AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY
OF NEPALESE SHAMANISM

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The spectrum of anthropological fieldwork ranges from "unobtrusive measures" (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz & Sechrest, 1966) and techniques of "direct observation" which demand investigator objectivity, to the more subjectively involved "complete participation" (Gold, 1958; Junker, 1960). Commenting on the value of the participatory aspect of fieldwork, Pelto & Pelto (1978:69) write "... it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the information that the anthropologist accumulates through direct participation." This type of field role has also been found effective in the study of religious systems and altered states of consciousness (Jules-Rosette, 1915; Maquet, 1975, 1980; Staal, 1975; Tart, 1972).

An altered state of consciousness is defined by Krippner (1972, p. 1) as a "mental state which can be subjectively recognized by an individual (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a difference in psychological functioning from the individual's normal alert waking state" (see Ludwig, 1969:9). More recently, Zinberg (1977:1) suggested using the term "alternate" rather than altered which has a pejorative connotation suggesting that such states represent deviation from the way consciousness ought to be. (The word "altered" is employed here because it is in current usage. However, I agree with Zinberg (1977:1) that "different states of consciousness prevail at different times for different reasons.... Alternate states of consciousness is a plural, all-inclusive term, unlike participatory aspects of fieldwork

"alternate" states of consciousness

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Personal names used herein are pseudonyms. Foreign terms are in Nepali unless indicated. Ta: precedes Tamang terms.
The "experiential approach," according to Maquet (1978: 362-63), "... is the investigator's awareness of his own inner reactions when going through a patterned behavioral process in another culture or subculture. This makes possible direct observation of some mental states, and helps to constitute a body of references for communication with other persons undergoing a similar experience." Thus, while the experiential method demands a direct participation in the system of beliefs and practices of the culture being studied, it is not the same thing as "going native." The latter is more appropriately associated with a conversion to another belief system and the absence of a critical perspective. The experiential method demands a combination of talents-scholar as well as disciple.

The experiential method is not exclusively subjective or objective but synthesizes elements of both. It demands intimate knowledge of the cultural categories by which experiences are interpreted and described by people under study, as well as a discursive perspective. Yet, it differs from other approaches in that it is always participatory and introspective, utilizing the experiences and self-observations of the ethnographer as viable tools of research.

In the experiential approach employed by Maquet (1975: 182-94; 1980:140) in his field study of Buddhist meditation in Sri Lanka, the anthropologist became a member of the in-group and was thus able to observe his own inner states while going through an indigenous cultural practice designed to produce certain mental states. He then reported and interpreted these experiences for an academic audience.

Jules-Rosette (1978:553-56) describes a similar experiential "folk inquiry" comprised of a four-fold process in which the investigator moves from initial "conceptions" of the other thought system; to "discovery," which is an "exchange of subjective positions" in order to experience what is being studied as a member; followed by the development of an analytical stance for "evaluation"; and finally, "communication" to those who have not undergone the immersion experience, in a language that merges experience and abstraction.
There are various levels of participation within the experiential approach. Maquet (1975:182) and Jules-Rosette (1976:132ff) represent examples of one extreme in that they both professed a personal commitment to religious doctrine. A more limited approach is the "introspective ethnography" used by Riesman (1977:2,149) who reports that once he had integrated himself fully into the life shared by the Fulani of West Africa, they behaved toward him as toward each other. Yet a whole side of him escaped their attention (i.e., everything Western, including the need to gather data for a thesis), and these factors influenced his thoughts and sensitivities, causing him to react differently than they to certain incidents. Riesman participated simultaneously in two cultural systems, and each affected him differently. Another example of this more limited experiential approach comes from Ridington (1969) who suggests a "symbolic transformation" of the ethnographer so that he can experience reality from the conceptual standpoint of his informants, but which stops short of cultural conversion. Similarly, Staal (1975:130) and Tart (1972:1207) both approach the study of mystical states by recommending that the investigator first adopt an uncritically attitude, to be replaced at some point by scientific perspective. Ram Dass (1970:54) describes himself as a "gnostic intermediary," i.e., an individual willing to give up a Western predisposition in order to experience another system at the "being" level, then bring it back and communicate it.

My personal circumstances, biases, and lifestyle made it impossible to carry out a complete participatory inquiry. The "permeability of realities" described by ethnomethodologists (Mehan & Wood, 1975:27f) was never completely experienced; nor was I "hurled into inconceivable new worlds" like Castaneda (1972:187). I did not undergo religious or cultural conversion to the Tamang belief system, but I did take a guru with whom a relationship was developed that eventually transcended cultural barriers and intellectual biases, enabling me to experience Tamang shamanism and ecstasy as an apprentice.

TAMANG SHAMANISM IN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Tamang are a Tibeto-Burmese speaking people and are the largest ethnic group in Nepal (approximately 520,000). They live primarily in the mountains to the east and west of the Kathmandu Valley, and there are about 23,000 in the Valley itself where Boudhanath, my field site, is located. A very acculturated town, Boudhanath is located about four miles from Kathmandu and is a famous pilgrimage site frequented by...
Buddhists from all the neighboring mountain countries. At one
time, Buddhists from Tibet and China also made annual pil­
grimages. Within Boudhanath's perimeters is located a large
stupa (tumulus) with a towering gilded spire from which
Buddha's all-knowing eyes peer out in all four directions. The
stupas is said to house the ashes of Mahakasyapa, Buddha of the
age before Sakyamuni (see Bista, 1967:52; Frank, 1974:94).

The Tamang are Buddhists and frequent the many Tibetan
monasteries that surround the Boudhanath stupa. But the lay
people know little about Buddhist doctrine, few can read any
of the sacred texts, and they do not practice meditation. The
underlying religion of the Tamang is animism. Their world is
populated with numerous spirit beings said to live in rocks,
trees, waterfalls, at crossroads, etc. The people believe that
these beings are responsible for much of the good and evil in
the world.

Tamang employ spirits to explain unfortunate events that
would otherwise be unaccountable (cf Evans-Pritchard, 1937).
Spirits are considered the sources of nearly all misfortune:
if a house burns down, a cow stops giving milk, the harvest
is small, or a man falls ill, a spirit agent is identified and a ritual
prescription carried out in order to dispel it. The shamans
are "masters of spirits" and have developed techniques of
control over them. They are able to utilize this power to com­
bat evil spirits, and thereby exorcise or help those who suffer
from spirits (see Shirokogoroff, 1935; Firth, 1964).

During my field research, I had the opportunity to observe
numerous shamanic rituals, the vast majority of which were
healing rituals. I would often accompany Bhirendra, my key
informant and guru, and his other disciples on their house
calls, where they would sing the sacred myths and play the
drum. They would enter into altered states of consciousness
interpreted as spirit possession and soul journey. Crapanzano
(1977:7) defines possession as "any altered state of conscious­
ness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an
alien spirit." Eliade (1964) uses the term "magical flight" to
connote an altered state of consciousness interpreted as a "soul
journey." In this state, the Tamang shaman believes that his
soul leaves his body and traverses a visionary cosmos com­
posed of heavens and underworlds. These altered states, then,
were undertaken in an effort to return a soul stolen by a spirit
or exorcise a possessing spirit, each a potential cause of illness.
The shaman's major social function in Tamang society, there­
fore, is the diagnosis and treatment of illness.

The shamans divide illness into two categories: natural and
spirit-caused. In very severe cases, Bhirendra recommended
his patients seek modern medical treatment. However, since precise boundaries do not exist between the two forms of illness, it appears their diagnostic determinations are based on the shaman's experience. Generally, those patients whose disorders are almost totally incapacitating are advised to seek medical treatment. The people acknowledge the doctor's superiority in dealing with diseases like cholera and in treating severe lacerations and the like.

Spirit-caused illness, which is a "personalistic medical system" according to Foster's (1976) categories, is treated by the shaman. As opposed to natural illness, spirit-caused illness is less incapacitating and allows the patient to carry on a semblance of normal activity. These illnesses vanish quickly after successful healing rituals, but those that persist or progress are later recommended to doctors (cf. Gould, 1957). In cases where rituals did not work immediately, Bhirendra would wait a few days and then send his patient to the doctor. If the patient's illness was successfully treated, Bhirendra would maintain that he appeased the responsible spirits making it possible for the doctor to speed dissolution of the patient's symptoms "which would have disappeared anyway" (Peters, 1978).

In the type of illnesses treated by the shamans, there was often an underlying upset in family equilibrium where two or more individuals were in conflict and one of them, the patient, became physically or mentally ill. Thus even seemingly organic symptoms resulted from tension and anxiety, and it was in cases such as these that Bhirendra seemed most successful in his treatment. It could be said that Bhirendra is essentially a psychotherapist; his healing techniques are not exercises in the treatment of organic disease but attempts to treat disturbing emotional states and interpersonal relations which manifest physical or mental symptoms (cf. Bourguignon, 1976a).

Shamanic initiation is also a form of psychotherapy. Tamang initiates experience a "calling" in which they are overwhelmed by anxiety and begin to shake, behavior interpreted by the Tamang as "crazy possession." The Tamang believe that the only cure from this disease is to become a shaman. Bhirendra's calling occurred when he was thirteen years old. When struck, he became "mad" and ran into a cemetery naked and, in a vision, saw numerous ghosts that attacked him and tried to kill him. In a moment of desperation, he drew a dagger and cried to the gods to save him because he was "only a small boy." The dagger then dropped from his hands and fell against a rock, creating a spark of light that ended the vision. When he awoke, he returned to his village and related his experience to his parents. His father is also a shaman and his mother descended from a long line of shamans. It was decided that his uncle, a shamanic initiation as form of psychotherapy
powerful shaman would be his guru. Bhirendra then entered into a seven-year training period, learning ritual techniques and methods and also learning how to produce and end at will (i.e. control) his altered states of consciousness-the type of trances that had initially made him ill. This is why Eliade (1964:131) maintains that the shaman's training is both didactic and ecstatic. It is this training that transforms an "initiatory sickness" into a shamanic career (see Peters and Price-Williams, 1980). That is to say, the shaman is a "healed madman" (Ackerknecht, 1943).

CHOOSING THE GURU

Bhirendra is forty-five years old, and shamanism provides him with supplemental income to rice farming, the principal means by which he supports his wife, parents, and four children. By all standards, he is a typical Tamang man, except that he is a philosopher of his culture—a man who has given a lot of thought to the world and the beliefs that serve as its charter. I was immediately impressed with his knowledge of Tamang mythology; at our first meeting, he recounted the cosmology and anthropogeny myths in much more detail than the three other shamans who had been interviewed earlier. He spoke with conviction, and his rituals were dramatic and compelling affairs lasting from dusk to dawn (Peters, 1978).

I explained that I had come from America to learn his methods of healing so that they could be shared with colleagues and benefit others. He readily agreed to help me and showed immediate concern about his salary for the project. Terms were negotiated; meetings would be four times a week and I would be invited to attend all the rituals he performed. Bhirendra wanted a week's wages in advance as a show of faith. I complyed and did not see him again for two weeks. He vanished completely, and I suspect his wife and parents lied to me when I came looking for him. Throughout our relationship, advances were a mistake. Money in pocket, Bhirendra would disappear on journeys or binges that would last as long as the money held out.

Fieldwork was not restricted to the experiential approach and other methods were utilized to gather data dealing with the socio-cultural context of ecstasy. It was immediately apparent that the shaman's trance did not exist of and for itself but was restricted to specific ceremonies, particularly healing rituals. From the beginning, interviews with Bhirendra focused on recording the magical and animistic healing beliefs. Interviews were conducted with both shamans and villagers in order to
accumulate needed information. Many hours were spent with Bhirendra discussing Tamang religion and shamanism. Living in the village, observing the daily activities, I was able to witness the shamans' role within the context of community life. Once my presence was accepted, friendships were formed. I was invited to attend numerous healing rituals and conducted follow-up interviews with patients. The Tamang were generally friendly and open.

As time passed, it became apparent that Bhirendra was a highly effective healer. I became personally fond of him, although this wasn't the case early on. He is a trickster-type character, and many of his ways are contrary to what I expected. Still, he is dedicated to his patients and shows real compassion for their ills, charging each what he feels they can afford. He often haggles with his patients over the cost of a ritual, but if necessary he performs it free of charge (albeit less elaborately). Outside his noble role as community doctor, he is a bit of a scoundrel. Once when we returned from a family outing, I found him in my bedroom. He explained that he wanted to see what was up there, but I suspect it was more than curiosity. Another time I left my sunglasses at Bhirendra's house. When I returned later to look for them, he said he had not seen them. Several months later I learned that Bhirendra had sold some glasses. I had to be out of the house before dawn each day if our meetings were to take place. Even so, he often left earlier for the tavern. Bhirendra, like most of the other shamans, was thought by the villagers to drink excessively, but I observed that it never interfered with his duties as a shaman. Indeed he had reasons for frequenting the bars outside of his obvious fondness for the brew, one being that the tavern is a village meeting place where much personal gossip is exchanged. It is the perfect place for a shaman to pick up news about family conflicts and the like, problems which the shamanic curing rituals attempt to resolve (see Peters, 1978). Bhirendra also liked to show his drinking buddies how the Western professor chased after him, a situation which definitely elevated his stature. Each time he took money and then disappeared, it seemed that his sense of one-upsmanship outweighed the importance of the wages lost.

Tamang shamans are suspicious rivals. Shamanic knowledge passes only from guru to disciple, never between shamans. Under most circumstances, the shamans try to avoid one another. Should rivals meet, a verbal duel for supremacy ensues, one boasting of his exploits, and the other of his powerful mantra (magical formulae). They are afraid to eat together and protect themselves against poisoning by passing special hand gestures over their food. There are numerous stories about
shamans powerful enough to kill with their supernatural powers. Bhirendra claimed to know how to do this and more; he promised to protect all of his disciples from spells and the "psychic arrows" of rival practitioners.

Only once did I observe two shamans working together. One of the first rituals I attended was for a woman whose husband came from a village about 40 miles east of Kathmandu. He called on a shaman from his village to cure his wife, and the shaman showed up with a "partner." The morning after the rituals, the shamans stopped at my house for an interview and we discussed the preceding night's events. They offered to sell 36 myths they said comprised the "complete (oral) shaman's wisdom" (Ta: bombo sherab). They appeared knowledgeable so I agreed to a price and we went to work. The shamans were unable to deliver all they had promised and we argued over a reasonable settlement. One of the shamans came by the next morning and picked up the money. Shortly thereafter, the other arrived and asked for his money. I suspected subterfuge, but by mid-morning it was apparent that the shaman had been swindled by his partner. Shamans have bad reputations with the villagers. When asked if he thought this was justified, Bhirendra replied in the affirmative, explaining by way of analogy that one can hold more ghee (melted butter) on one's finger if it's bent than if it's straight.

Shamans take pride in their ability to outsmart each other. Trickling one another out of money is perfectly in character. In other words, anthropologists are not the only ones who are "fair game." Sleight of hand also plays an important part in the shaman's healing ritual. For example, Bhirendra sometimes becomes possessed by a tiger spirit. He dramatically runs in and out of the house on all fours, growling and pounding on windows and doors. When he finally confronts his patient he jumps, bites and sucks at various places on the body. He then produces "black pus and blood" from his mouth. After I witnessed this a few times, I noticed that he put ashes from burnt incense or wood into his mouth before he became possessed. I suspect he bit his tongue or cheek to produce the blood. Bhirendra never admitted any subterfuge was involved. He did tell me on one occasion, however, that a disciple with whom he was having a dispute used such trickery. Dramatic ritual performances involving similar sleight of hand are reported about shamans the world over (cf. Levi-Strauss, 1963).

Trickery is also the dominant feature of the shaman's relation to the spirits. As indicated, every shaman is a master of spirits, and the goal of practically every healing ritual is to trick the spirits. In one ritual which is typical, the shaman fools the
spirits of death by substituting an effigy for the patient when the lights are out. The people believe that the more cunning a shaman is the more power he has to outsmart the spirits who are the causes of illness and misfortune and from whom they need protection. In other words, if Bhirendra and the other shamans were not tricksters and experts at legerdemain, they would not be in keeping with the cultural stereotype of what it is to be a shaman.

Despite the many things separating me from Bhirendra, I respected his religious endeavor and valued his keen mind and amazing memory. He was a rich source of knowledge that could be confirmed and validated by other shamans. My admiration for his important role in the community was a major bond between us, and our friendship was based on more than the boost given his status and wealth. After I became his disciple, he was consulted in more cases and his fame spread far beyond our community. The tavern keepers extended him credit, which he substantially abused. In a sense, he became middle class for a while. When he realized that my stay was finite, our relationship became increasingly important to him and he embraced me as his friend.

When Bhirendra and I first began our relationship, it was on a strictly business basis, and he frequently embarrassed me in front of his friends to show off his superiority. After I injured my knee while trekking, he came to my house with several companions and told me to take off my pants so that he could heal the knee. I offered to roll up the pants leg but he demanded obedience to make me prove my faith. He went to great lengths to assert his dominance in our relationship. Sometimes I would come home frustrated after a day searching for him, yelling that I was "through with that @*!." The next morning, he would send someone to fetch me for teachings and I would swallow anger and pride and go after him.

Bhirendra is a great shaman and cured numerous patients in my presence. He could induce "possession" and highly emotional states in his patients, in order to exorcise spirits. He was awesome when possessed by the spirits and performed breathtaking feats like immersing his hand for two or three seconds in boiling oil, an act which never ceased to amaze me and which I am still unable to explain. He is also an accomplished musician and excellent raconteur, and was generally acknowledged to be the important shaman (thulo bombo) in the area. He had six disciples, including me. In time he told me about his life and calling, and initiated me into the secrets of the shamanic vocation.
After Bhirendra agreed to take me as a disciple, he took four months before beginning my teachings. He ignored my persistent wishes to become a shaman until one day when he walked into my house and announced he had scheduled a purification ritual for that evening so that he could see whether or not the gods would come to possess me. The time had come! Bhirendra and two disciples began the ritual that evening by lighting incense and chanting *mantra*. When it was time to "call on the gods," Bhirendra handed me a drum and told me to play along. We sat cross-legged on the floor, holding the drum handles in our left hands and drumsticks in our right, and we beat out drums softly in a 3-3 pattern. After a short time, everyone's beat increased to a loud, extremely rapid pace, perhaps fast enough to facilitate altered states of consciousness. (There are numerous techniques for producing trances, ranging from fasting and other forms of deprivation to dancing (Bourguignon, 1972), taking of hallucinogenic drugs (Furst, 1976), and the use of percussion instruments which, when beaten at certain rapid rates, may facilitate trance states (Gastaut *et al.*, 1949; Neher, 1961, 1962; Prince, 1968; Sturtevant, 1968). Lex (1979: 126-27) maintains that repetitive stimuli evoke right-brain functioning.) The beating increased for several minutes but nothing happened to me. The exercise was repeated twice more; still nothing happened to me while Bhirendra and his disciples shook furiously. One of the disciples became possessed by his grandfather. His legs shook and then the trembling spread throughout his body. At the height of his paroxysms, Bhirendra and the others were bouncing up and down with their legs crossed sometimes two feet off the ground simultaneously smashing their drums at a rapid rhythm.

We repeated the exercise again and again; I started to shake consciously and gradually began letting go, becoming part of the beat itself. After a dozen or more times, the shaking in my legs became more automatic. They shook by themselves, yet I was aware of this "non-doing." After a few moments, my whole body began to shake and I bounced all over the room. My attention was focused on my body movements and my eyes were closed. But as soon as I became aware of my surroundings, that other things were going on around me, the shaking ceased being automatic and subsided into fatigue.

Looking back on the drumming that night, it seems we played as fast as possible, everyone playing the same rhythm, bam-bam-bam, bam-barn-bam, in threes until the beating became even faster. The trembling seemed to evolve from conscious to
automatic at the moment Bhirendra inserted a loud extra beat between two of mine, changing the rhythm and causing it to quicken. I'm sure he did this purposely and always used this method with his disciples. He made two or three of these drumming maneuvers before my drumming and shaking became automatic. At one point, my shaking continued until I felt a fleeting fear that I was losing control and being overwhelmed, at which point I became aware of my body trembling. It was a disturbing feeling, not very traumatic but nonetheless jolting. Afterwards, my heart pounded and I reasoned that my resistances were strong against surrendering to the experience. I hadn't fully "let go."

The first time I shook, Bhirendra and the other disciples were certain I had been chosen by a god to become a shaman. Bhirendra was proud of me and himself. "After all," he boasted, "I called on the gods." That evening they gave me a Nepalese nickname: sahib jhankri (gentleman shaman). Villagers were drawn to my house by the drumming during the ritual, and by the next morning the entire village knew about my possession."

Yet I felt no alien power enter me. I lost control of my movements and became scared; nothing else happened. Introspectively, I lost sense of time and surroundings, but my trance (if that is the proper term) was extremely light. Bhirendra and the other disciples thought I had been possessed. Because I had not progressed very far in my initiatory accomplishments, it was natural that I didn't know who had possessed me, nor had the god spoken through me, nor had there been visions.

My viewpoint differed. I did not believe I had been possessed. Bhirendra interpreted my shaking and fast drumming to be possession, my fear as fear of the deity-something he expected to occur in a neophyte. I saw the drum as a method to produce an altered state indigenously interpreted as possession, in my case a hyperactive automatic state with feelings of anxiety that was experientially different from normal waking consciousness. Bourguignon (1976b:8) writes that spirit possession occurs only in societies where people believe in it. Spirit possession could not exist for me because I do not hold the same animistic beliefs as my informants. Still I did experience something subjectively unusual.

The first purification rite was followed on subsequent nights by two equally exhausting sessions. But these were not as successful as the first. I explained my critical view of possession to Bhirendra who dismissed it saying, "You are new in this country; how do you know what exists here?" Up to that time,
I had been in Nepal seven months learning about spirits that cause every type of misfortune. Still, I could neither accept the belief that spirits cause illness nor that I had been possessed by a spirit that night. Skepticism must have contributed to the failure of the subsequent two rituals in which I was unable to let myself go. I would begin shaking and become aware of the energy moving upwards. When the shaking reached my shoulders and neck, I stiffened and was unable to loosen up as I had the first night. This "stiffness of neck" was upsetting, symbolic of the inflexibility of my cultural biases. I told Bhirendra about my neck; he said I was afraid to let the god speak through me because I thought it would talk nonsense, and he advised me not to let the thought bother me. At all of these purification rituals, Bhirendra was intent on having the gods speak through me, but he gave me no personal instruction regarding how to evoke this. Once he called on my father and grandfather (both deceased) while I was playing the drum and shaking, hoping he would have more success calling on my ancestors because they were closer to me than the Nepali spirits. The spirits remained silent.

Undiscouraged, Bhirendra planned a pilgrimage for all the disciples to a special festival where shamans from all over Nepal bring their apprentices to help them advance beyond the first initiatory stages. He said we would dance together to Richeswar (40 miles south of Kathmandu) where the festival is held annually during the full moon of April. There we would pay homage to Siva, the great Hindu god, and gain his favor so that the gods would possess us and make us powerful shamans.

The festival at Richeswar fulfilled a long desired ambition: to go to a bombo festival as a participant! Despite my doubts about Siva and the other gods and spirits, I had really experienced something on the night of the first ritual, and I wanted access to it again. With enthusiasm and determination, I threw myself into preparation for the festival.

At Bhirendra's instruction, a shaman's frock was tailored for me consisting of a white skirt, white Nepali shirt, red and white scarves to wrap around my head, and a peacock-feather headdress set in a gold and red headband. Bhirendra gave me a gift of a rosary of 108 black wooden beads special to shamans, and lent me a string of bells.

**THE INITIATION**

Bhirendra, four other disciples and I met early the morning of the Richeswar pilgrimage. We donned our robes, secured each other's bells and feathers, and left the house playing on our
drums, singing the traditional pilgrimage songs. We marched and drummed through our village to the jeep that would take us to Richeswar. Like many others from Kathmandu, we opted to go by motor. We stopped in every little village or group of houses along the way where offerings had been left for us, and we sang and danced the pilgrimage dance.

We had been practicing the pilgrimage song, dance and drum accompaniment for days. Bhirendra explained the symbolism of the dance and the purpose of the pilgrimage: some came for initiation and blessing, others to be healed.

The villagers turned out to watch us leave for the pilgrimage; we danced down the main street and around the stupa. I was self-conscious in my colorful costume; my long skirt tripped me as I danced. An air of sanctity hung over the pilgrimage group. Along the way, there would be much joking and drinking, but when the bombo danced and sang, they were serious about their holy mission. From the moment we donned our robes, we were transported from secular to sacred. Bhirendra said we were closer to the gods on the pilgrimage and that was why it was auspicious for initiations.

We found shelter in a half-finished barn at Richeswar that night. A few hundred people had made the pilgrimage, including several groups of shamans with their disciples. One group danced in front of our shelter. Bhirendra said they were only fair, telling us we were much better. We ate rice and had a couple of drinks of raksi, the local liquor, to help warm us up. Then we all sat down together and began a purification ritual. The evening was numinous; a million stars lit the sky and seemed near enough to touch from our Himalayan vantage. Outside our shelter, other groups drummed and sang. Dressed in our regalia, we were intent on the evening’s initiation. We played and sang the sacred stories. During the singing, I began to sway back and forth, my headdress bobbed and bells jingled to the time of the music. I was filled with feelings of kinship for my brother initiates and especially my guru.

Bhirendra took complete charge of the ritual; setting the pace, his drumming echoed against the walls. I followed his beat. While my body was swaying, I lost myself in the music and began to shake. Bhirendra broke my pattern by inserting an extra beat or two in the rhythm, and my beating quickened. He repeated this three or four times and then I lost control of my movements. My heart pounded, I forgot about the shaking and drumming and felt my body rise up. There was a tremendous amount of nervous energy. At first, the shaking seemed to emanate from my genitals. I felt the drum rise up into the air, and the nervous feeling went along with it. The area near my

an experiential study of Nepalese Shamanism 13
solar plexus began to tremble, and then my chest, shoulders and finally my head. When I became conscious of these movements, fear swept through me. I felt a flash of heat throughout my body. Then my mind split off from my body. I watched my body shaking and jumping into the air as if my consciousness was separated from it.

Suddenly I found myself flying over a quiet valley towards a green glow. It was as though I were dreaming. A light appeared before me and consumed my attention. I saw a square structure like a three-story house whose bricks were meticulously laid. The doors and windows on the first two floors were closed; through the open windows in the top floor, I saw the upper torso of a green figure. I'm not certain what it was, but the green light emanated from what appeared to be an eye. I realized that I was dreaming, and felt water being poured on my head. In seconds, I was fully aware of my surroundings. Bhirendra smiled; he said I had been purified by the water sprinkled from a sacred bowl. It was time for the dawn march to the Siva shrine.

Bhirendra analyzed my experience. He said the green form might have been the supernatural being possessing me. But he considered this a "crude vision," unlike the controlled visions that appear to the shamans when they perform their duties and send their souls on journeys. He said he had visions like mine before he became fully initiated. Several of the other disciples also were "possessed" that night, and mumbled sounds that Bhirendra interpreted as words of spirits in the vicinity or, in one case, from the initiate's dead grandfather. None reported a vision. Later, Bhirendra explained that shamanic "clear visions" involve meeting the gods face to face in their golden palaces to receive powerful mantra. My vision was crude because he could not recognize the form I described or the place I'd been.

We approached the Siva shrine singing and drumming, and climbed the stairs that led to the rock representing Siva. Many people stopped Bhirendra to ask about the "white" bombo. He explained that the gods came to me which impressed everyone and filled Bhirendra with pride. We played before the rock and all the shamans shook simultaneously and were "possessed" by Siva. I was not.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GURU

After Richeswar, the apprenticeship went downhill. Nothing could equal it. Several more purifications were held to entice
the gods and dead relatives to possess me, but no experiences occurred to parallel the night at Richeswar. Bhirendra and I were disappointed. He wanted the god that shook (possessed) me to speak and identify itself. Then we would be able to hold a guru puja (ritual) where the spirit would be honored and asked to become my tutelary deity. This now remains for future research.

In the remainder of time spent together, Bhirendra concentrated on detailing the shaman's belief system. This work after Richeswar was more in-depth than it had been before. So while my apprenticeship was only a limited success, the experiential technique was a success. Bhirendra revealed much of his system and explained the various stages involved in initiatory advancement. Some of this information might not have been attained by more traditional field methods, and I think Bhirendra provided it primarily because of our guru-disciple relationship. I was taught as a student; he wanted me to understand everything in detail so that I could practice the teachings.

Our relationship remained unblemished until shortly before my departure. Bhirendra knew I respected and acknowledged his shamanic expertise. He considered me a serious student and admired my commitment. While I never became a Tamang, a level of human understanding was reached with my guru.

Just as our stay was drawing to a close, a series of crises befell my family. My son and I were bitten by a rabid dog, and a few days later my wife and I contracted hepatitis. I didn't call Bhirendra in to treat us; in fact I didn't even think of him then. I was frightened, and for a few days the possibility of death crossed my mind more than once. I sought out Western medical aid as quickly as possible. When Bhirendra learned of our problems, he came to my house, observably shaken. He asked me "not to tell anyone" that I hadn't called on him first, explaining he had told people that I had consulted him and that he had diagnosed a natural illness. "What will the villagers think if they learn my disciple did not call me when illness struck?" I was speechless. At that moment, the gulf between us became apparent. There was great frustration between my desire to become a shaman and my inability to behave like one. I finally understood the limits of my participation. My method was a failure!

Shortly thereafter, I was hospitalized for the hepatitis. On the third night in the hospital, I dreamed I was running down the streets of Boudhanath pursued by a bull. I ran on top of a
garbage heap. There was a stick in my hand and it was magically transformed into a bright yellow and black snake. I used it as a whip to chase the bull away. I cracked it over my head, and it sounded as loud as thunder; then I heard a voice reciting what seemed to be a mantra and turned to see Bhirendra. The dream was very vivid, with colors brighter than waking life. I became aware that I was dreaming and began to awaken, still captivated by the dream images which carried over into ordinary reality. For a few moments, I could still see and hear Bhirendra.

The dream impressed me greatly; its images are still clear in my mind. It was one of those dreams, which Jung (1954: 117-19; 1960:254; 1066:178) called "big dreams," which appear at important junctures of life, often preceding personality change, sometimes even psychosis. Jung states that they are very numinous and carry a feeling of significance which is remembered for years but whose meaning is difficult to understand. During the days of my recovery, while I was in bed, the dream images often came to mind, preoccupying me.

Shortly after my release from the hospital, Bhirendra came to visit. I was compelled to tell him the dream, and as I began telling him, his eyes gleamed. He grew very excited and began interpreting the dream. He said that the voice I heard was his spirit, and his mantra had cured me. The bull was a spirit sent by a jealous shaman and was responsible for my misfortunes. His spirit had worked the magic that drove the bull away, and was the reason I was out of the hospital and feeling better. His emotional energy was contagious; my dream came alive. For a moment, I experienced Bhirendra as if he were really the influence in my dream. The dream images enveloped me and, as I relived them, I experienced a suspension of disbelief. It didn't occur to me to question Bhirendra's interpretation. Once the dream was interpreted, I felt an unmistakable "ah hah!" and thought: "The dream and illness are related. By chasing the bull away, I have been cured." The boundaries between dream and reality seemed to merge; what happened in the former had effects in the latter. My way of thinking was completely turned around. I stepped across cultural boundaries and was freed from my previous intellectual inflexibility. Emotion welled up inside me and I began to tremble and weep. Bhirendra and I embraced. I felt he had healed me and this created a strong transference. Although many weeks of bed rest were required before my recuperation was complete, I believe my recovery began that night when my unconscious used Bhirendra as a symbol. In retrospect, my experience seems very close to what Maslow (1971:278) described as a "peak experience" in that it enabled me to transcend individ-
ual and cultural differences and attain a new viewpoint and a
feeling of oneness with another human being.

Bhirendra said my dream indicated I would have success be­
coming a shaman. He saw it as a sign of my calling, and
compared it to his own. He said the bull in my dream was like
the ghosts that attacked him at the time of his visionary calling.
I was a "real" disciple now. He gave his magical dagger to me
as a gift, to remind me of the pilgrimage and of how the gods
had favored to possess me. He said that I would attain clear
visions and we would fly together to the nine heavens. As I
mentioned earlier, I am still skeptical that spirits exist, or that
soulsjourney, and I have not experienced any conversion, but I
do believe in the guru and in the power of the shaman's
techniques. Further, I accepted the logic in Bhirendra's dream
interpretation.

My experience is similar to what a Tamang neophyte might
experience at the hands of his guru. One of the primary things
the guru does for the disciple is to interpret the calling and
place it within a socio-cultural context so that it can be utilized.
Bhirendra did this for me. He provided order in a chaotic
situation, assuring me of recovery, and linking this with ini­
tiatory advancement. By recovering, I became a better disciple.
Bhirendra treated my problem as though it were symptomatic
of an "initiatory illness," the beginning of a shamanicjourney.

INITIATION AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

There are four stages to the Tamang shaman's training. Each
stage represents a higher achievement by the neophyte. The
calling is the initial stage; as mentioned before, when Bhirend­
dra ran into a cemetery naked, his condition was described by
the Tamang as "crazy possession." After this episode, the
potential shaman must find a guru in order to complete the
process which leads to mastery of the states of mind which
originally spontaneously overwhelmed the candidate.

In the second stage, the possession state is mastered; i.e. the
guru, through the performance of numerous purification rites
like the ones which Bhirendra held for me, attempts to teach
the initiate how to gain control of and utilize the possession
trance. Here "control" implies the ability to voluntarily induce,
terminate and utilize possession within community context. I
have yet to attain this level, but it was evident from Bhiren­
dra's description that accomplishment of this goal required the
establishing of a relationship with a tutelary or "internal" guru
who teaches the initiant in his dreams and visions, and pos-
senses him during rituals when he diagnoses illnesses or performs divination. It is believed that the spirit that produced the "crazy possession" is transformed into an ally in the second stage and serves as the internal guru.

The third and fourth stages involve mastery of visionary experiences. The shaman must learn to produce an altered state in which he sees visions indigenously interpreted as soul journey. In such states, the shaman projects his soul through the top of his head (through the "heavenly doors") and magically flies throughout a visionary cosmos composed of numerous heavens and underworlds in which various gods and demons exist. In his training, the shaman must confront and master the contents of his visions. The "internal guru" is also important here; he guards and protects the shaman on his mystical journeys. The Tamang consider that the highest level of initiation is attained when the disciple can convert "crude visions" into "clear visions" (i.e., chaotic and spontaneous into structured and voluntary) (see Peters, 1981, 1982).

Thus complete initiation includes mastery of altered states of consciousness which the Tamang describe as spirit possession and soul journey. In the ethnopsychiatric literature, these states have often been interpreted as pathological conditions (Devereux, 1956:28-29; Silverman, 1967; Wallace, 1966). This, however, cannot be assumed in the case of the Tamang. On the contrary, various of the techniques utilized in Tamang initiatory training are extremely close to those employed in contemporary psychotherapy.

Ellenberger (1970: 111-12) maintains that spirit possession has the same dissociative features as multiple personality, and that multiple personality becomes a psychiatric category when the belief in possession declines. The dissociation that occurs in shamanic possession, unlike the dissociation occurring in multiple personality, is, however, not idiosyncratic but is a socially learned behavior that is culturally shared, valued, and (after initiation) voluntary.

Bourguignon (1965:55-56) believes that the type of dissociation that occurs in spirit possession may have positive healing qualities. She writes of "dissociation in the service of the self" and compares it to Kris' (1952:253) "functional regression," i.e., a trance or similar mental state (free association, psychodrama, reverie, etc.) where ego functions are relaxed, and insightful, inspiring and psychotherapeutic experiences follow. Bourguignon also argues that spirit possession in Haitian voodoo is a "self-enhancing" experience increasing the "field of action" and "scope of fulfillment."
It is important to remember that, in numerous tribal societies (as in Nepal), there is no negative label attached to the initiate's possession trances; therefore, there is no consequent shame, anxiety or social isolation as might accompany similar behavior in our culture. Yap (1960:126-29) distinguishes two types of possession based on the positive or negative value assigned by the individual or his culture to the experience. If the phenomenon is viewed negatively by others and censured by the rest of the self system, there is likely to be a pathological dissociation. The other type of possession is termed "mythopoetic" by Yap. The beliefs attached to this type of possession reflect positive cultural values and are consequently unrepressed. Typically, these include possessions by deities, cultural heroes or other respected personages.

Jung (1962:110f; 1969a:304f) also believed that there are forms of possession that do not involve repression. These represent the emergence of "autonomous complexes" or "archetypes," the contents of the collective unconscious which were not previously conscious. Archetypes, of course, reflect man's inner duality and may take the form of either devils or mythical heroes. Jung pays scant attention, however, to personal and cultural beliefs and how these may influence conscious acceptance or rejection of the possessed state.

The type of possession found in Tamang shamanism is of the mythopoetic variety. The shaman reacts to his crisis (or calling), not through repression but through possession and identification with a culturally accepted role model. Bhirendra's case is typical in that the tutelary spirit that possessed him was a respected shaman and ancestor. The Tamang do not consider this pathological. And, as Yap (1960:126-27) indicates, possession by an "accessory mythical personality" may be psychotherapeutic in that it "... can help the individual to grasp a profoundly complex life situation, as a first step towards further action and self-development."

Sargant (1974:4-17) pointed out that there is a parallel between possession states and catharsis and that the former have the same therapeutic effect as the latter. Levi-Strauss (1963:152) writes that the shaman is a "professional abreactor," reliving the origin of his disturbances *i.e.* the calling) each time he becomes possessed. From this perspective, the shaman's initiatory process, in which the neophyte induces possession at numerous performances, has the therapeutic effect of reinvoking the initial possession and the emotion associated with this experience. Further, spirit possession is similar to certain therapeutic acting-out maneuvers found in psychodrama (Moreno, 1947) and in Perl's (1969) Gestalt therapy.
The fourth and highest initiatory stage is accomplished after the visions which arose spontaneously during the calling and the later purification rituals are controlled by the shaman; that is, initiatory training is ended when the shaman has gained the capacity to voluntarily enter into visionary trance and, to a certain extent, have control over its contents, transforming crude visions into clear visions. Control of visionary trance is learned in the purification rituals, just as possession trance is mastered in the earlier stages. During these rituals, the human guru and the initiant travel together to the various levels of the cosmos, the guru introducing his disciples to the deities in order to gain their blessing.

This training has the purpose of creating a specific introspective state, one in which the neophyte learns to enter voluntarily into visionary states where he is participant, observer and controller. While the shaman emotionally participates, his ego stands back, so to speak, allowing manipulation of the visionary contents. This is not an hallucinatory state involving an "impairment of reality testing." Bhirendra clearly distinguishes between his visions and ordinary reality. In fact, he says that he is aware of himself in his trance states as a participant in a ritual and, at the same time, involved in another world invisible to others.

This simultaneous or "dual awareness" of ego and dream ego is known in the psychological literature as "lucid dreaming." Lucid dreaming is a state in which the dreamer is aware that he is dreaming and that his experiences are different from the ordinary experiences of waking life. Tart (1977:176) describes the lucid dream as a state" ... in which you feel as if you 'wake up' in terms of mental functioning within the dreamworld; that is, you feel as rational and as in control of your mental state as you do in your ordinary state of consciousness, but you are still experientially located in the dreamworld." Thus in this mental state the individual has the ability to be both rational and produce images simultaneously.

Lucidity may be established in a dream or within the waking state through relaxation and other techniques used to facilitate altered states that allow images to surge forth while maintaining awareness that one is dreaming. Ouspensky (1960:272-73) employed such a technique in order to observe his dream process. He called them "half-dream states" because he seemed to be awake (conscious of self) and dreaming simultaneously. Lucid dreams are extremely similar to "out-of-the-body experiences" (Green, 1968:20). The basic distinction between the two states is probably that symbolic or fantastic elements are likely to occur in the former, whereas in the latter the individ-
ual has the tendency to regard the dream imagery as identical to the external world. Oliver Fox (1962:34-38), in a discussion of his own out-of-the-body experiences, emphasizes that there are degrees of realization of consciousness during lucid states. States with a high degree of dual consciousness are termed "out-of-the-body experiences" or "astral projection."

Now these half-dream or lucid states, described in the para-psychological and occult literature with frequent images of flying and dual awareness, are extremely similar to the descriptions Bhirendra provided of his trances and the reports of shamans the world over. They are also extremely similar to a host of psychotherapies that employ techniques requiring patients to consciously observe their visual imagery. These "half-dream" states utilized in psychotherapy include Jung's (1969b) "active imagination," DeSoille's (1966) "directed daydreams," Leuner's (1969) "guided affective imagery," certain of Assagioli's (1976) techniques for "psychosynthesis," and others (see also Singer, 1974; Watkins, 1976).

In his visionary states, the shaman initiates an inner dialogue between the characters appearing in his visions, representations of his unconscious, and his consciousness. According to Jung (1961:170-71; 1966:290-91), this type of dialogue is therapeutically beneficial because the images yield knowledge and include ways of knowing that are different, yet complementary, to consciousness. This process of recognition and participation with inner images leading to the establishment of a collaborative relationship between the unconscious and the conscious is termed the "transcendent function" by Jung (1969c), and it is an important technique in this type of psychotherapy. The inner dialogue is also considered important in "psychosynthesis" wherein an "inner master" (teacher) appears in the visual imagery to provide answers to problems that the conscious personality does not feel can be solved by ordinary means (Assagioli, 1976:202-07). Bhirendra's relationship to his internal tutelary guru with whom he has established an inner dialogue is very similar to this inner master. As mentioned before, one of the objectives of shamanic initiation is the establishment of this relationship, first through mythopoetic possession, then as protector and guide to the worlds of the shaman's internal cosmos.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Tamang shamanic initiatory processes comprise a psychotherapeutic system. Its primary goal is to transform the "initiatory sickness" or calling, which initially afflicted the
neophyte, into manageable altered states described as spirit possession and magical flight. Both of these are utilized in the service of the community and do not occur outside of ritual context. Further, these altered states are analogous to techniques used by clinical psychologists which are believed to enhance integration and are therefore healing.

My own experiences can only confirm parts of the data. The later initiatory stages and the techniques involved were described by Bhirendra and they shall be a project of future research. However, whether I will become a Tamang shaman is questionable. As mentioned, while I respect the effectiveness and value of shamanism within Tamang culture, I have not experienced cultural conversion. The experiential method which I explored is, however, a viable and important aid to the study of altered states of consciousness. The guru-disciple relationship enhanced the quality and type of data I received. I was concerned with introspective states and, because I attempted to experience them as an initiant, I came to appreciate their significance within the shamanic initiatory system. That is, while my own initiations were only partially successful, I experienced them in the same context as other Tamang shamans. "Crude visions" and the shaking which is the primary characteristic of spirit possession were experienced first-hand. The guru took notice of these psychological phenomena and, by way of explanation, example and comparison with his own experiences and those of his disciples, tried to make me aware of initiatory goals. Of course, my apprenticeship has only begun but, in a real sense, the information contained herein was learned as an "insider" in spite of the fact that I am not a Tamang.

REFERENCES


**An experiential study of Nepalese Shamanism** 23


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