

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Mindfulness Studies Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-6-2020

Diversity in the Women of the Therīgāthā

Kyung Peggy Meill
pkmeill@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/mindfulness_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meill, Kyung Peggy, "Diversity in the Women of the Therīgāthā" (2020). *Mindfulness Studies Theses*. 29.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/mindfulness_theses/29

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mindfulness Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Diversity in the Women of the *Therīgāthā*

Kyung Peggy Kim Meill

Lesley University

May 2020

Dr. Melissa Jean and Dr. Andrew Olendzki

Abstract

A literary work provides a window into the world of a writer, revealing her most intimate and forthright perspectives, beliefs, and emotions – this within a scope of a certain time and place that shapes the milieu of her life. The *Therīgāthā*, an anthology of 73 poems found in the Pali canon, is an example of such an asseveration, composed by *theris* (women elders of wisdom or senior disciples), some of the first Buddhist nuns who lived in the time of the Buddha 2500 years ago. The *gathas* (songs or poems) impart significant details concerning early Buddhism and some of its integral elements of mental and spiritual development. However, equally significant is how the information illuminates these enlightened women, not only as Buddhists, but *as women* whose life circumstances and longings lead them onto a path away from the secular world toward freedom and enlightenment. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the *theris*, as well as their societal roles prior to ordination, and the poetic revelations of their enlightenment experiences silhouette this particular group of first Buddhists through the lens of diversity. The biographies of these women are braided together with their poetic perspectives on attachment, suffering, death, *kamma*, and happiness. Threads of shared experiences, such as those of grief, friendship, and kinship from former lives weave through this anthology as do the similar demographic traits of its creators. The pattern that emerges from this swatch of ancient fabric is that of a group of extraordinary women who are also typical of a culture of *paideia* within a small minority of the privileged classes.

Key words: diversity, *Therīgāthā*, *theris*, first Buddhist nuns, ancient women poets

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	II
LIST OF TABLES	V
LIST OF FIGURES	VI
LITERATURE REVIEW	2
Overview of the <i>Therīgāthā</i>	3
Importance of the <i>Therīgāthā</i>	4
<i>Therīgāthā</i> as Literature.....	5
Landscape of an Ancient Place and Time.....	9
General Geography	9
Time Period.....	10
Governance	10
Population	12
Vedic Origin and Culture.....	14
Vedic Influence on Societal Hierarchy	14
Aryan Migration and Vedic Culture	15
Science of the Aryan Migration.....	17
<i>Vanna</i> System in 500 BCE	19
Actual Practice of <i>Vanna</i>	20
Skin Color and <i>Vanna</i>	21
Women in Vedic Society	22
Color and Roles of the <i>Theris</i>	25
Key Takeaways from the Literature Review	28
STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF DIVERSITY IN THE THERIS.....	28
Methodology and Methods for Analysis.....	28
Weaknesses	29
Key Sources of Data	30
Surveys of the <i>Theris</i> and Results.....	31
By <i>Vanna</i>	31
By Place of Origin	37
By Association to Kings	43
By Association to Gotama	49
By Association of One to Another and to Other Monastics	52

Discussion.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	64
REFERENCES	66

List of Tables

Table 1.	Reich's Timeline of Significant Events in Ancient India	18
Table 2.	Schumann's Class Identification of 39 Theris	32
Table 3.	Origin of <i>Theris</i> by Cities/Towns/Villages	39-40
Table 4.	<i>Theri</i> Connections to Kings	43
Table 5.	Ties to the Buddha Prior to Ordination	49-50
Table 6.	Connections Among <i>Theris</i> and to Other Monastics	52-54

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Horner Breakdown of 73 <i>Theris</i> by <i>Vanna</i>	33
Figure 2.	Meill Breakdown of 73 <i>Theris</i> by <i>Vanna</i>	36
Figure 3.	Where the <i>Theris</i> Came from by Kingdom	37
Figure 4.	Where the <i>Theris</i> Came from by Kingdom, Revised	38

Diversity in the Women of the Therīgāthā

This investigation is the most preliminary of forays into the subject of diversity vis-a-vis identity and experience within one particular group of ancient Buddhist women. It is an exploration of certain demographic features found in the authors of the 73 poems of a Pali canon anthology called the *Therīgāthā* (songs or poems of women elders). The literary pieces tell of the privileges and sufferings of these women, and of their subsequent experiences of freedom and enlightenment as some of the earliest Buddhist nuns.

Currently, there is no published study on any research focused on diversity (other than gender) of the ancient Buddhists. Thus, this paper is not testing any hypothesis – either corroborating or contradicting the findings of prior examinations – related to the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the Buddhist women. Rather, the thesis represents only an examination into the topic, using measurements available such as family backgrounds and places of origin. If possible, ethnicity or even skin color might have been a useful gauge, but the information available to date does not provide sufficient means to develop such a methodological tool.

In order to examine the group of women, it is imperative to establish even a rudimentary contextual framework in which the backgrounds and experiences of the *theris* (elder nuns, elder meaning wise more than old) can be assessed. The literature review is purposed to structure such a chassis; and once it is outlined, the second half of the paper will examine the extent of homogeneity or heterogeneity within the body of the 73 poets (two of whom are groups rather than individuals). The environmental architecture sketches out certain elements of ancient India that influenced the society in which women, including the first Buddhist nuns, functioned as members of certain socioeconomic classes and of particular places.

Social conditions shaped these women and affected their physical, mental, and moral perspectives; and, therefore, several of the key environmental features must be appreciated and understood even if elementarily. For only by so framing the lives of the nun poets can we grasp more fully the magnitude of the transformative paradigm shifts they experienced through their enlightenment encounters and their participation with other women of the Buddhist monastic community. This is the intent of the literature review: to provide the backdrop for the *theris* and the *Therīgāthā*. The anthology itself must also be positioned, again albeit in basic measures, within the framework of history, both as an important canonical treatise and as a significant literary treatment.

Once the literature review has set its parameters, including numerous and divergent opinions related to certain critical issues of the ancient world under review, then the examination of diversity in the *theris* can be undertaken. In accordance with several criteria such as backgrounds and enlightenment experiences of the *bhikkhunis* (ordained women monastics), a determination can be made regarding the extent of diversity found among this group of Buddhist women. Although the poets may or may not have been representative of the broader order of women, their backgrounds and works provide, at least, one approximate illustration of diversity during that time.

Literature Review

The literature review establishes a grounding upon which an analysis, including several surveys, will be undertaken to determine the extent or limitation of diversity among these women. Although no study of any length has been found to date regarding diversity, there is extensive material related to the ancient landscape of the time period of the *theris*, along with a growing number of more recent analytical works of the *Therīgāthā* on topics ranging from the

secular roles of women in ancient Indian society, to their spiritual leadership, and the literary merits of their poetry.

The setting of the *theris* – the time and the place within which the *gathas* (songs/poems) emerged to be chronicled, first orally and later in written form, is important to acknowledge as it served to shape these women as individuals in the secular realm and then as enlightened *bhikkhunis*. The literature review raises key issues that would have had relevant bearing upon the poet nuns; several of them will be factored into the study of diversity found in the second half of the thesis.

The integral components of the literature review include: the historical position of the *Therīgāthā* as a religious text and as an historical record of a particular time; the geography, governance, and general conditions of the region of interest – the northeast section of the Indian subcontinent; and the Vedic culture, notably its societal habits and structure of interrelationships found in the *vanna* (caste) system. *Vanna* will be a major factor in the determination of diversity related to the 73 *theris* who constitute the participant body for this study into diversity in the foundational years of Buddhism.

Overview of the *Therīgāthā*

Very little related to early Buddhism comes without differences of opinions and perspectives; and the *Therīgāthā* text is no exception. The authenticity of the anthology as one authored by women has come into question and, so too, the revisions made from their original composition (oral) to the many iterations through transcriptions and translations. Believed to have been composed by women who were the first Buddhist renunciates, Hallisey (2015) dates the canonical poetry from the time of the Buddha to as late as the 3rd century BCE. Some believe

Pali was the vernacular of the northeast region of ancient India, but Hallisey finds this highly dubious. Whatever the vernacular language may have been, it was reworked in no minor fashion from the time when the last of the *Therīgāthā* poems were composed to the 6th century, the time of Dhammapala's commentary (Pruitt, 1998) which provided a compilation of essential backgrounds of the poets.

Importance of the Therīgāthā

Finally, to give some context to the anthology: it is found in the Pali canon, the doctrinal foundation of the Theravada Buddhist tradition; and its *Tipitaka* (three baskets) is comprised of the *Vinaya Pitaka* (on the rules and discipline of monks and nuns), the *Sutta Pitaka* (the largest segment made up of discourses, teachings, and poetry), and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (further doctrinal treatises or commentarial literature). Within the second *Pitaka* is the *Therīgāthā*, codified at successive councils until finally, in Ceylon, it was committed into writing around 80 BCE (Miller, 1984).

According to Blackstone (1998/2000), the *Therīgāthā* is the only canonical text in any of the world's religions that is attributed to women's authorship. Hallisey (2015) writes that it also holds several other noteworthy attributes: the anthology was written by some of the first Buddhists; and it is one of the first poetries of India. Chakraborty (2018) adds that it is the world's first anthology of women's literature.

For those in the West – especially scholars of ancient languages, philology, Buddhism, and history – the anthology has provided a gateway to forging a path for canonical translations. It has made it possible for academics in other fields such as anthropology, comparative religions, sociology, gender studies, and even genomics to add further to the body of knowledge concerning early Buddhism, early nuns, and the *Therīgāthā*. Many of these late 19th century and

20th century scholars were British, who were to be followed by American scholars in laying down the essential groundwork of scholarship for the *Therīgāthā*.

Although several translations of the anthology into other European languages were completed in the late 1800's, the first full text in English, in poetry form, was produced by Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019) at the start of the 20th century. She brought together the Pali text with the commentary of the poets that had been produced by Acariya Dhammapala; and her work served to catalyze the interest in – and the development of – the field of Pali translation and, more specifically, investigations into the *Therīgāthā*.

It was not until 1971 that the second complete anthology translation into English, as prose, was completed by philologist K. R. Norman (1971/1995), credited for meticulous and technically accurate work with the Pali language. Soon thereafter, Dhammapala's extensive background commentary, critical to understanding the poets of the *gathas*, was translated by William Pruitt (1998). Dhammapala's work has served as an essential fount of knowledge to scholars and translators over the centuries, including the present day. Finally, Charles Hallisey (2015) produced the most recent complete and very readable translation of the poems.

Therīgāthā as Literature

The anthology, arranged from the shortest of poems with one verse (two lines) and increasing in length to the “Great Chapter” of 75 verses, provides examples of religious women living out the tenets of the Buddha's teachings; and it also presents historical narratives of a people in an ancient time and place. However, beyond these valuable qualities the *Therīgāthā* is literature, the result of the spirit of creativity within human beings, no matter the time. Literature as oral songs or written poems comes with some form of dissemination – the sharing of thoughts and emotions that are personal, profound, and penetrative. The literary considerations of this

anthology have been scrutinized by a number of scholars; and, not surprisingly, as found in all aspects concerning the ancient nuns, there are uncertainties regarding the poetry in matters such as authorship, literary style, and the time in which the works may have been composed or altered with transcriptions.

C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019), Norman (1971), and Hallisey (2015) point out some discrepancies within the text, in part attributable to Dhammapala, who may have crossed the wires of the *bhikkhunis'* backgrounds with their *udanas* (inspired utterances). They also point out that some poems appear to be reflective of *rathoddhata*, a literary style developed much later than the estimated time period of the *theris*. Ambapali's poem, a well-known work, is one such example. Collins (2003) writes that her poetic technique was not common for that period and would become standard only in a subsequent era. He asserts the same of the *kavya* genre found in the nuns' works. One modality of *kavya* makes use of simile and imagery, such as: "my defilements are burnt out," "the mass of darkness is torn asunder," "my pot gives forth the smell of water snake," and "I destroy desire and hatred with a sizzling sound," (from numerous poems found in Pruitt, 1998).

However, Collins (2003) and Hallisey (2015) acknowledge Warder's (1954) contention that Pali poetry may have been at the very beginning of the development of a poetry that would, in time, become classical Sanskrit meter. If the poet nuns were on the leading edge of literary innovation, it would indicate they were ahead of their time along several fronts beyond religion. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the original pieces were set to classical poetic style when they were transcribed hundreds of years later by monks.

Miller (1984) holds folk songs to be the sources of *theri* poems, tying the verbal and metrical structures of the *gathas* to vestiges of musical organizational constructs. She points to

the fixed syllabic meters as stemming from rhythmic patterns found in vocal music. As an illustration, Olendzki (2016) translates the first verse of Ambapali's work into poetry while abiding by the original structure (per syllabic number and syllabic length/strength) and paying heed to the musical character that may have been similar to the oral original. Albeit brief, the bars hint of how the *gathas* may once have sounded.

Collins (2003, p. 673) demonstrates another *kavya* technique using the same poem by the former prostitute/courtesan, one of the 73 *theris*, Ambapali:

The curls of my hair were black like the color of bees; now through old age they are like bark-fibers of hemp. The words of him who speaks the truth are not false.

Before, my eyebrows were beautiful, like crescent moons nicely drawn by a painter; now through old age they droop in wrinkles. The words of him who speaks the truth are not false.

My two breasts used to be full, round, close together, and uplifted; [now] they hang down like empty water bags. The words of him who speaks the truth are not false.

Such was this body. A crumbling home of many sufferings, it is a decayed mansion shedding the pride of its plaster. The words of him who speaks the truth are not false.

In this technique, the poet begins from the head and moves downward which, according to Collins, became a standard form sometime after the period in which this poem and the anthology purportedly originated. He describes *kavya*, to be “a product of linguistic sophistication and specific training” (Collins, 2003, p. 682). This implies that poetry of this nature would have

been created by only those *theris* who had been well educated; it would eliminate those from lower classes of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Additionally, the higher ranks of the prostitution profession, the *ganikas*, such as Ambapali, would have been trained in various arts (Bhattacharji, 1987). She, along with other wealthy *ganikas*, gave generously to the Buddha; and Ambapali's gift of a mango grove for use by the renunciates is a well-known story. Collins candidly describes Pali literature, including the *Therīgāthā*, and what he calls "the premodern Pali imaginaire" as "an elite ideology, originally strongest in the cities" (2003, p. 682).

The anthology of 73 poems totals 522 stanzas or verses (*slokas*). The poems are arranged according to length, starting with poems of one verse and moving to increasingly longer pieces, ending in Samedha's "Great Chapter," made up of 75 verses. These works are sometimes clustered along categories of relational themes such as grief or friendship; or they are grouped as personalized teachings from the Buddha, little nuggets to the nuns about their names and their traits. Composed by the nun poets, the *udanas* are expressions at the time of enlightenment; and the experiences often reveal captured moments of freedom, joy, and even euphoria.

In the longer poems there are stories of immense sorrow and challenges, especially along the fronts of sexuality and sensuality, love and passions, temptations, and the drudgeries of daily living. The candor of the poets reveals their individual struggles; and such personal and forthright disclosures give credibility to the authenticity of the enlightenment experiences they recount. The *theris* do not deny or squelch memories of the past filled with the array of human emotions. Rather, their backstories frame the paths to *arahantship* (one who has gained insight into the true nature of existence, achieving *nibbana*), conveying the spiritual journey with a humanness that has resonance.

Landscape of an Ancient Place and Time

In order to get a sense of the place and time of the *Therīgāthā* writers, numerous texts and articles have been called upon; and these research sources come from a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, history, and genetics, as well as Pali scholarship from both the lay and the monastic sectors, with heavier reliance upon the former rather than the Buddhist monastics. It should be noted that the works covered are only those in English or translated into English.

Many of the texts on early Buddhism and ancient India, especially those of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, seem to have relied heavily upon Pali canon texts for their abundant records not only of the Buddhist teachings, rules, and regulations, but of data regarding the historical events and social norms of an ancient time. Subsequently, other studies, building upon the earlier works, have advanced the approaches to subjects that intersect in some manner, directly or indirectly, with the *theris* to shed new light and fresh perspectives upon the experiences of the poets.

One factor that has widened the breadth of knowledge concerning ancient peoples of the world, including the first Buddhists, is the development of new tools in science and technology. Most certainly, the implementation of scientific techniques and advances will supplement research approaches for the confirmation of – or adjustments to – information found in the Pali canons and associated texts.

General Geography

The subcontinent of India resulted from a collision of the earth's Indian continental plate with Eurasia millions of years ago; and the outcome from that drama is the roughly diamond-shaped land mass with its four major facets. In the northwest is what is now Pakistan, above

which is Afghanistan. Along the northeastern side of the peninsula is present-day Nepal and the great mountains of the Himalayas. Beyond Nepal is Tibet and China. The lower western edge of India faces the Arabian Sea; and the other side fronts onto the Bay of Bengal.

Off the southern tip of the peninsula is Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon; and, farther away, more to the eastern half of the Bay are the Andaman Islands, including the Little Andaman Island. It is seemingly insignificant to the subject of this thesis of early Buddhist nuns; but its people of long ago may have, unknowingly, contributed to the construct of a social order that would survive for thousands of years. In some manner, then, they may have influenced the world of the poet nuns of the 6th- 4th centuries BCE.

Time Period

Scholars, notably Theravadins, have set the life of the Buddha between the years of 566 and 486 BCE; but Gethin (1998) notes that other more recent scholarship calculates his death closer to 400 than 500 BCE. For the purpose of this study, 500 BCE will bound the timeframe for attention. However, it is not possible to do this without knowing a little about prior periods that may relate to the general make-up of the nuns.

Before the nuns, the Indus civilization, centered in India's northwest region, collapsed and was followed by the Vedic age, the latter half of which some have dated to 1,000-500 BCE, a period when the *Rig Veda* and the other Vedic texts were completed (Gombrich, 1988). They were to impact the society of the nun poets of our concern.

Governance

The northeast sector of India, along the lush Gangetic plains by the Himalaya mountains, is the region of the early development of Buddhism. It was comprised of sixteen *mahajanapadas* (kingdoms, states, or republics) that had purportedly developed from tribal structures to become

larger kingdoms such as Magadha, Kosala, and Avanti to smaller states (within the larger kingdoms) that included Sakya (of which the Buddha was a member) and Licchavi (Schumann, 1989).

T. W. Rhys Davids (1903/1972) writes that the sixteen “Great Countries” or “Great Powers” are recorded in the *Anguttara* and the *Vinaya* texts, but that their compilation of kingdoms had relied upon an old list. By the 5th century BCE, smaller states had become subsumed by greater powers; examples included Kasi (on the list of 16) and Sakya (the clan of Gotama) which had become part of Kosala hundreds of years before the Buddha’s birth; and Licchavi (listed as one of 16) which had joined with other clans to form the republic of Vajji.

Boundaries fluctuated as the balance of power shifted; but in the time of the Buddha, the paramount kingdoms were Magadha and Kosala. Rhys Davids (1903/1972, p. 23) describes these kingdom names as “not of countries, but of peoples, as we might say Italians or Turks.” The *mahajanapadas* incorporated a variety of settlements, including hamlets, villages, towns, and cities; and they were governed by kings or *rajjas*, *ganas*, and *sanghas* (the last two terms referring to rule by groups) (Roy, 2014). The matter of caste or *vanna* (familial and economic/social groups) is injected in Schumann’s (1989) description of these *mahajanapadas* as their leadership of kings and *rajjas* was made up of men from the caste class of *khattiyas* (nobility or warriors).

The *rajjas* and their councils were the administrators of the states/kingdoms. It is unclear if the councils were synonymous with *ganas* and *sanghas*; but even if they were not, one might surmise the highest controlling administrators to be *khattiyas*. The *ganas* and *sanghas* operated with collaborative sensibilities, meeting frequently, following traditions, respecting the elders, and governing by unanimity. On the other hand, as Roy (2014) states, they dominated the non-

khattiya laborers and producers who worked the land. It is not improbable that the Buddha used this customary *sangha* structure as a model for the Buddhist *sangha*.

Within these regions, the period around 500 BCE was marked by continuing growth in trade, agriculture, and urbanization. Gokhale (1982, p. 7) asserts that the transformation was significant enough, at least with regard to urbanization, to use the term “revolution.” Adding to that, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (1901) writes of the use of stamped coinage or *kahapanas*; and Roy (2014) confirms the circulation of punch-marked coins of silver and copper. Other metals, such as iron, strongly influenced the increasing production in agriculture and war equipment during this time.

Population

The population of this northeastern region would be useful, perhaps even illuminating, particularly as related to the socioeconomic segmentations within it. Schumann (1989) provides one possible approximation, although he bases the data on a witness report of some centuries *after* 500 BCE. He describes the region as being 2,000 square kilometers (770 square miles), inclusive of large areas of jungles, unusable for agriculture. Furthermore, he estimates a total population of 180,000 for the Sakya state broken down as follows: 8,000 in its capital of Kapilavatthu (located in what is now Nepal), the city where the Buddha was raised; and 4,000 in each of the 8 or 9 provincial cities. In other words, 40,000 people lived in towns/cities; and the remaining 140,000 were in villages. The *rajjas* (*khattiyas*) numbered roughly 10,000, giving a possible sense of the ratio of *khattiyas* to other population groups.

Thomas W. Rhys Davids, founder of the Pali Text Society who with his wife, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids, spearheaded the earliest efforts to translate Buddhist Pali texts into English,

tackles the issue of demographics of the Sakya territory. For this, he relies upon a 5th century Indian Buddhist translator and commentator, and writes (1903/1972, p. 18):

Buddhaghosa has preserved for us an old tradition that the Buddha had eighty thousand families of relatives on the father's side and the same on the mother's side. Allowing six or seven to a family, including the dependents, this would make a total of about a million persons in the Sakya territory.

The tabulation is notable in several ways: 1) Rhys Davids acknowledges that the figure (80,000) is “purely traditional ... and not uninfluenced by the mystic value attached to it” (pp. 18-19); and 2) the phrase “including the dependents” may be tallying in non-Sakyans engaged with the Sakya *rajjas* in a variety of services. This latter point will reemerge as the backgrounds of the *theris* are considered; and it may help specify the affiliations of those *theris* who came from the Buddha's household prior to their ordination.

Dyson (2018) estimates the population of India to have been 4-6 million around the 2nd millennium BCE and growing to 35 million by the turn from BCE to the Common Era. Rhys Davids (1903/1972) estimates the population of the kingdoms in the 7th century BCE at 15-20 million based upon the small numbers of cities and the large areas of uninhabitable lands as reported in ancient texts. Taking these figures as only estimates, it would put the population in 500 BCE at 20+ million; as comparison, this is larger than the 2019 figures for the Netherlands (17+ million) and Chile (19 million), and less than Taiwan (24 million) and Australia (25 million).

Rhys Davids (1903/1972, p. 34) even provides a figure of 400,000 for the army that was formed by the northeastern territory to repel Alexander in the 4th century BCE, as well as that of an army of 200,000 for just the Magadha Kingdom in the 3rd century BCE during a time of

peace. Whether all of these men were of the *khattiya* class is uncertain, as are the numbers themselves. The figures indicate the shifting sands of the population and political power, as kings expanded their territories, developed their cities, and witnessed the growth in their citizenry.

The *bhikkhunis* lived in a time of change, as the social structure favored class rather than tribal groupings, and as the economy of subsistence transformed into one of relative surplus (Gokhale, 1982). Iron tools helped to increase farming production and to innovate instruments of war. Distinct trade routes developed to connect far-flung places, increasing the volume for both short-distance and long-distance trade. Consequently, a powerful new mercantile class developed as did new varieties of urban formations. It was also a time in which the religious wanderers and teachers grew in number, perhaps an indication that there was more than the traditional Vedic standards of spirituality.

Vedic Origin and Culture

As previously mentioned, the nobility of kings or *rajjas* who administered and controlled the *mahajanapadas* were from the class called *khattiya*. The principles underlying their rule, as well as the positions of other population segments, were stipulated in the massive tomes of the Vedas, compiled in old Sanskrit over an extensive period of time.

Vedic Influence on Societal Hierarchy

Ghurye (1969) writes that the *Rig Veda* often referenced three groups within society: *brahmin* (poet-priest), *khattiya* (warrior-chief), and *vessa* (common people). He explains that the fourth hereditary group was added with the latter texts of the *Rig Veda*. Gombrich (1988, p. 38) cites from the last book of the *Rig Veda*, the “Purushaskta” or the “Hymn of the Cosmic Man,” providing a summary of its tale – of a huge male figure who could be both “compared to and

assimilated with the universe, which he both pervades and transcends.” He quotes a fairly well-known segment from the text: “His mouth was the *brahmin*, arms were made the royal [*khattiya*], his two thighs that which is the *vaiya* [*vessa*], from his feet was born the *sudra* [*sudda*].”

As the fourth group, *sudda*, came into the hierarchy, *vessas* became elevated from being merely a mass of “the common people” to merchants and bankers. These four groups, in descending order, constituted the Vedic formulation for the processes of the world – one in which everyone and everything had its proper position or life station for the purpose of sustaining the *dhamma* or the system of the universe (Bechert & Gombrich, 1984).

The mythical and mystical hymn of the Cosmic Man, along with other texts of the Vedas, set the groundwork for the workings of brahminical society of ancient India with its myriad of stringent guidelines that demarcated one group from the others. In all classes, there was separation by marriage and contact, division of labor (each group with its own profession), and a hierarchy that ranked groups from superior (*brahmin*), down the body of the population, to increasing inferiority (Dumont, 1966/1980).

Aryan Migration and Vedic Culture

Several of the early historians of ancient India, such as Oldenberg, allude to two waves of invasions into northwest India by people of the north called the Aryas or Aryans. In describing the second migration, he relates it to the first: “The Aryan population of India came into the peninsula, as is well known, from the north-west. The immigration lay already in the remote past at the time to which the oldest monuments which we have of religious poetry belong. The Indians had as completely lost the memory of this...” (1882/1971, p. 8). He describes the people of the first migration as “fair Aryans” who “broke down the strongholds of the aboriginal

inhabitants, the ‘black-skinned,’ the ‘lawless,’ and ‘godless,’” pushed back the “enemy,” and “annihilated or subjugated” them. He continues to describe the second wave of migrants as “surpassing their brothers intellectually ... [to produce] the great monuments of the Indian mind ... [called] the Vedas” (p. 9).

Most historians reference the more recent migration, estimating the time of the process to 2,000 - 1,000 BCE. Gethin (1998) tells us the immigrants/invaders came into the northwest Indus valley from ancient Iran, and that they were descendants of nomadic pastoralists from central Asia whose language was the dialect(s) of old Indo-Aryan or old Sanskrit.

Gombrich (1988) also places the migration in the middle of the second millennium BCE and writes the Aryans came from what is now northern Iran and southern Russia. Those who led them in war were called kings who guided the military penetration into the subcontinent, moving east and south. One wonders if these “kings” – aggressive and militant leaders of the Aryan invasion(s) – served as the models, if not the first, of the *khattiyas* outlined in the Vedic texts. Sharma (1958/2016, p. 9) explains that the term *arya* in the *Rig Veda* text can be translated to mean “possessor or noble” and that the gods of the Vedic hymns conveyed the *arya* as people of wealth or nobility or both. *Khattiyas* would suit well this template of nobility and power.

Without detail, Gombrich (1988, p. 35) mentions that the Aryans “mixed with people who spoke Munda or Dravidian languages, who have left no traces of their culture.” He believes it was the friction between conquerors/invaders and native inhabitants that created societal changes, and that the original peoples assimilated into the Indo-Aryan culture. He adds that the *brahmins* followed a practice of incorporating other kinds of priests, eventually blending them in as a sub-caste of *brahmins*. This may be the reason for why Horner (1930/2011) groups the *Therīgāthā* nuns with subdivisions for the *brahmin* class, found in Figure 1 on page 33.

Rhys Davids (1903/1972) in his description of 7th century BC writes of the different groupings comprised of Aryan, Dravidian, and Kolarian, as well as others. Munda, Kolarian, and Dravidian people spoke languages that originated outside the Indo-European (or Indo-Aryan) family of languages, that of Dravidian and Austroasiatic languages. Reich (2018) asserts that the *Rig Veda* borrowed words, not typical in Indo-European languages, which likely stemmed from Dravidian and Austroasiatic languages. He postulates that the people with these languages were in India prior to the Aryans.

According to Sharma (1958/2016) *vanna* developed gradually, starting with the antagonistic relationship between the invading Aryans and the Dasyus, perhaps associated with the Dravidians and other inhabitants of the land invaded by the Aryans. Sharma also notes the difference of color between the Aryans and their enemies who were “dark-hued people, who deserted their possessions without fighting” (1958/2016, p. 14). In the later portions of the *Rig Veda*, *dasa* becomes the word to mean slave. The number of slaves increased toward the end of the Vedic period when more slaves were engaged as domestic servants (*suddas*) to *brahmins*, *khattiyas*, and the developing class of *vessas*.

There is the notion posed by Sharma (1958/2016) that the name of the fourth *vanna* group, *sudda*, may have come from a conquered tribe called Sudra, circa 10th- 8th century BCE. Even prior to the “Hymn of the Cosmic Man” with its mention of the four classes, earlier texts of *Rig Veda* reference the broad divisions of *Arya* and *Sudda*, perhaps demarcating the invader and the invaded.

Science of the Aryan Migration

In an effort to learn whether there were any associations between *vanna* and endogamy (as one factor to determine the rigidity among *vanna* classes) and ethnicities (invading Aryans

and the Aboriginals), the landmark work of David Reich (2018) provides significant scientific data of the ancient world, including India. The information from the geneticist's research related to several major events in ancient India is found in the table below, with some slight changes in verbiage and reformatting from his original table (p. 122):

Table 1

Reich's Timeline of Significant Events in Ancient India

Year	Event
7,000 BCE	Farming from Iran spreads to Indus Valley in northwest India; this event considered to be the first major Aryan migration
2,000 BCE - 0	Massive mixture of two main populations of North and South India
1,500 BCE	Approximate time of the <i>Rig Veda</i>
1,000 BCE	Strong endogamy begins to take hold

Reich breaks down the ancient population into two groups, the Ancestral North Indians (ANI) and the Ancestral South Indians (ASI); and he writes that the entire subcontinent has witnessed mixtures over many years. The ANI carry genetic factors related to Europeans, Central Asians, Near Easterners, and the Caucasus people; while the ASI genetic materials are related to ancient East Asian and South Asian populations. Reich's studies of ancient DNA show that those speaking Dravidian languages had more ASI ancestry; those with Indo-European (Indo-Aryan) languages had more ANI ancestry.

His studies have correlated genetic data to social status with those in higher classes carrying higher proportions of ANI ancestry, and those in the lower classes with higher proportions of ASI ancestry. Only the people of Little Andaman Island were found to have no genetic features of West Eurasian-related ancestry. They were isolated descendants of an East

Asian-related population that contributed to South Asians; they may be a bridge to understanding the nature (genetically and ethnically) of the people of India prior to the Aryan invasions.

***Vanna* System in 500 BCE**

Against such backdrops and possibilities, it is apparent that the correlation of the Vedic traditions, starting with the *Rig Veda* as the oldest text, approximately 3,500 years ago, to the hierarchical structure and workings of society is not without some ambiguity. Neither are the historical descriptions of dark or light skin colors relative to ANI or ASI. There are only early indications in Reich's studies; and so too merely hints and glimpses through Buddhist and historical texts.

Using Reich's outline of time versus population changes, there is an apparent overlap of time periods of "massive mixture" of populations *and* "strong endogamy" (2018, p. 122). Numerous factors are likely involved in this phenomenon; and maybe it appears contradictory only if one determinedly (or narrowly) connects endogamy with the Vedic or brahminical *vanna* system.

Reich raises two possibilities regarding endogamy in India: 1) that it was practiced in ancient tribal groups and was preserved and reinforced through the caste system; or 2) that it emerged from a religious basis from the *Rig Veda* as justification for the "natural order of life" (2018, p. 142).

The *Law Code of Manu* (compiled some hundreds of years after the *Rig Veda*) enumerated extensive details of *vanna* restrictions and regulations and furthered the proliferation of subgroups of *jatis*. The question of *when* the constricting nature of *vanna* took hold is yet to be soundly determined. On the other hand, perhaps the *vanna* system became increasingly

inflexible (as others have written) to stem the tide of consequences that came with integration through marriage across class (or color/ethnic) boundaries.

Tony Joseph (2019) is an Indian journalist who has relied upon recent studies on population genetics to understand issues related to the ancient people of his country. He puts the first migration into the subcontinent between 9,000 and 5,000 BCE, and the second wave between 2,000 - 1,000 BCE by central Asian pastoralists who spoke Indo-European languages and called themselves Aryans.

However, he asserts that Aryans and their Vedic culture were not *the* fountainhead of Indian civilization, adding that its earliest sources were founded elsewhere. What cultural elements he would include in this comment would be of interest, as would the details of the people influencing that civilization prior to the Indo-Aryan migrations. Rather than partnering the *vanna* system with the arrival of the (second) wave of the Aryans, he suggests that the social caste construct really set in around 100 CE, perhaps due to shifting political paradigms.

Actual Practice of Vanna

Schumann diminishes the force of *vanna* during the time of the Buddha. Although he acknowledges the system and its expectations of hereditary professions and endogamy, he writes, “the people of the ‘Middle Country’ did not feel the caste system as particularly oppressive ... and that it was possible for those in the two lower classes to rise ... above his origins” (1989, p.192). According to this historian, the *vanna* system was very different than what it would become in later years which would be legalistic and rigid in its regulations.

Gombrich writes of the *ideology* of *vanna*, with the example of the Buddha who referred to himself as *khattiya* in order to use terms that were understandable in the ideology of that time.

He adds that the Buddha so described himself in “brahminical terms – for there was no other language in which to describe society.” He asserts this did not “prove that [the Buddha’s father] had ever heard of the term” (1988, p.50). He connotes a cleft between the actual practices and the idealistic Vedic concepts. Similarly, Wagle (1888/1966) differentiates the “ideal” from the “average,” and explains that the brahminical laws may have set forth the “ideal” but the lived-out experiences and realities (“average”) differed.

Rhys Davids (1903/1972) also writes of this dichotomy. Stipulations may have been outlined regarding the insularity of classes, but he gives numerous examples of the exceptions to the rules such as *khattiyas* working as a potter, cook, and basket maker; *brahmins* living as hunters and trappers; and a *brahmin* eating the food of a *candala* (loosely, a part of the *sudda* class, later to be even lower as the complexities of the *vanna* rubric intensified).

Skin Color and Vanna

The four societal classes or *vanna* has become known by its Portuguese origin, “casta,” first used in the 1500’s. Hutton (1963, p. 47) explains that *casta* signifies “a man of a good family,” and pertains to “breed, race, or kind.” Although the *Rig Veda* did not include the *vanna* term (the word means color), it would become closely connected to color as Ghurye (1969) outlines, giving the colors associated with *vanna* groups: white for *brahmins*, red for *khattiyas*, yellow for *vessas*, and blue for *suddas*, the last group on the hierarchy, whose lot in life was to serve the other classes.

Gombrich (1998/1991, p. 39) contests the notion of these colors being related to skin color, writing that they were only “symbolic ... [and had] nothing to do with skin pigmentation or a colour bar.” On the other hand, regarding “colours” of the *vanna* system, Rhys Davids writes: a) of the *khattiyas* that they were “most particular as to the purity of their descent ... fair

in colour, fine in presence, stately to behold”; b) of the *brahmins*, “they were equally with the nobles distinguished by high birth and clear complexion”; c) of the *vessas*, the peasantry, no colour is given; and d) of the *suddas*, “which included the bulk of the people of non-Aryan descent, who worked for hire, were engaged in handicraft or service, and were darker in colour” (1903/1972, p. 54).

Sharma (1958/2016) believes there was gradual development of the *vanna* system; in its early period, Aryans were even weavers, tanners, and carpenters who enjoyed important positions as helpers of the kings. That such professions formed a separate class, he asserts, is “certainly not true of Vedic times... [their] occupations were quite dignified in the *Rig Veda*; but he notes the positions “came to be reckoned as *sudra* [*sudda*] in the Pali texts” (p. 32).

Once the *vessas* were made up of “common people” (Ghurye, 1969, p. 44) and “the peasantry” (Rhys Davids, 1903/1972, p. 54); but this third *vanna* group would become synonymous with bankers and merchants by the time of the *theris*. Perhaps, as the economy grew, the masses became differentiated by wealth. Also, it is a detail, but an interesting one – that Rhys Davids positions the *khattiyas* as the first group in the hierarchy.

Dumont (1966/1980) gives a definition of *casta*, to mean something not mixed; its derivation is the Latin word, *castus*, meaning chaste. Whether fully implemented in the society of ancient India or only conceptually held as aspirational – or something in between – *vanna* seems to be imbued with an underlying desire for purity (chasteness), be that heredity, profession, and/or color.

Women in Vedic Society

Isaline Blew Horner, an English Indologist and leading scholar of Pali literature, wrote one the earliest historical overviews of the *theris*. She covers much ground in topics associated

with the variety of relationships the early Buddhist women had as laywomen, “almswomen” (nuns), mothers, daughters, wives, workers, Buddhist teachers, and members of the *sangha*. Her opening line paints the setting for women prior to the development of Buddhism: “In the pre-Buddhist days the status of women in India was on the whole low and without honour” (Horner, 1930/2011, p. 1).

However, she adds the Vedic era raised the general position of women: daughters were no longer considered as a burden and a catastrophe; and unmarried women were favorably viewed. She claims that the rise of Buddhism enhanced the position of women, and that “the status of unmarried women was higher than it had ever been in India before – and, we may add, than it has been since” (1930/2011, p.19).

Murcott (1991) concurs for the most part and considers the initial period after the Aryan migration to have been advantageous to women, a time in which they were involved in agriculture, Vedic studies, and even shared in the Vedic rituals, either as unmarried or married women. She adds that women were also engaged in the intellectual and religious realms, as teachers, poets, or scholars. However, the time leading to the emergence of Buddhism brought a culture increasingly less supportive of women and of their efforts to gain an education.

Wilson references Horner’s work as one that *purports* to gender equity of the Buddhists and of new opportunities for women in ancient India. She seems to imply that Horner may be overstating the notion of the “emancipation of woman” attributed to the Buddha (Wilson, 2012, p. 259). Many have pointed to the additional *Vinaya* rules, applicable only to the nuns, as one obvious gap of gender equity in the first monastic community and beyond.

Oldenberg conveys the attitude of Buddhists to women, at least in some of the more extreme or blunt thoughts/teachings:

Women are to the Buddhist of all the snares which the tempter has spread for men, the most dangerous; in women are embodied all the powers of infatuation, which bind the mind of the world. The ancient story books of the Buddhists are full of narratives and illustrations of the incorrigible artifice of women.

‘Unfathomably deep, like a fish’s course in the water ... is the character of women, robbers with many artifices, with whom truth is hard to find, to whom a lie is like the truth and the truth is like a lie.’ (1888/1971, p. 165)

Such a perspectival of women balances out its diametric as expressed by Horner and another seminal writer, her colleague, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids (1909 /2019). Yet, considerations about women along the vein of Oldenberg’s reference are important, not for their truths about the gender, but the beliefs or stereotypes possibly *imposed* upon women in an androcentric society governed by men. The impositions of beliefs of others can be potent, as some of the *bhikkhunis*’ poems will reveal following the literature review.

Even with the vantage point of viewing early Buddhism as egalitarian in nature, C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019) shows herself to be the product of her culture, imbued with the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and late Victorian era tendencies. Her translations of the *gathas* may concern the landscape of the Vedic world, but her expressions connote a far different realm. One example of her work by *theri* Kisogotami reads as follows:

Mark Sorrow well; mark ye how it doth come,

And how it passes; mark the Eightfold Path

That endeth woe, the Four great Ariyan Truths.

Woeful is woman’s lot! Had he declared,

Tamer and Driver of the hearts of men ... (C. A. F. Rhys Davids, 1909/2019, p. 108)

She associates the teachings of the Buddha to the “Ariyan,” and one wonders if the Tamer and Driver is the Buddha or the woman. If it is the latter, it is not far removed from the notion of women as “tempter” with “powers of infatuation” per Oldenberg’s previous quote (1888/1971, p. 165).

On the other hand, Hallisey (2015, p. 111) translates the same verses of this nun quite differently, without vagueness about the tamer’s identity:

One should know suffering,
the origin of suffering and its cessation,
the eightfold path.

A female deity speaks about the state of being a woman

Being a woman is suffering,
that has been shown by the Buddha,
the tamer of those to be tamed.

As later studies of the specific *theris* and their poems will indicate, sex and sexuality are major foci of attention; whether this was the result of a cultural ambiance generated by male-operated society is worth consideration. If not, there is a surprisingly large proportion of the *theris* who are highly concerned, if not *obsessed*, with sex and beauty. The primary focus of this research study, however, is not upon the male-female tension/relationship but more the women to women qualities of similarities and differences.

Color and Roles of the Theris

Like Horner, Susan Murcott (1991) approaches the ancient writers of the *Therīgāthā* along several strands that relate to secular categories of the *theris* such as mothers, wives, widows, and prostitutes, as well as their “roles” after ordination, especially as teachers,

preachers, and skilled practitioners. Horner (1930/2011), Olivia (2017), and Murcott (1991) provide the names of those *theris* who were found to be exceptional by the Buddha. In reviewing their backgrounds, it is clear that they come from the upper classes: 3 are *khattiyas*; 4 are *vessas*; 1 is *brahmin*; and 1 is without class identity. However, this last nun, Sona, is described in the brief commentary as coming from a “respectable family” (Hallisey, 2015, p. 258 n12). It is unlikely the *suddas* would be equated with “respectable” families; she would have been from one of the upper three groups of *vanna*.

Another *theri* included in this group of nine is Uppalavanna (from the *vessa* or merchant class), held up by the Buddha for being an excellent example of a nun. Young (2007), as well as Horner (1930/2011), Olivia (2017), and Murcott (1991), attribute Uppalavanna with supernatural power (*iddhi*) which allows her to shapeshift, even becoming a man on occasion. In her poem, she is confronted by Mara (a male figure of an evil tempter who crops up with frequency in this anthology) who reminds her that a solitary woman in a remote place is susceptible to rape/attack. Uppalavanna responds:

What can I do?

Here though I stand, I

can vanish and enter into your body. (Young, 2007, p. 20)

These same lines are translated by Murcott to be the words of Mara in the following manner:

[Mara:]

I'll vanish!

I'll enter your belly:

I'll stand between your eyebrows

and you won't be able to see me! (Murcott, 1991, p. 71)

Hallisey confirms that the verse indeed should come from Uppalavana:

Maybe I will just disappear
 or maybe I will get inside your belly,
 maybe I will stand between your eyebrows,
 but wherever it may be,
 you won't see
 where I am standing. (Hallisey, 2015, p.121)

More intriguing (in light of this particular study) than the nun's intelligence and savvy speech – along with her supernatural powers – is a brief description by Horner (1930/2011, p. 170) of Uppalavanna's name: "so-called because she had a skin like the colour in the heart of a dark blue lotus..."; and similarly by Young (2007, p. 18): "... having been born with the lovely complexion of a blue lotus, which explains her name, Uppalavanna, "the color of a blue lotus." According to Young's footnote, the *Saddharma-ratnāvaliya* (*Jewels of the Doctrine*) describes her as having "dark complexion because the second chief disciple of a Buddha, whether female or male, must have dark skin" (pp. 18-19n16).

Regarding color, Buddha's other chief disciple was Khema (a *khattiya*) whose skin color has also been noted by C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019, p. 6) who describes her as: "Beautiful, and with skin like gold, she became the consort of King Bimbisara." Bode (1893, p. 529) says about her: "They gave her the name Khema, and her skin was of exceeding beauty, yellow as fine gold"; and Dhammapala (Pruitt, 1998, p. 165) in his commentary (from which the others obtained their information) writes: "She was named Khema, and she had a golden complexion, her skin resembling gold."

Skin color must have been of interest and of some relevance in that society for it is noted

with frequency by many. Ironically, science may discover that, in the example of Uppalavanna, she may have had a medical ailment, the result of a bad heart, poor blood circulation, or drinking water contaminated with nitrates.

Key Takeaways from the Literature Review

The foundational translations, along with other ancillary texts, and sources on the contextual landscape of the ancient nuns serve as the basis for the next phase of this study: the analysis of the backgrounds and experiences of the women with regard to homogeneity or diversity. As the literature review has indicated, no issue related to the realm of the *theris* comes without some disputation: from the authorship of the *Therīgāthā* thought by some to have been altered in transcription by monks years after the original compositions; to the affiliation of poetic works to particular *theris*; the population numbers and the proper categorization of kingdoms; and, most significantly, the nature of the *vanna* system in the time of the Buddha. Yet, it is necessary to use *some* set of tools in the analysis of *theri* diversity to obtain a general understanding of this group of ancient Buddhist women.

Study and Analysis of Diversity in the Theris

Terms may mean different phenomena depending upon contexts and cultures. This seems evident when embarking upon an initial study into the diversity of the ancient *bhikkhunis*, authors of the *Therīgāthā*. Although works mentioned in the previous literature review seem to associate color with socioeconomic classes of the *vanna* system (by family or profession or both), there is not sufficient data to analyze the *theris* against the metrics of color or ethnicity.

Methodology and Methods for Analysis

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this analysis will analyze the diversity in this group of nuns according to the use of approaches outlined below:

1. The *vanna* with its four classes that appear to have been in place during the time of the Buddha will be a primary gauge of studying the group of 73 poets, two of which were groups (of 30 and 500) rather than individuals. It is not clear when (and with what speed) the *vanna* system ballooned to become increasingly complex in numbers of groups and subgroups (*jatis*), including *candalas* and *dalits* – those so low as to be considered untouchables, including women during menstruation and people handling corpses. This development may have come with the *Book of Manu*, compiled after the time of the *theris*.

Wagle (1888/1966, p. 6) discusses the subgroups and how they developed, from the results of “low births,” or births of mixed classes. As an example, a child from a mother of higher caste than the father would be considered of low class, not included in the system of four classes. Wagle outlines all the numerous names for the different combinations of lineage, including the *candala* being a child of a *brahmin* mother and a *sudda* birth father.

2. Along with *vanna* classifications, the analysis will break down the 73 authors (individuals and groups) according to their places of origin – that is, where their families came from. This will indicate the nature of the women according to urban versus rural backgrounds.

3. Another assessment will be based on tabulations of other affiliations, such as ties to kings, to the Buddha’s household, and to other family renunciates.

4. Based upon the quantitative data, the summaries of findings will touch upon several select poets and their works to capture a sense of *theri* views of secular life and enlightenment.

Weaknesses

As already indicated, the study of this canonical anthology – the poems themselves as well as the sociological and historical context in which they were written – is problematic for several reasons:

1. Questions are not few regarding both the authorship of the *gathas* and the time(s) in which they were composed. C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019) and Collins (2013) are just two of a number of scholars who have questions regarding aspects of the *Therīgāthā*. Blackstone's (1998/2000) analysis of the terms/words of *theris* relative to freedom and liberation, as compared to those by their counterparts, the elder monk poets (*theras*, authors of the *Theragāthā*), points to the authorship of the anthology as being *by women*; but her one well-detailed study cannot put to rest all the doubts about the authorship of the text. Some inconsistencies in the details of translation and *theri* backgrounds have been attributed to Dhammapala (Pruitt, 1998) by scholars such as Norman (1971/1995), Hallisey (2015), and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019); but they do not consider the anthology any less important for these inconsistencies and errors.

2. As the ancient *vanna* system is a major measurement tool in this research of diversity, it must be noted that the system too is not without differences of opinion and perspective. As outlined in the literature review segment, some historians have diminished the significance of *vanna* in the lives of the ancients. However, they do not deny its presence; rather they give varying degrees of credence to the rigidity and influence of the socioeconomic classification system within society around 500 BCE.

3. This research work must rely upon the translations provided by others who read and understand Pali. The analysis will make use of several translations, rather than rely upon only one complete translation, in an effort to capture the significance of certain terms and meanings when assessing the poems.

Key Sources of Data

The data for the quantitative analysis comes predominantly from the complete anthology translations by Hallisey (2015) and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019), but also from the partial

anthology translations and analytical writings of Murcott (1991) and Horner (1930/2011), and the complete translations with detailed commentary by Pruitt (1998) and Norman (1971/1995). Although all background notations reference the work of Dhammapala, it is the last two works of Pruitt's translation of Dhammapala and Norman's extensive notations of the Dhammapala commentary that serve as critical tools for this diversity analysis.

Based on available resources, there is no apparent way to assess ethnic/racial backgrounds of the *theris*, even if to differentiate Aryan from Aboriginal. Although color has been associated with the *vanna* system (the lower the class, the darker the skin color) by T. W. Rhys Davids (1903/1972), and so too facial features such as cephalic and nasal indices for *brahmin* versus other classes by Ghurye (1969), these approaches are not appropriate for the poet nuns being evaluated. The best criterion would be the rudimentary (four classes) *vanna* system, referenced frequently by Dhammapala (Pruitt, 1998). If information is not provided in the commentary, this study will call on other sources in an effort to identify classes of the *bhikkhunis*.

Surveys of the *Theris* and Results

Using the various texts by scholars and the original works of the *theri* poets, surveys will determine patterns regarding socioeconomic backgrounds, places of origin, relationships among the poets, and ties to the Buddha.

By Vanna

Rough assays of *theris*, with attention to caste, have been outlined by two scholars; and the first is by Schumann (1989, p. 187) who notes that of the 457 "historical persons" in the Pali Canon, 61 are nuns. His summary of just 39 of them is shown in Table 2; but there is no detail

regarding which of the *theris* he has included in the group he has identified by caste. His figures have been reformatted below:

Table 2

Schumann's Class Identification of 39 Theris

<i>Vanna</i>	#	%
Brahmins	15	38.4
Khattiyas	13	33.2
Vessas	10	25.8
Casteless	1	2.6
Suddas	0	0
Total	39	100

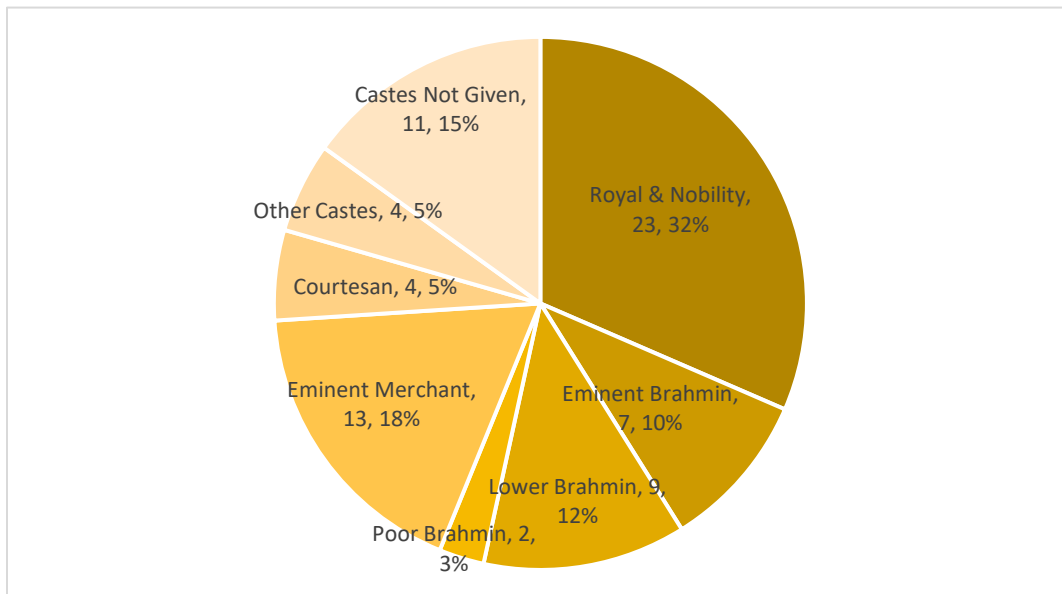
Schumann's tabulation does not identify either the 39 specific *theris* or the 61 nuns he refers to as being mentioned in the Pali canon. This statement triggers the question regarding the obvious discrepancy between his 61 from the Pali canon and the 73 from the canonical text of the *Therīgāthā*. Nevertheless, Schumann's percentages *may* be somewhat useful comparisons as the analysis of the full body of 73 *theris* by *vanna* is completed in this current study.

Horner (1930/2011, pp. 167-168) provides the second and more detailed breakdown of the 73 *theris* by caste. She uses several *brahmin* subgroupings, likely based on wealth. Her figures have been reconfigured to show both numerical value and percentages. Rather than the term *khattiya*, she uses royalty and nobility; for *vessas*, she uses merchants. Horner's tally serves as a baseline for further scrutiny into the socioeconomic backgrounds of the *theris*. Her tabulations do raise some concerns, including the following:

1. The use of subsets (eminent, lower, and poor) for the *brahmins* alone is not explained; however, the insertion of eminent for both *brahmins* and merchants likely comes from her translation of *setthi*, used in related narratives and carrying the definition of “eminent” (Horner, 1930/2011, p. 167 n4).

Figure 1

Horner Breakdown of 73 Theris by Vanna



2. She has grouped the prostitutes by profession into a separate segment called “Courtesan” rather than categorizing them into one of the four family *vanna* classes. Of these four, Dhammapala’s commentary (Pruitt, 1998, p. 45) tells of Addakasi coming from a rich merchant (*vessa*) family; the others, without family class lineages provided, may be better positioned in the class of *suddas* or service providers.

3. The group Horner identifies as “castes not given” is constituted by the following nuns:

1. Dhamma of Savatthi;
2. Abhaya of Ujjeni;

3. Another Sama, a friend of Samavati;
4. A Certain Nun;
5. Sona, single parent of 10 children;
6. Group of 30;
7. Group of 500;
8. Vasetthi of Vesali;
9. Vijaya of Rajagaha;
10. Uttara; and
11. Vaddha's Mother

All those underlined are described as coming from “good families” (Pruitt, 1998) or “respectable families” (Hallisey, 2015) in the full or brief backgrounds. *Suddas* would not have been classified in such a manner; thus, these nuns would have been *khattiyas*, *brahmins*, or *vessas*.

Of these nine, the Group of 500 is associated with the authorship of a poem in six verses, titled, like all the poems in the anthology, by the poet's name, Patacara Pancasata (Murcott, 1991) or Pancasata Patacara (Norman 1971/1995). C. A. F. Rhys Davids and Dhammapala interpret the poem as a dialogue between Patacara and 500 women who were overcome with grief from the deaths of their children.

Norman (1971/1995, pp. 88-89) explains that the number 500 has no real value and suggests *pancasata* to mean being “mindful about the five ... either to the five *khandhas* or the five *nivaranas*.” He even wonders if this poem is about another *theri* with the same name as the great teacher, Patacara. Murcott (1991, p. 82) takes a more general view by equating 500 to “a great many,” be that 50 or 100 or some other number that underscores Patacara's large

following. Regardless of the size of this group, its members are described as coming from “good families.” That would put them into classes other than *sudda*.

Additionally, the Certain Nun is identified as the long-time nurse in the household of Matapajapati Gotami. She likely moved from the Kingdom of Koliya to the adjoining Kosala Kingdom when Matapajapati married Suddhodana, the father of the Buddha and the head of the Sakyas, based in the city of Kapilavatthu. Nurses would have belonged to the *sudda* caste.

Another *theri*, Vijaya of Rajagaha, is identified as having been a friend of Khema, from a *khattiya* family before she joined the monastic life; considering class demarcations, it is probable that the two women were of the same class.

4. Finally, of the four nuns grouped into Horner’s “other castes,” Punna is described as a servant, who was “freed” by her owner/master, Anathapindika, an extremely wealthy merchant who gifted the monastery at Jetta Grove in Savatthi to the Buddha. Dhammapala (Pruitt, 1998, p. 252) states that pride in a previous life resulted in Punna being “conceived in the womb of a house servant,” a water-pot carrier, who was “made a free woman” by Anathapindika.

Her freedom was critical as slaves and those in debt were not permitted to join the monastic Order. (Beyond this restriction, all women joining the Buddhist Order had to have the permission of their husbands or fathers.) For the purpose of this study, using only four *vanna* classes, Punna is categorized as a *sudda* or servant. It is apparent from her backstory that the position of servant (or slave) was a familial or hereditary classification. This seems to go against the thought of some historians, such as T. W. Rhys Davids (1903/1972) and Gombrich (1988/1991), that the *vanna* system, during this particular time, was more conceptual than actual.

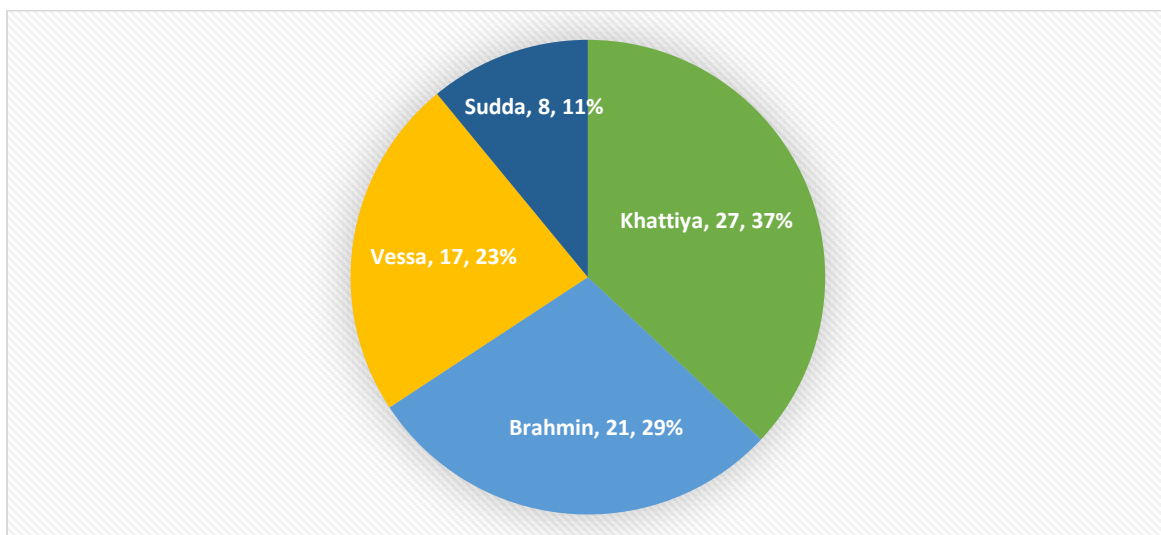
Sumangala’s mother was a rush weaver; Chapa was the daughter of a deer hunter; and Subha’s father was a goldsmith (Pruitt, 1998). Like Punna, these three women can be identified as *suddas*, people working with their hands and providing services for the three higher classes.

T. W. Rhys Davids (1903/1972, p. 54) writes that the majority of *suddas* were people “of non-Aryan descent, who worked for hire, were engaged in handicraft or service, and were darker in colour.” He also explains that below the four classes were the “low tribes” and “low trades” including “workers in rushes, bird-catchers, and cart-makers,” as well as “aboriginal tribesmen who were hereditary craftsmen” such as “mat-makers, barbers, potters, weavers, and leather-worker.” Again, for the purpose of this initial inquiry, only the basic four groups will be used.

With these additional considerations, the nine who are of “respectable” or “good” families according to Horner have been re-categorized with the results shown below. The findings indicate that 89% of the *theris* came from the upper three classes and 11% were *suddas*. The largest number of women were *khattiyas* (27), followed by *brahmins* (21), then *vessas* (17), and, finally, the *suddas* (8 *theris*).

Figure 2

Meill Breakdown of 73 Theris by Vanna



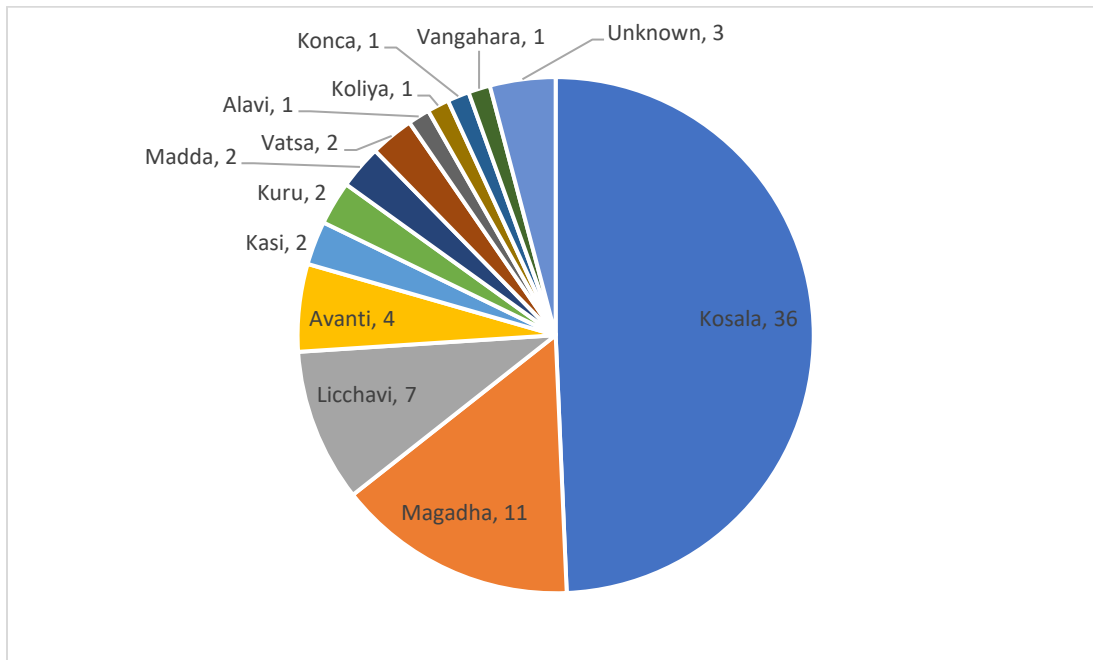
By Place of Origin

Another method of evaluating the diversity of this group of early renunciates is to survey their places of origin. The geographic origination of the nuns may provide yet another view of the demographics of this group. There was some fluidity regarding boundaries of the kingdoms, as some smaller ones were enveloped by the larger, more powerful kingdoms during the years of the Buddha. The list of 16 kingdoms found in the Pali canons may have been outdated, lacking accuracy about the actual state of the kingdoms (T. W. Rhys Davids, 1903/1972).

Figure 3 provides a breakdown of the *theris* by their home kingdoms as provided in the various iterations of the Dhammapala commentary. Vangahara is not found listed as a kingdom but is described by Dhammapala as a “district” south of Magadha (Pruitt, 1988, p. 277). It may well have been part of what Bronkhorst (2007) called Greater Magadha.

Figure 3

Where the Theris Came From by Kingdom

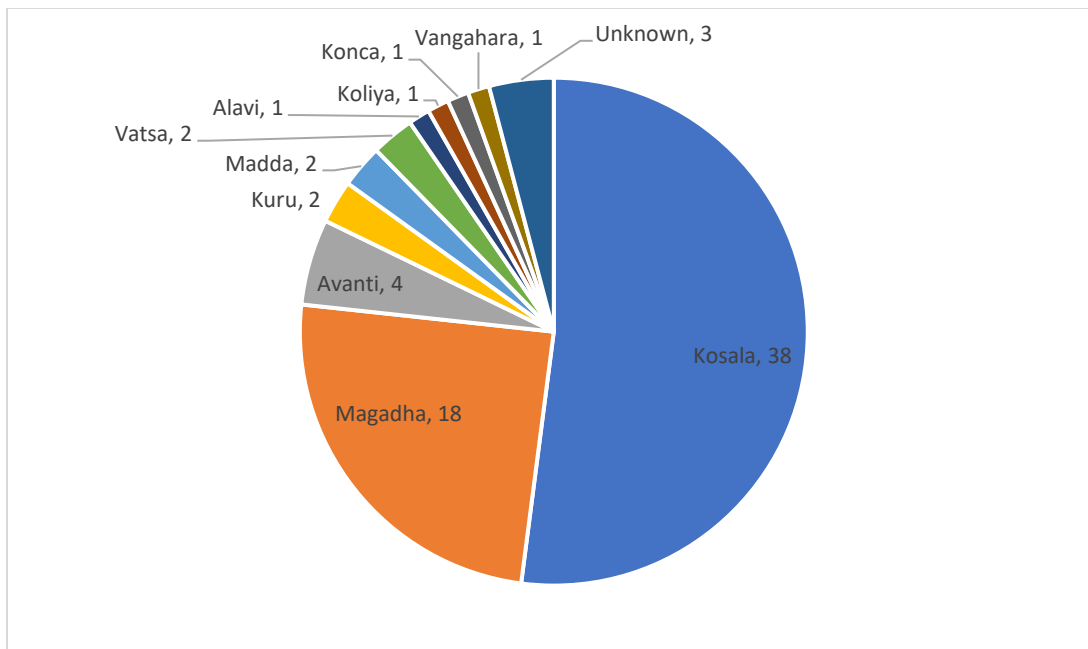


Additionally, although the commentary mentions Madda as a kingdom, it is not found on the list of the 16 great kingdoms; and Kasi was so weakened, it was taken over by Kosala. And, finally, Licchavi is treated as a kingdom (on the list of 16 and by Dhammapala) but had become one of eight republics that, together, constituted Vajji Kingdom. Later, Licchavi was incorporated into Magadha.

Figure 4 includes only the changes reflecting the incorporation of Kasi and Licchavi into Magadha and Kosala. It is not coincidental that they were also the most powerful kingdoms of that era, and that they included the most significant cities during the time of the *theris*.

Figure 4

Where the Theris Came from by Kingdom, Revised



Although the *mahajanapas* were political, Wagle (1888/1966) stresses that they were also social in nature with their underlying and strong elemental traits of familial and kin/clan ties that, in turn, were associated with geographic places of origin and hereditary professions. The *brahmin* villages and settlements (*gamas*) were heavily located in the regions of Magadha and

Kosala, with the early growth of land ownership by *brahmins* in those areas, made possible through royal gifts of land as payments for ritual services rendered (Wagle, 1888/1966). Yet, it would be in regions around those kingdoms – in the stretch of land between Savatthi (capital of Kosala) to Rajagaha (capital of Magadha) – where both urbanization and Buddhism would be most active around 500 BCE (Bronkhorst, 2007) .

The places of origin of the *theris* have been identified by specific locales within the various kingdoms; and, abiding by Dhammapala’s kingdom designations (Figure 3), the table below breaks down the kingdoms to the cities/towns/villages from where the women came.

Table 3

Origin of Theris by Cities/Towns/Villages

Names of Kingdoms	Names of Cities/Towns/Villages	Number of Theris
Kosala	Savatthi	17
	Kapilavatthu	15
	Saketa	2
	Kosala, no specifics	2
Magadha	Rajagaha	8
	Nalaka	3
Licchavi	Vesali	7 ₁
Avanti	Ujjeni	3
	Bharukacchaka	1

₁ Includes Ambapali from Vesali in Vajji Kingdom, a confederation that included Licchavi, which was to become part of Magadha.

Kasi	Baranasi	2 ₂
Kuru	Kammassadhamma	2
Madda	Sakala	2
Vatsa	Kosambi	2
Alavi	Home place of king	1 ₃
Koliya	Devadaha	14
Konca	Montavati	1
Vangahara	No specifics	15
Unknown	No specifics	3 ₆

Almost all the specific locations listed in the above are towns/cities (*nagaras* or *purās*) and not *gamās* (settlements or villages). The exceptions are shown as “no specifics” for six *therīs*. Several historians (Gombrich, 1988/1991; Wagle, 1888/1966) list the “Six Great Cities” recorded in the *Digha Nikaya* for the time of the Buddha and the first nuns. They were Campa, Rajagaha, Savatthi, Saketa, Kosambi, and Baranasi.

In sum, the tabulations indicate the following features:

² For this compilation, Kasi (like Licchavi) is listed as its own kingdom; it would be merged into Kosala, as indicated in Figure 4, revised.

³ Sela, as the daughter of King Alavika, would have lived in a city if not a large town, whichever was the center of the Alavi Kingdom.

⁴ Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha’s aunt, originally came from Devadaha in Koliya Kingdom prior to being married into the Sakya clan based in Kapilavatthu.

⁵ Dhammapala’s commentary of Chapa, a deer hunter’s daughter, describes her as being from Vanagahara, a district south of Magadha. It may likely have been part of what Bronkhorst (2007) would call Greater Magadha.

⁶ No places of origin are provided for Canda who became a beggar. The authors within the group of 30 and the group of 500 have no places of specific origin given. Dhammapala says of the 30 only that they “did meritorious deed[s] under previous Buddhas and accumulated good [actions] ... impelled by their own deeds, they were born in good families here and there” (Pruitt, p. 154); and for the group of 500, it was a nearly identical description: “born in the homes of various [good] families ... when they came of age, they were taken by their parents to husbands’ households here and there” (p. 159).

1. 42% of the women came from five of these six great cities;
2. 44% came from just two cities;
3. 64% originated from four cities (Savatthi, Rajagaha, Kapilavatthu, and Vesali); and,
4. 92% (67 poets) came from towns/cities.

It may well have been that the six *theris* “without specifics” of place of origin also lived in towns/cities prior to their ordination. However, with the data to date, it is still clear the vast majority of the women came from urban settings. One *theri* who may well have come from a more rural setting or *gama* (settlement or village comprised of those within one profession) was Chapa from Vangahara, the daughter of a deer hunter.

Considering the Buddha spent so many of the *vassas*, rainy seasons from July-November, in Savatthi, a number in Rajagaha, and a few in Baranasi and Vesali, it follows that the women from those cities would have been introduced to his teaching. Gokhale (1982, p. 13) writes that the Buddha stayed in Savatthi, known for its “high degree of mercantilism and urbanism,” for as many as twenty-five rain-retreats. Gokhale describes the city as a place where “the first contours of a new urbanism, with its new powerful classes of merchant-bankers and kings, began to take shape.” It would be in such a setting that the teachings of the Buddha found fertile soil for both followers and philanthropic support.

With Kapilavatthu being the center of the Sakya clan/kin-group, it is not surprising that it carries such a high number of *theris* in the tabulation. Even though the number 500 cannot be taken literally, in addition to the poet Group of 500 (Pancasata Patacara) attributed to one *gatha*, there are references to another Group of 500 who went forth with Mahapajapati Gotami, the founder of the women’s Order. The group was made up of Sakyan and Koliyan women whose husbands and sons had either died in battle or left their families to join the monastic life. In

addition, the group included members of Gotama's harem (Murcott, 1991). Although this group is not included in the authorship of the *Therīgāthā*, it is yet another indicator of the many from Kapilavatthu who were attracted to the Buddha's teachings.

Ranking third on the list of cities of the *theris* is Rajagaha, the capital of the Magadha Kingdom, important for its commercial strength and attraction to merchants and bankers (*vessas*). Gokhale (1982) writes that the Buddha spent five rain-retreats in that city where he had close ties with King Bimbisara before he was murdered by his son and successor, Ajatasattu who too, eventually, became a supporter of Gotama.

This time period witnessed significant growth in urban towns and cities, which may have created a paradigm shift for the *brahmin* orthodoxy, established traditionally for village society. Major new professions that were urban-based emerged, particularly in trade, as noted by Gokhale (1982). Gombrich (1988/1991) is of the opinion that the *brahmins* were not interested in urban-dwellers; and Bronkhorst goes further to state that "when it came in contact with cities, Vedic civilization did not like them" (2007, p. 251). The Vedic social equilibrium had been sustained in villages and rural settings; and the urban *brahmins* would become different from those of the traditional *brahmin* culture identified with village life.

Bronkhorst (2007) adds that Magadha had a culture of its own with norms different from those of Vedic traditions found elsewhere. Greater Magadha, as he calls this kingdom, had a different approach to urbanization and its accompanying political structures than what had been familiar to the conventional *brahmins*. Additionally, Magadha held variant perspectives on rebirth and *kammic* retribution, as well as different practices related to burying the dead.

Whether the Buddha realized this vacuum and chose to fill the gap, or was most comfortable with the setting of the towns/cities from his personal background is uncertain; but

both are possibilities for his focus on the urban settings and, more specifically, upon those in the most significant cities, with Savatthi in the lead.

By Association to Kings

Some of the *theris* had personal ties with kings and rulers in their secular lives before becoming *bhikkhunis*. Their connections to those at the top of the hierarchy of power are identified in Table 4.

Table 4

Theri Connections to Kings

Abhaya's mother	Had a son with	King of Magadha
Dantika	Family of chief minister of	King of Kosala
Jenta	Family of	King of Licchavi
Khema	Family of	King of Madda
Mahapajapati Gotami	Wife of	King of Sakya
Sela	Daughter of	King of Alavi
Soma	Daughter of chief minister of	King of Magadha
Sudarinanda	Daughter of	King of Sakya
Sumana	Sister of	King of Kosala
Sumedha	Daughter of	King of Konca
Ubbiri	Had a child with	King of Kosala

In this tabulation, the Sakya “republic,” headed by Suddhodana, the father of the Buddha, is listed although it had become part of the more powerful Kosala Kingdom. With this inclusion, 14% of the poets had personal ties to the highest level of power, wealth, and prestige within the

khattiya caste. The compilation does not include members of the households of royalty, such as Mahapajapati's nurse or the *theris* who were part of the harem of Siddhattha Gotama.

It is worth noting that Abhaya's Mother is called by her connection to her son, in much the same fashion that the poem by Mahapajapati's nurse is credited to A Certain Nun, whose name, according to Murcott (1991, p. 28) was Vaddhesi. Pruitt (1998, p. 99 n2) would disagree with her translation, noting that *vaddhesi* is used as a verb (to serve) in this piece and not as a proper noun.

Another *theri* without a name is Vaddha's mother, a woman born in the home of a "good family" (therefore, not *sudda*) who left her son with relatives to join the women's Order. This piece of nine verses is in the form of a dialogue, spoken between the *theri* and her son who visits her after becoming a monastic himself. Her words to Vaddha are about effort and meditation, "a goad" to encourage her son who says (Hallisey, 2015, p. 109):

It seemed like she wielded a driving goad,
when my mother, out of kindness
urged me forward
with verses about the highest goal.

I heard her words,
instruction by the one who gave me birth,
and I felt a profound urgency to reach the state of freedom.

Vaddha's poem of the event with his mother is found in another text, the *Theragāthā*; and some have wondered if one original narrative was divided, in error, and attributed to two people regarding the incident.

The commentaries (Hallisey, 2015; Pruitt, 1998) tell of Padumavati, the name of Abhaya's Mother, whose famed beauty appealed greatly to King Bimbisara, friend and benefactor of the Buddha. Bimbisara had her brought to him; and his night with her produced a son, Abhaya, who was brought to his father to be raised at the palace from the age of seven on. Abhaya becomes a monk, a follower of the Buddha; and it is the teaching by this son that converts his mother into a believer and nun. Her poem recalls the words of Abaya in the first stanza, followed by her description of freedom in the moment of her enlightenment.

“Whether up from the sole of the foot, Mother,
or down from the top of the head,
reflect on this body as filthy and foul-smelling.”

It's by living that way that all passion for sex is pulled out.

Its burning fever broken, I have become cool, free. (Hallisey, 2015, p. 27)

Pruitt's translation is somewhat different (Pruitt, 1998, p. 57):

Mother, from the sole[s] of the feet upwards, from the head
and hair downwards, consider this impure, evil-smelling
body.

As I dwell in this way, all my desire has been rooted out. The
burning fever has been cut out. I have become cool,
quenched.

This second translation does not make it clear that the second verse is by the poet and not the son. The consideration of the body as foul and evil (not uncommon in the poems of the *theris*) is especially poignant coming from a former prostitute, but equally so from her son who knew well the ramifications of passion and desire, having been the product of the “burning fever” and

desire. It is intriguing that the expression of foulness of the body starts, in this poem, with the bottom of the feet – where, per the myth of the Cosmic Man of the *Rig Veda*, *suddas* were born. This is in contrast to another former prostitute/courtesan, Ambapali, whose poem, considered an example of *kavya* style, describes her beauty from the head downward (the poem is found on page 7).

Unlike Padumavati, Khema was born into the family of the King of Madda. She was sent to live in the harem of King Bimbisara (Magadha Kingdom) who ordered her to see the Buddha nearby; and upon hearing him, she was converted. As mentioned previously in the literature review, she became one of the Buddha’s chief disciples. Her poem also describes the body as foul:

This foul body, sick, so easily broken, vexes and shames

me,

my craving for sex has been rooted out.

The pleasures of sex are like swords and stakes,

the body, senses, and the mind

just the chopping block on which they cut.

What you call the delights of sexual pleasure

are no delights for me now.

What you take as pleasures are not for me,

the mass of mental darkness is split open.

Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished. (Hallisey, 2015, p. 79)

Khema is responding to Mara, the evil one, the tempter of Khema and many of her fellow nuns.

Phrases such as darkness being “split open” and craving for sex being “rooted out” are also

frequently peppered throughout the *gathas*. This one by Khema lacks the richness some poems carry; it seems rote in tone and wording. The work provides a comparison to that of Ambapali's which is full of similes both expressive and inventive such as "hair black like the color of bees," "now ... like bark-fibers of hemp, and "my two breasts ... hang down like empty water bags." When combined with the repeating line, "The words of him who speaks the truth are not false," there is a rhythm created, connoting impermanence the ongoing cyclical motions of life (see page 7, translation of the *gatha* by Collins, 2003, p. 673).

The works of Pruitt (1998) and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1909/2019) refer to Khema as a queen; but Murcott (1991) calls her a chief consort in Bimbisara's harem. Polygamy, especially for men of wealth, was not an uncommon practice. Siddhodana, the father of the Buddha, married two sisters, at least; and Siddhattha Gotama had several wives according to the *Vinaya*. Murcott (1991, p. 22) tells of a legend of Siddhattha being so impressive in his talents that "all the Sakyans sent a daughter to his household, the total number coming to forty thousand."

Like Khema, Ubbiri became part of the harem of King Pasenadi of Kosala. When she gave birth to a daughter, Hallisey (2015) and Pruitt (1998) write that Pasenadi made her a queen, one of several. According to Horner (1930/2011) he had a number of wives; Mallika was chief queen among five queens, including Ubbiri. In addition to these wives, Pasenadi had other women in the positions of chief consort and queen-consort.

Murcott (1991) surmises that the title/role differentiation was connected to financial remuneration, and that harem members, including chief consorts (*ganikas*), received significant payment. She notes – what is apparent in the texts of various translators – that more genteel and less obvious terms are used to describe harems and prostitutes. This may be not only a modest inclination by some translators, but rather the conveyance of an acceptable and normative

approach to all that was “royal,” including the various levels of the harem hierarchy within a palace – from the *rajaṛodha* (harem women) to the higher *ganikas* (chief consorts).

Horner (1930/2011, p. 85) considers slaves/servants to have been treated in a seemingly romanticized fashion:

It nowhere appears that slave-women were overworked. There were multitudes of them in the royal establishments, some of whom waited upon the queens, and performed such duties as daily buying flowers for them and looking after the jewels of the ladies in the royal harem. In other households they pounded rice, an arduous task, and helped with the cooking.

Murcott (1991, p. 24) holds a variant view of the “royal harem,” citing from a the *Artha Sastra*, a treatise compiled in the 3rd century BCE, which lists as some of the tasks of the *rajaṛodha*:

... to hold the royal umbrella, golden pitcher and fan, and attend the lord seated in his royal litter, throne or chariot. He could order any of them to surrender herself to anyone to whom he wished to grant a favor, and refusal without just cause entailed a fine.

The penalty of 1,000 whip lashes was the punishment for disobedience.

Bhattacharji (1987) provides dozens of terms referencing the many levels of prostitution, including the royal harem. He writes that those in the higher ranks received training in the arts such as singing, playing musical instruments, reading, dancing, and “the art of attracting and captivating the mind of others” which was “endowed with maintenance from the state” (p. 37). Every city had its chief courtesan who was “an ornament of the city,” sustained by state funds and serving the wealthiest and most powerful of men (Bhattacharji, 1987, p. 43). In the narrow perspective of defining women as “snares” – so identified in the Pali texts – blame in the realm of

sex and passion is placed solely upon the snake-like behavior of women. There seems to be little acknowledgement that sex is a collaborative enterprise; and in the case of the ancients, the industry was well structured, institutionalized by the state and men in positions of wealth and power.

By Association to Gotama

The next survey outlines the ties between the *theris* and the Buddha prior to the ordination of the women into the Order, founded by the Buddha's stepmother, Mahapajapati, whose request was rejected initially by the Buddha. Only with the intervention in support of a women's *sangha* by Ananda did it become established, but with supplemental restrictions that did not apply to the monks; these regulations continued well beyond the time of the earliest monastics.

Table 5

Ties to the Buddha Prior to Ordination⁷

<i>Theri</i>	Nature of Association
4. Tissa (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harems ⁸
5. Another Tissa (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
6. Dhira (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
7. Vira (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
8. Mitta (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
9. Bhadra (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
10. Upsama (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
13. Visakha (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem ⁹
14. Sumana (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
15. Uttara (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem
16. Sumana (K)	Sister of Pasenadi, King of Kosala, follower and friend of the Buddha

⁷ Numbers before the names indicate the order of their poems within the anthology; letters after the names indicate *vanna* class: K for *khattiya*; B for *brahmin*; V for *vessa*; and S for *sudda*.

⁸ Sakyans are *khattiyas* by *vanna* class. The Buddha came from the family/clan of Sakya. Hallisey and Pruitt refer to the harem women as "concubines"; C. A. F. Rhys Davids calls them "ladies of the Bodhisat's court."

⁹ Visakha is also connected to a number of *theris* from a shared previous life.

18. Sangha (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem ¹⁰
19. Abhirupananda (K)	Chief wife of a Sakyan
25. Mitta (K)	Sakyan, member of Gotoma's harem ¹¹
26. Abhaya's Mother (S)	Prostitute, mother of child by King of Magadha, Bimbisara, friend of and benefactor to the Buddha
33. Ubbiri (V)	Consort/queen/harem of King of Kosala, Pasenadi, friend of the Buddha
36. Soma (B)	Daughter of chief minister for King Bimbisara with strong ties to the Buddha
38. Certain Nun (S)	Nurse to Mahapajapati, Gotama would have known her from his childhood living in the same household
41. Sundarinanda (K)	Daughter of Mahapajapati, half-sister of the Buddha
47. Patacara (V)	Grief for the deaths of her family, she wanders the streets, stripped of clothing; upon seeing the Buddha she is changed. ¹²
52. Khema (K)	Consort/queen of Bimbisara, friend and benefactor to the Buddha
55. Mahapajapati Gotomi (K)	Stepmother/aunt of the Buddha
65. Punna (S)	Servant of Anathapinkaka, a devotee of the Buddha and donor of Jeta Grove Monastery in Savatthi
66. Ambapali (S)	Courtesan, benefactor who made a gift of a monastery to the Buddha

The list is not short; it provides some indication of the personal familiarity of some of the *theris* with the Buddha, as well as the family or kinship-bounded nature of this sample group of early Buddhists. After the Buddha set forth, members of his family and household joined him. This included his wife, Yasodhara; his aunt/step-mother, *theri* Mahapajapati; his half-sister, *theri* Sundarinanda, who went forth following her mother, her brother, Nanda, and her nephew (son of Gotama), Rahula; members of the royal harem (12 women); his mother's nurse; and a Group of 500 (not the Group of 500 who wrote a *gatha*) of the clans of Sakya and Koliya.

¹⁰ Although Sangha was said to be like the other 11 women of the harem, she had a son and worked with cattle. It may be that as harem women aged, other work within the household was assigned to them.

¹¹ Mitta seems the probable 12th from the Sakyan harem, based on place of origin, *vanna* class, and commentary on going forth with the Mahapajapati.

¹² A powerful story of a woman who marries a *sudda*, later to lose him to a poisonous snakebite, as well as her two children to drowning, and her parents and family to fire. Where others avoid her, the Buddha's approach and teaching are one of kindness and support. Patacara became a gifted teacher who had influence on many women, including the Group of 30, the Group of 500 (mothers of deceased children), Uttara, and others.

Patacara, not known to the Buddha in the same way as others on this list, has been included to represent those (including a number of other *theris*) powerfully affected by the Buddha's teaching, especially of a one-to-one personal teaching. Her story is an extraordinary and tragic one of loss in the deaths of her entire family and its impact on her psychological state. Hers is also the story of healing, and of a woman whose personal suffering platformed her to become a teacher, guiding others burdened with suffering. Her poem reveals depth and wisdom without use of trite clichés or pedantic styles:

Furrowing fields with plows, sowing seeds in the ground,
taking care of wives and children, young men find wealth.

So why have I not experienced freedom,
when I am virtuous and I do what the Teacher taught,
when I am not lazy and I am calm?

While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way,
by concentrating on it move from the higher ground down.

Then I held back my mind,
as one would do with a thoroughbred horse,
and I took a lamp and went into the hut.

First I looked at the bed, then I sat on the couch,
I used a needle to pull out the lamp's wick.

Just as the lamp went out, my mind was free. (Hallisey, 2015, p. 67)

Unlike some of the *gathas* that rely on set phrases from teachings or the stereotyped notions of women, beauty, sex, and sexuality, Patacara’s work is polished. She makes use of unusual similes (mind held back like a thoroughbred horse; the mind free, out like the light); and some of her lines are almost meditative: “While washing my feet I made the water useful in another way, by concentrating on it move from the higher ground down.” There is a sense of the tactile in describing an extraordinary event within mundane moments such as looking intently at water or pulling out the lamp’s wick with a needle. Such actions serve as practices for attention and meditation; it is a discovery of enlightenment in the midst of the simplest experiences of living.

Leaving aside the case of Patacara, this list is very personal, limited to the circle of family, household, clan/kin, and close friends (examples include: Kings of Magadha and Kosala; Anathapindika, the wealthiest man in Savatthi and a major donor to the Buddha; and a wealthy courtesan and benefactor, Ambapali of Vesali).

By Association of One to Another and to Other Monastics

Finally, within the group of 73 poets, there are relationships connecting them to each other in a variety of ways, such as friendships or other experiences of commonality.

Table 6

*Connections among the Theris and to Other Monastics*¹³

12. Dhammadinna (V)	Previous life, related to theris marked with an *; they were sisters, daughters of a king ¹⁴
13. Visakha (K)	*

¹³ Numbers before the names indicate the position of the poem within the order of the anthology; *vanna* classes are shown as *khattiya* (K), *brahmin* (B), *vessa* (V), and *sudda* (S).

¹⁴The story involving the 7 *theris* in a previous life is interwoven in the commentaries of each of the women. In the past, they had been born into the household of the King of Kasi in the city of Baranasi. The concept of *kamma* and rebirth is a constant current throughout both the poems and the commentary. Most of the actions, accumulated good deeds, relate to gifts or other seemingly minor acts of attention to monks in prior lives. Nearly all the rewards of a good rebirth relate to wealth. The freedom expressed in the poems cut the eternal cycle of future lives.

21. Sumangala's Mother	Son became a monk; she followed remembering his words to her in her <i>gatha</i> .
27. Abhaya (K, B, or V)	Friend (not family) of Abhaya's Mother who followed her into the Order.
28. Soma (V)	She and Another Soma (29) had a friend in common who died; they shared a grief for the mutual friend
29. Another Soma (K, B, or V)	Friend of Soma (28)
32. Dantika (B)	Daughter of Kosala's King Pasenadi, she "gained faith" when the Jeta Grove Monastery in Savatthi was gifted to the Buddha
34. Sukka (V)	Teaching of <i>Theri</i> Dhammadinna touched her
35. Sela (K)	Daughter of King of Alavi; her brother, Hatthaka, was a notable lay disciple of the Buddha
37. Bhadda Kapilani (B)	She and her husband went forth together.
45. Sona (K, B, or V)	Her husband went forth with the Buddha, leaving her to raise 10 children before she joined the Order
46. Bhadda Kundalakesa (V)	*
47. Patacara (V)	*
48. Group of 30 (Unknown)	Influence of <i>Theri</i> Patacara
49. Chanda (B)	Influence of <i>Theri</i> Patacara on this widow/beggar
50. Group of 500 (K)	Influence of <i>Theri</i> Patacara upon mothers of dead sons
51. Vasetthi (K, B, or V)	Sight of the Buddha dispelled her grief; he taught her with a sermon. ¹⁵
52. Khema (K)	*
57. Vijaya (K, B, or V)	Taught by her friend, Khema (52), Vijaya followed her into the Order.
58. Uttara (K, B, or V)	Influence of <i>Theri</i> Patacara
59. Chala (B)	Sister of one of Buddha's two chief disciples
60. Upachala (B)	Sister of one of Buddha's two chief disciples
61. Sisupachala (B)	Sister of one of Buddha's two chief disciples
62. Vaddha's Mother (K, B, or V)	She left her son to join the Order; later he became a <i>thera</i>
63. Kisagotami (K)	*
64. Uppalavanna (V)	*She was a co-wife with her daughter to her son who became a monk/ <i>thera</i> .
66. Ambapali (S)	Son became a monk/ <i>thera</i>
67. Rohini (B)	Heard the Buddha and converted her parents
68. Chapa (S)	Husband was a monastic who strayed back to the secular world to live with Chapa and have a child. He later joined the Buddha; Chapa followed.

¹⁵ This woman went "mad" after the death of her son. She wandered the streets, becoming homeless. The sight of the Buddha dispelled her illness; and after his teaching she asked for ordination.

69. Sundari (B)	After her father met with the Buddha and went forth, so too did his daughter, Sundari. Influence of <i>Theri</i> Vasetthi. ¹⁶
71. Subha of Jivakamba Grove (B)	Becomes a believer by seeing the Buddha in Rajagaha
73. Sumedha (K)	Taught her parents after hearing the <i>bhukkhunis</i> teach

The connections among the *theris*, as well as with people outside the group of 73, are highly personal; and several concern friendships, such as that between Vijaya and Khema. When the latter joined the women’s Order, Vijaya followed. The ties may have even stemmed from a previous life, as in the case of Dhammadinna, Visakha, Bhadda Kundalakesa, Patacara, Khema, Kisagotami, and Uppalavana – women of different ages and from various places who had been sisters, daughters of the King of Kasi, in a previous life. However, it is notable that none of the seven were *suddas*, being from only the *khattiya* and *vessa* classes.

In this compilation, there are a number of *theris* whose family members were also monks. Vaddha’s Mother, Sumangala’s Mother, and Ambapali had sons who also went forth; after raising 10 children, Sona, like her husband, became a mendicant; and sisters Chala, Upachala, and Sisupachala followed their brother, Sariputta, one of the Buddha’s chief disciples, into the Order. Chapa, the daughter of a deer hunter, whose beauty enthralled an ascetic, Upaka. Upaka was “given” Chapa by her father. After some years, Upaka returned to monastic life, allowed by the Buddha to go forth even though he had “become old” (Pruitt, 1988, p. 280). Soon thereafter, Chapa would go forth as well.

This list also includes several *theris* who experienced personal transformation from simply “seeing” the Buddha (Subha, Subha of Jivakamba Grove, and Vasetthi); such experiences

¹⁶ The death of Sundari’s brother led her father, overwrought with grief, to *theri* Vasetthi and into the Buddhist monastic Order. Sundari followed and so too did the entire household.

served as pivotal points from which the women chose the path of renunciation, joining the Order of *bhikkhunis*.

Discussion

As previously emphasized, this study has been at an initial level of investigation, taking into account a wide range of issues that had influence upon the *bhikkhunis*. The surveys are a macro-anatomical approach to the diversity of the *theris*, using attributes of *vanna* classes, places of origins, and relationships with the Buddha, kings in high positions, and friends and families. The findings are almost startlingly unequivocal along several features:

1. The significant majority of *theris* came from the socioeconomic classes of *khattiyas*, *brahmins*, and *vessas* – those from the social, economic, professional, and family groups of wealth, power, or both. Furthermore, of these three groups, those with larger numbers were the *khattiya* and *brahmin* classes, the traditional and well-established segments of society. Although 23% of the women were *vessas*, this category had changed from a group of the “common people” to that of merchants and bankers, probably as a result of the development of trade and growth in affluence beyond the *brahmins* and *khattiyas*. Schumann (1989) notes that the Buddha was favorably inclined toward economic activities; and he appreciated the position of *vessas* to donate monasteries and carry the message of the *dhamma* into different parts of their trade routes.

Relative to this ranking of *theri* classes (Figure 2, p. 36), when compared to Schumann’s percentages (Table 2, page 32), the two lists are roughly in the same ranges, with the *khattiyas* and *brahmins* reversed in rank order and numbers. In sum, 89% of the *theris* were from the upper three classes, the most stemming from the *khattiya* group; and only 11% originated from the ranks of service providers and servants (*sudda*).

It is evident from the Ubbiri's description of a good deed, and its ramifications for rebirth (*kamma*), that the two *vanna* classes of *khattiya* and *brahmin* were considered most valuable. This is underscored in the *Apadana* narrative of Ubbiri as she brings up her past lives (Pruitt, 1988, p. 76):

I have known two [sorts] of families: *khattiya* and *brahmin*. [I was] of high family everywhere. This was the consequence of [the gift] of that one seat.

I have not known grief or mental torment. I have not known life as an outcaste.

This was the consequence of [the gift] of that one seat.

Many nurses, hunchbacks, and female attendants looked after me. I went from lap to lap ... Some bathed me, others fed me. They delighted me always. Some smeared me with perfume ...

Such were the rewards of a good deed; such were the details of a life considered to be the result of good action, *kamma*. In the commentary of the *theris*, accumulated *kamma* (of good deeds) is often tied to a life that is extravagant and self-centered. There is no attention in Ubbiri's story of the larger external world; her scope of the world is seemingly limited to the monastics and the life of the palace. Many of the stories of commendable deeds concern actions dealing with monks, such as giving them cakes, flowers, and seats.

Schumann (1989, p. 192) writes, "Social inequality is the result of previous deeds; everyone [earns] his social position by *kamma*." There are instances of the results from faulty action(s) from previous lives as well. One example is Addakasi (literally means "Half Kasi"), whose value, using her beauty and body, was once equal to half the worth of Kasi Kingdom. Born into a rich merchant family in Baranasi, she became a prostitute/courtesan as the

consequence of having called a nun a prostitute in a former life. For this abuse, she also had been “cooked in hell” in an earlier life (Pruitt, 1998, p. 45).

The impact of past deeds can result in drastic measures, as revealed in the narrative of *theri* Isidasi who had accumulated good deeds before committing adultery. “Having died, she was born in hell. When she died there, she was conceived as a hermaphrodite in the womb of a servant girl” (Pruitt, 1998, p. 329). *Kamma* was associated not only with retribution and reward, but seemingly with positions within *vanna*. In the time of the Buddha, Isidasi was born into a merchant (*vessa*) family; but “one husband after another was led to being displeased with her,” all due to the “power of her former deeds” (Pruitt, 1998, p. 329).

2. Most of the *theris* came from only a couple kingdoms, notably the most powerful ones in their time: Kosala and Magadha . 77% of the *theris* came from those regions; adding Avanti Kingdom into the equation, the result is 82% from three kingdoms (Figure 4, page 38).

3. Drilling down further, 64% of the *theris* (including those without places of origin identified) came from just four cities: Savatthi, Rajagaha, Kapilavatthu, and Vesali. Although most of the ancient population lived in villages, 92% of the poet nuns were city residents, most of whom were enjoying the luxuries of affluence and a booming economy in urban settings “crowded with elephants, horses, chariots, carts and men, all swaying and rolling along” (Wagle, 1888/1966, p. 28).

4. The connections of the *theris* convey anything but an expansive or diverse spectrum of society. The surveys indicate a good number of *theris* who were directly connected, most intimately, to men positioned at the apex of power and wealth.

5. Finally, the circle tightens further through affiliations of the women with the Buddha himself, with a good number of poets coming from his household. As Table 5 (pp. 49-50)

indicates, twelve of the *theris* had been members of his harem; one was his aunt/stepmother; one was his half-sister; and one was a servant who worked as his aunt's nurse .

6. The last tabulation outlined in Table 6 (pp. 52-54) provides the nature of additional *theri* connections; and it reflects the ties with family members who were also Buddhist monastics.

Perhaps the circles of associations are relatively small and tight because they represent the first followers of a new movement; and perhaps many such developments follow a similar pattern in their incipient phases.

Gotama was familiar with the life of royalty, having been raised in several seasonal palaces, and “surrounded by beautiful and gaily-attired handmaids, who sought to dissipate his thoughts with music and dancing” (Oldenberg, 1882/1971, p. 104). The world of the highest-positioned *khattiyas* was an environment the Buddha knew well; his friends included kings, such as Pasenadi and Bimbisara, who were about his age. Naturally, they would have been his early adherents and supporters.

Members of his core family followed the Buddha. Others of his household, such as the women of the harem and his aunt's nurse followed as well. Without Gotama, the household head, what would their functions have become? They stepped onto an unknown path but with those individuals who were close and very familiar to them.

There are variations within this group of 73 with regard to their personal stories, but this would be true for any group of individuals, homogenous or heterogeneous. However, there are some variations in age and subject of interest within the *theris*. Many seemed to join the Order as young women; and a handful entered as old/older women. As one instance, Sumana, the sister

of King Pasenadi became converted when she heard the Buddha give a teaching to her brother; but she waited a long time in order to care for her grandmother. Her poem is simple and concise:

Sleep well, dear old one,
 covered with cloth you have made,
 your passion for sex has shriveled away,
 you've become cool, free. (Hallisey, 2015, p. 15)

The translation by Pruitt (1998, p. 35) is rendered quite differently:

Lie down happily, old lady, clad in the garment that you have made, for your
 desire is stilled. You have become cool, quenched.

Another *theri* who may have joined the Order as an older woman is Sumangala's Mother, born into a poor family in Savatthi. Given in marriage to a rush-plaiter (women were given in marriage when they "came of age," most likely when they reached puberty which would have made them more girls and adolescents than women), she had a son who became a monk. She worked hard making sunshades and baskets out of bamboo sticks. She probably just barely eked out a living. Her poem is a reflection of her past; and one senses she labored for many years. This is a contrast to the lifestyles of many of her fellow *theris*. Her poem addresses her son:

Dear one who is quite free, dear one who is quite freed,
 I too am well-freed from the pestle;
 my shameless husband, even the sunshade he worked under,
 and my pot that stinks like a water snake all disgust me.

As I destroyed anger and the passion for sex,
 I was reminded of the sound of bamboo being split,
 I go to the foot of a tree and think, "Ah, happiness,"

And from within that happiness, I begin to meditate. (Hallisey, 2015, p. 21)

Other older women included Dhamma whose husband had not allowed her to go forth. She practiced as a layperson and joined the monastic Order after the husband died. And Sona was another woman who entered the monastery in her later years. Only after raising her 10 children alone (her husband left to become a monk) did she herself become a *bhikkhuni*.

There are several topics of keen interest to many of the nun poets. Passion and sex have already been noted. Many of the poets raise this subject as attachments to overcome; and they adopt common phrases most likely from the teachings of the Buddha. Some of the tone or flavor of the teachings can be found in Pruitt's translation on the Buddha's words to his sister:

Nanda, see the body, diseased, impure, rotten. Develop the mind, intent and well concentrated, for contemplation of the unpleasant.

As this is, so is that. As that is, so is this, It gives out a rotten evil smell. [It is] what fools delight in.

Looking at it in this way, not relaxing day or night, then analyzing it by your own wisdom, you will see.

The commentary explains that the Buddha spoke in this manner in order to teach Nanda a meditation tool "for the sake of higher paths." He continued, saying, "O Nanda, there is no hard core to this body, not even in the smallest measure," and ended with, "A city is made of bones with a smearing of flesh and blood where old age, death, pride, and hypocrisy lurk" (Pruitt, 1998, p. 109). Dhammapala reports that Sundarinanda attained *arahantship* at the end of this teaching. The method of so tackling attachments must have been effective.

Another case of a blunt, if not harsh, approach concerning the body and sex can be culled from the story of *theri* Vimala, a prostitute, who followed in the profession of her mother. When

she tries to seduce Moggallana, the Buddha's chief disciple, he speaks the following words which are found elsewhere in the canonical texts and included by Dhammapala in the commentary:

You little hut, made of a chain of bones, sewn together with flesh and sinew. Fie upon the evil-smelling body. You cherish those who have another's limbs.

You bag of dung, tied up with skin, you demoness with lumps on your breast.

There are nine streams in your body which flow all the time.

Your body with its nine streams makes an evil smell and is obstructed by dung. A bhikkhu desiring impurity avoids it as one avoids excrement.

If any person knew you as I know you, he would avoid you, keeping far away, as one avoids a cess pit in the rainy season. (Pruitt, 1998, p. 101)

This must have been another example the practice of leaning – very frontally – into an attachment, emphasizing its unpleasantness for the purpose of rooting it out.

Another case of teaching, seemingly without full awareness of the “other,” is found in the story of Sumedha, the daughter of King of Konca who heard the *dhamma* from the time she was young; and when she came of age, she rejected her parents' plan for her to marry King Anikoratta. For one so young, the words she spoke to her parents seem to have been from somewhere/someone other than herself and her experiences. Her poem is the longest one, the “Great Chapter” which concludes the anthology; its language is strong, and some phrases are reminiscent of the Buddha's words:

Like a worm, I would be associated with this foul body, impure, smelling of sweat, a frightful water bag of corpses, always flowing, full of impurities...

A body is repulsive, smeared with flesh and blood, food for worms, vultures, and other birds... attached to the unsubstantial body, an aggregate of bones and sinews, to the foul body, full of saliva, tears, excrement, and pus...

This very day, father, I shall renounce [the world]. What [have I to do] with unsubstantial enjoyments? I am disgusted with sensual pleasures. They are like vomit, made like the base of a palm tree. (Pruitt, 1998, p. 343-385)

The young believer continues in this pedantic fashion, oblivious to the pain she is creating for her parents. Even when she is told they are pained; she continues with her preaching. Her life as a pampered princess reveals its character in this poem. She neither recognizes the pain and suffering of another (here, her parents), nor feels any compassion or sympathy toward them. She shows herself as self-centered, threatening to starve herself if she is not permitted to go forth. As her mother “suffered and cried and her father’s face was covered with tears ... [she fell] to the palace floor” (Hallisey, 2015, p. 217), perhaps not unlike a spoiled young child having a tantrum.

Like the teachings related to beauty and the body, those related to grief could also be harsh, although effective. To the grieving mother, Ubbiri, the Buddha tells her:

Mother, you cry in the forest, “O Jiva,”

get hold of yourself, Ubbiri.

Eighty-four thousand daughters, all with that same name,

the ones that said they were “Life,”

all have been burnt in this cremation ground,

so which one of them are you grieving for? (Hallisey, 2015, p. 39)

Dhammapala's commentary has some additional dialogue not found in the above; and in it, the Buddha asks her, "Why are you babbling?" to which she replies, "O Lord, I am lamenting because of my daughter" (Pruitt, 1998, p. 74). The dialogue segues into Ubbiri's poem which Pruitt translates to read much like Hallisey's. To have one's suffering diminished in this way does not reveal a humane regard for a different state of mind or the suffering of the "other."

On the other hand, Patacara, who as a teacher influenced many, including her fellow *theris*, handles those overwrought with grief in a more even-handed way, probably because she has known the depths of grief and loss. When Canda was a beggar (the result of losing her husband and all her relatives to cholera), she lived on the streets begging for food for seven years. She went to where Patacara was serving a meal and "... when the *bhikkhunis* saw she was afflicted and overwhelmed by hunger, compassion arose, and being well disposed, they served her the food that remained" (Pruitt, 1998, p. 157). Only *after* Canda's immediate physical need had been met, did Patacara explain the doctrine to her.

This teacher's *dhamma* resonated as well with the Group of 500, women who had lost their sons. Unlike the Buddha's attitude toward grief (of Ubbiri), Patacara's is less adamant, as reflected in the poem by the group retelling what Patacara has said to them (Hallisey, 2015, p. 73):

You keep crying out, "My son!"
to that being who was coming or going somewhere else
and who came from somewhere else,
none of which you know.

But you do not really cry for him
over what you do know will face him wherever he is:

that is just human nature.

He came from there uninvited, he went from here without
permission,

he came from somewhere or other, he stayed a bit.

From here he went one way, from there he will go another,
a hungry ghost will be reborn as a human.

He went the way he came, what is there to grieve about?

What grieving person would not prefer such a tone with words of honesty but without searing candor? Patacara softens the blows of suffering with truth carried by a gentle breeze rather than a blustery gale to make a point in a teaching.

Conclusion

The ancient *theris* had some powerful and very personal stories; and although the narratives may have been diverse in nature, the demographics of the women was not. The majority of the 73 were people of privilege and leisure, without need or concern for working for their livelihoods. Additionally, they were networked to people similar to themselves, including kings and others of wealth and power – this within a narrow rubric of only a couple cities.

In sum, the group was not diverse relative to socioeconomic classifications or places of origin. With some exceptions, they made up an exclusive enclave of the highest ranks of ancient society. The very nature of the Buddhist monastic life – removing oneself from the secular world with an act of “renunciation” – reinforced the insularity and exclusivity many of these women knew from their secular lives. Relative to diversity, they may not have accurately reflected the true spectrum of the larger women’s Order or the Buddhist community as a whole;

but, clearly, the demographics of the 73 poets did not represent the overall population of that region and time. Even so, what these *theris* provide is a distinct sample group, a rich source for research of the earliest Buddhist women.

Of the Pali “imaginaire,” of which the *Therīgāthā* is a component, Steve Collins has said it was the product of “an elite ideology, originally strongest in cities” (Collins, 2003, p. 682). To his observation, the findings of this study would add that it was also the product of the rich and privileged classes of ancient Indian society.

Only after the emergence of the survey findings did there come the realization that the study had begun with an underlying, albeit well-veiled, expectation. Indeed, it was a *hope* that the demographic data would reveal democratic and egalitarian qualities within the group of *theris*. Instead, what emerged were their predominantly aristocratic and royal traits – of lifestyles and backgrounds – making the women quite homogenous and far from diverse. How such a slant¹⁷ may influence the measures of their literary works, as well as their individual stories, is worth consideration, perhaps for another research endeavor.

Yet, what *is* certain, in this arena full of ambiguities and dichotomies, is that this thesis has just barely scratched the surface of the *theris*. Their position and their writings, from a remarkable and propitious juncture in the development of the Buddhist tradition, merit far greater scrutiny from a multitude of other angles and queries. However, it is possible that using the “slant” of the lens of diversity will net fresh findings that may otherwise remain only marginal, if not left hidden in the darkness of ancient history.

¹⁷ From Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” copyright 1951 by the President and Fellows of Harvard University.

References

- Anālayo, Bh. (2011). Mahapajapati's going forth in the Madhyama-agama. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 18, 267-317. <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2016/01/Analayo-T-60-final2.pdf>
- Anālayo, Bh. (2014). Beautiful eyes seen with insight as bereft of beauty – Subha theri and her male counterpart in the Ekottarika-agama. *The Sati Journal*, 2, 39-53. <http://www.sati.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Sati-Journal-Volume-2.pdf>
- Anthony, D. (2007). *The Horse, the wheel, and language: How bronze-age riders from the Eurasian steppes shaped the modern world*. Princeton University Press.
- Barnes, N.J. (2000). The nuns at the stupa: Inscriptional evidence for the lives and activities of the early Buddhist nuns in India. In E.B. Findly (Ed.), *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's women* (pp.17-36). Wisdom Publications.
- Bechert, H., & Gombrich, R. (Eds.). (1984). *The world of Buddhism: Buddhist monks and nuns in society and culture*. Thames & Hudson. <https://archive.org/details/worldofbuddhismb00bech>
- Bhattacharji, S. (1987, February). Prostitution in ancient India. *Social Scientist*, 15(2), 32-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3520437>
- Blackstone, K.R. (2000). *Women in the footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for liberation in the Therīgāthā*. Motilal Banarsidass. (Original work published 1998)
- Bode, M. (1893). Women leaders of the Buddhist reformation. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1893, 517-566 & 763-798. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/journals/jras/1893-13.htm>
- Bodhi, Bh. (Trans.). (2013, November 30). *Discourses of the ancient nuns*.

- <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/b1143.html>
- Brekke, T. (1999). The religious motivation of the early Buddhists. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 67(4), 849-866. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466273>
- Bronkhorst, J. (2007). *Greater Magadha: Studies in the culture of early India*. In J. Bronkhorst (Ed.), *Handbook of Oriental studies section two: India, volume 19* (pp. 13-437). Brill. http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Greater%20Magadha%20Studies%20in%20the%20Culture%20of%20Early%20India_Bronkhorst.pdf
- Chakraborty, K. (2018). Radical grace: Hymning of ‘womanhood’ in *Therigatha*. *Feminist Theology*, 26(2), 160-170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735017738654>
- Choubey, A. (2009, July). Voices from the yore: *Therigatha* writings of the bhikkhunis. *Indian Review of World Literature in English*, 5(II), 1-9. https://www.academia.edu/24915319/Voices_from_the_Yore_Therigatha_Writings_of_the_Bhikkhunis
- Collett, A. (2009). Historio-critical hermeneutics in the study of women in early Indian Buddhism. *Numen*, 56(1), 91-117. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852708X373276>
- Collett, A. (Ed.). (2014). *Women in early Indian Buddhism: Comparative textual studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Collett, A. (2015). Women as teachers and disciples in early Buddhist communities: The evidence of epigraphy. *Religions of South Asia* 9.1, 28-42. <https://doi.org/10.158/rosa.v9i1.29442>
- Collett, A. (2016). *Lives of early Buddhist nuns: Biographies as history*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, S. (1990a). *Selfless person: Imagery and thought in Theravada Buddhism*.

- Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1982)
- Collins, S. (1990b). On the very idea of the Pali Canon. *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 15, 89-126. http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Articles/On%20the%20very%20Idea%20of%20thePali%20Canon_Collins_CCRS_1990.pdf
- Collins, S. (2003). What is literature in Pali? In S. Pollack (Ed.), *Literary cultures in history: Reconstructions from South Asia* (pp. 649-688). University of California Press.
- Collins, S. (2010). *Nirvana: Concept, imagery, narrative*. Cambridge University Press.
- Desai, S. (2019, March 5). Book reviews. [Review of the book *A population history of India: From the first modern people to the present day*, by T. Dyson], *Population and Development Review*, 45(1), 249-251. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.1242>
- Dickinson, E. (n.d.). "Tell all the truth but tell it slant."
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263>
- Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. (M. Sainsbury, L. Dumont, & B. Gulati, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original published in 1966)
- Easwaran, E. (Trans.). (2007). *The Dhammapada* (2nd ed.). Nilgiri Press.
- Fick, R. (1920). *The social organization in north-east India in Buddha's time*. (S. Maitra, Trans.). University of Calcutta Press.
- Findly, E.B. (2000). Women teachers of women: Early nuns "worthy of my confidence." In E.B. Findly (Ed.), *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's women* (pp.133-155). Wisdom Publications.
- Gethin, R. (1998). *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.
- Ghurye, G.S. (1969). *Caste and race in India* (5th ed.). Popular Prakashan.

- Gokhale, B.G. (1982). Early Buddhism and the urban revolution. *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 5(2), 8-22.
http://www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Articles/Early%20Buddhism%20and%20the%20Urban%20Revolution_JAIBS_Gokhale_1982.pdf
- Gombrich, R. (1975, April). Buddhist karma and social control. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17(2), 212-220. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/178004>
- Gombrich, R. (1991). *Theravada Buddhism: a social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo*. Routledge. (Original work published in 1988)
- Hallisey, C. (Trans.). (2015). *Therigatha: Poems of the first Buddhist women*. Harvard University Press for Murty Classical Library of India.
- Hallisey, C. (2018, October 29). *Buddhist spirituality and contemplation of nature through poetry* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Shwt5kEc7ww&t=1s>
- Heirman, A. (2011). Buddhist nuns: Between past and present. *Numen*, 58(2011), 603-631.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/156852711X593278>
- Horner, I.B. (2011). *Women under primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and almswomen*. Gutenberg Publishers. (Original published in 1930)
- Horner, I.B. (2013, November 30). *Women in early Buddhist literature*. A talk to the all-Ceylon Buddhist women's association.
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/horner/wheel030.html>
- Hutton, J.H. (1963). *Caste in India: Its nature, function, and origins* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Jootla, S.E. (1988). *Inspiration from enlightened nuns*. Buddhist Publication Society.
http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/inspire-nuns6.pdf

- Joseph, T. (2019, February 6). *Book discussion: Early Indians by Tony Joseph* [Video].
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktn3S1RaT-I>
- King, U. (1987). World religions, women and education. *Comparative Education*, 23(1) 35-49.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3099444>
- Lang, K. (1986). Lord Death's snare: Gender-related imagery in the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2(2), 63-79.
www.jstor.org/stable/25002042
- Miller, B.S. (1984, summer/fall). The *Therīgāthā*: Women's songs of early Buddhism. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 19(2), 129-135. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40872698>
- Milligan, M. (2019). The economic power of women in early South Asian Buddhism. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 56(1), 53-76.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464618817367>
- Moore, J.H. (1907). Analysis of the Pali Iti-vuttaka, a collection of discourses of the Buddha. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 28, pp. 317-330.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=xcs0AAAAYAAJ&lpg=PA317&dq=sloka%20pali&pg=PA317#v=onepage&q=sloka%20pali&f=false>
- Murcott, S. (Trans.). (1991). *The first Buddhist women: Translations and commentary on the Therigatha*. Parallax.
- Norman, K.R. (Trans.). (1995). *The elders' verses, II: Therigatha*. Pali Text Society. (Original work published 1971)
- Ohnuma, R. (2006, December). Debt to the mother: A neglected aspect of the founding of the Buddhist nuns' order. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(4), 861-901.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4139955>

- Oldenberg, H. (1971). *Buddha: His life, his doctrine, his order* (W. Hoey, Trans.). Indological Book House. (Original work published 1882)
- Olendzki, A. (n.d.). Pali poetry [selection from various parts of the Pali Canon].
<http://www.andrewolendzki.org/pali-poetry.html>
- Olendzki, A. (2016, Fall). Singing the dharma: Ambapali's song. *Tricycle Magazine*.
<https://tricycle.org/magazine/ambapali-buddhist-song/>
- Olivia, N. (2017). Women Buddhist masters. *International Journal of Dharma Studies*, 5(8), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40613-017-0047-y>
- Pieris, R. (1952, May). Caste, ethos, and social equilibrium. *Social Forces*, 30(4), 409-415.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2572341>
- Pruitt, W. (Trans.). (1998). The commentary on the verses of the theris (*Therīgāthā-attakathā: Paramatthadīpanī VI*) by Acariya Dhammapala. The Pali Text Society.
- Reich, D. (2018). *Who we are and how we got here: Ancient DNA and the new science of the human past*. Pantheon.
- Rhys Davids, C.A. F. (1901, September). Conditions in ancient India. *The Economic Journal*, 11(43), 305-320. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/295664>
- Rhys Davids, C.A.F. (Trans.). (2019). *Psalms of early Buddhists I: Psalms of the sisters*.
Pranava Books. (Original published in 1909)
- Rhys Davids, T.W. (1972). *Buddhist India*. Books for Libraries Press. (Original work published in 1903)
- Rhys Davids, T.W. (Trans.). (1899). *Dialogues of the Buddha*. Henry Frowde.
<https://static.sirimangalo.org/pdf/dialogues1.pdf>

Roy, K. (2014). Society at the time of the Buddha. In R.R. French & M.A. Nathan (Eds.),

Buddhism and law (pp. 31-45). Cambridge University Press.

Schelling, A., & Waldman, A. (1996). *Songs of the sons and daughters of Buddha*. Shambhala.

Schopen, G. (1995, November). Monastic law meets the real world: A monk's continuing right to inherit family property in classical India. *History of Religions*, 35(2), 102-123.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062692>

Schopen, G. (2008, October-December). Separate but equal: property rights and the legal

independence of Buddhist nuns and monks in early North India. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 128(4), 625-640. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25608448>

Schumann, H. W. (1989). *The historical Buddha: The times, life and teachings of the founder of Buddhism* (M.O'C. Walshe, Trans.). Penguin.

Sharma, A. (1977). How and why did the women in ancient India become Buddhist nuns?

Sociological Analysis, 38(3), 239-251. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3709804>

Sharma, R.S. (2016). *Sudras in ancient India: A social history of the lower order down to circa A.D. 600*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. (Original published 1958)

Shulman, E. (2017). The early discourses of the Buddha as literature: Narrative features of the Dīgha Nikāya. *Journal of Religion*, 97(3). <https://doi.org/10.1086/691979>

Skilling, P. (2001). Nuns, laywomen, donors, goddesses: Female roles in early Indian

Buddhism. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 24(2), 241-274.

<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/jiabs/article/view/8921>

Thanissaro, Bh. (n.d.). Introduction to the *Theragāthā* & *Therīgāthā*.

<https://www.dhammadalks.org/suttas/KN/Thag/introduction.html>

Thanissaro, Bh. (Trans.). (n.d.). *Poems of the elder nuns* (34).

https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/KN/Thig/index_Thig.html

Trainor, K. (1993, spring). In the eye of the beholder: Nonattachment and the body in Subhā's verse (*Therīgāthā* 71). *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61(1), 57-79.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465001>

Wagle, N. (1966). *Society at the time of the Buddha*. Popular Prakashan. (Original work published 1888)

Walters, J. (1994). A voice from the silence: The Buddha's mother's story. *History of Religions*, 33(4), 358-379. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062715>

Walters, J. (2018). *Legends of the Buddhist saints: Apadanapali*. Online publication: J. Walter and Whitman College.

http://apadanatranslation.org/public/links/walters_legends-of-the-buddhist-saints.pdf

Warder, A.K. (1954). Pali metre: A study of the evolution of early middle Indian metre, based on verse preserved in the Pali Canon. (Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29620/>

Weingast, M. (2020). *The first free women: Poems of the early Buddhist nuns*. Shambhala.

Willis, J.D. (1985). Nuns and benefactresses: The role of women in the development of

Buddhism. In Y.Y. Haddad & E.B. Findly (Eds.), *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (pp. 59-85). State University of New York Press.

<http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-MISC/misc29865.pdf>

Wilson, L. (1996). *Charming cadavers: Horrific figurations of the feminine in Indian Buddhist hagiographic literature*. University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, L. (2012). Buddhism and gender. In D.L. McMahan (Ed.), *Buddhism in the modern*

world (pp. 258-268). Routledge.

Wilson, L. (2014). Buddhism and family. *Religion Compass*, 8(6), 188-198.

https://www.academia.edu/26680725/Buddhism_and_Family

Wright, J. (1999). Old wives' tales in "Therīgāthā": A review article. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 62(3), 519-528.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3107578>

Young, S. (2007, January). Female mutability and male anxiety in an early Buddhist legend.

Journal of the History of Sexuality, 16(1), 14-39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30114200>

Zimmer, C. (2018, March 20). David Reich unearths human history etched in bone.

NYTimes.com. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/science/david-reich-human-migrations.html>