

## The Sources of Authority for Shamanic Speech: Examples from the Kham-Magar of Nepal

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Among the Kham-Magar, an indigenous population of West Nepal, shamans end their long ritual chants with the promise to keep to the terms of the contract that bind human beings to the supernatural entities. In this paper I identify the sources of authority that allow the ritual specialists of this community to act as its spokespersons toward invisible partners. Taking up the debate initiated in the introduction to this special issue, I begin by confronting the notion of “social magic” that Bourdieu (1982:97-161) sees as the source of all authority, with the “discourse of magic” proposed by the linguist Tzvetan Todorov (1978:246-82), showing that the two approaches are less inconsistent than might first appear to be the case: both suggest that the efficacy of ritual speech rests on deception. The second part of the paper turns to Kham-Magar ethnography; it examines the staging of the sources of shamanic authority in the ceremony of consecration of a new shaman. I partly challenge Bourdieu’s (1982:20) vision that ritual techniques are mainly techniques of domination, ensuring that the dominant power is reproduced, rather than being a source of authority for ritual specialists: “Rituals represent the limit of all situations of *imposition*<sup>1</sup> where, through the application of a technical competence, however imperfect, a primarily social competence is exercised: the competence of the speaker who is authorized by his or her group to speak with authority.” The third part looks precisely into the “competence of the speaker,” shamanic speech itself, for possible sources of his or her ritual authority. I explore the pragmatic effects of the ritual use of language, including a reflexive definition of the performer. I argue that these techniques set up the conditions for the emergence of a transcendent authority.

### Efficacy of Ritual Speech and Deception

All forms of language, whether ordinary discourse or more formalized kinds of discourse (judicial, administrative, poetic, or ritual), have the power to act symbolically on reality, if only by describing it: in naming things, language “appropriates” them, gives them certain definitions, and informs the interlocutors’ perception of reality. In this sense, an illocutionary act (or an instance of performative speech) that performs the action at the same time as it expresses it,

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<sup>1</sup> English translations from the French and emphases are the author’s.

pushes the pragmatic dimension of language to the limit, but is not radically different. Thus, if linguists and sociologists agree on the symbolic and pragmatic power of all forms of language, the point at which they diverge is the place to look for this power.

Against the linguists, Bourdieu (1982:13) insists that language authority comes from *outside* language itself: “one cannot look into language for what is actually embedded in the social relationships in which language is used.” For Bourdieu, the linguistic characteristics of ritual speech (such as parallelism, formulae, and obfuscation of language) are intended to demonstrate the speaker’s mastery of a technique, and subsequently, to gain him or her the group’s recognition. The formalization of language would not produce anything by itself and would be nothing but an “attribute” of the spokesperson whose authority comes from the group. The efficacy of rituals depends on “the general belief shared by all that *pre-exists* the ritual.” And he concludes (133): “one preaches only to the converted.” Yet one wonders how the converted were converted in the first place and whether there is not more in a ritual than the symbolic imposition of the dominant order, the *doxa*.<sup>2</sup> Before getting to this question in the light of our ethnography, it may be worth turning toward an alternative approach to the ritual efficacy of speech.

About the same time that Bourdieu (1975, 1981, and 1982) wrote his articles on “the economics of linguistic exchanges,” claiming that searching for the effectiveness of speech in the linguistic logic of speech was in vain, the French linguist Tzvetan Todorov (1973 and 1978) published a structural study of magic speech, “Le discours de la magie,” which did exactly that, looking into the inner logic of the magical discourse. Based on a corpus of magic formulae collected in France by folklorists at the turn of the twentieth century, Todorov remarks that the magician acts on the object of magic, the illness, or pain (what he calls the “referent”) *in order* to act on the recipient (whom he calls the “*allocutaire*” or addressee). In order to understand the structure of the magic action, Todorov distinguishes between two kinds of actions: an action aimed at the problem—such as, for instance, an inflamed appendix that the surgeon has to remove from the patient’s body; and an action directed at the patient or addressee but not at the problem—such as, for instance, during a criminal prosecution, when the lawyer’s defense of her client involves acting on the interlocutors, without claiming to transform the crime. What characterizes a magic action is that it aims at the patient while *pretending* to aim at the problem around which the magical speech is organized.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction between acting on the referent and on the recipient allows Todorov to compare magical speech with other forms of discourse related to magic, such as advertising: advertising discourse is aimed at the recipient; it even openly invites her to buy the product that it advertises. But never will an advertisement explicitly claim to *transform* the thing it is advertising, the referent. However, this is of course exactly what it does when it presents the

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<sup>2</sup>(Bourdieu (1982:154-56) used the Greek term *doxa* to denote what is taken for granted in any society, the unquestioned truths).

<sup>3</sup>“Levain ou charbon, que tu sois noir ou rouge, de quelle couleur ou espèce que tu puisses être, je te conjure dans les airs ou le plus profond de la mer, et te commande de la part du grand Dieu vivant de sortir de suite du corps de N . . .” (Todorov 1978:249). Translation: “Bread or coal, whether you’re black or red, what color or species that you may be, I beseech you in the air or the depths of the sea, and command you on the part of the great living God to leave immediately the body of N . . .”

product in its best light in order to persuade the prospective purchaser to buy it. But then the action on the referent is neatly hidden, so we would have two forms of “magic”: both seek to transform the recipient of the magical action, but in the case of advertising, the modification of the referent (its beautification) is concealed; classical magic, by contrast, claims to modify the referent but conceals the wish to convince the addressee. Todorov (1978:280): “Each [of these magical actions] is a double act pretending to be simple.” Advertising does not confess its referential act, nor classical magic its “*allocutionary* act” (that concerns the *allocutaire* or addressee).

For Todorov the only character reminiscent of the classical magician in our western urban societies would be the “artist who hangs an old sheet on the wall, calls it BX 311 and sells it at a price of 10,000 dollars; yet the transformation of the referent is the result of the buyer having been persuaded, rather than its cause” (*ibid.*). Todorov’s example shows that in this case of Art as modern magic, it is the buyer, it seems, who causes the magical act of the artist to be efficacious since he has to be already convinced (by what we might call the market) of the value of the artwork that he is buying. So, indeed, one preaches only to the converted.

Bourdieu and Todorov do not seem to be aware of their respective writings on this subject, but the similarity of their conclusions has to be emphasized. Through two radically different demonstrations and methods—a study of the inner logic of discourse on the one hand, and the study of the social positions of the speakers on the other—both linguist and sociologist see the power of speech as fundamentally based on deception. The real source of authority should remain concealed in order to be effective, and this involves a more or less voluntary blindness on the part of those over whom authority is exercised. Bourdieu (1982:113, emphasis added) talks of the “social magic” that consists in “these social mechanisms capable of producing *this complicity based on ignorance*, which is the source of all authority.” For Todorov it is also clear: (classical) magic transforms the perception of the patient while claiming to transform the object of its speech; the modern magic of advertising, by contrast, acts on the object of its speech while pretending to act on the buyer. The two researchers converge in a critical study of the power of speech, and both are equally concerned with not letting themselves be mystified by language. Clearly, in the debate that set him against the linguists, Bourdieu overlooked the capacity of the latter (or at least a few of them) to reveal the “magical” dimension that is inherent in linguistic exchanges, and therefore also the potential for political manipulation of language.

Indeed Todorov rightly emphasizes that susceptibility to magic is present in all of us, the Ancients as much as the Moderns, if only because each of us tries to “fix things” in a suitable way through talking. And Western science is deceiving itself when it claims to be performing *pure* acts of description. Compared to this salutary reminder, Bourdieu’s hypothesis—that language expresses the dominant order that it serves to perpetuate—suffers from a strong functionalist bias, and limits the understanding of what really happens in rituals. He neglects the pragmatic effects of speech on the recipients, something that Todorov, on the contrary, takes seriously.

Our ethnography requires us to revise Bourdieu’s theoretical proposition without abandoning it completely. As we will see in the following section, the Kham-Magar put a great deal of effort into staging the sources of authority of their ritual specialists in the course of long and elaborate village ceremonies. Moreover, a shaman goes through a long period of

apprenticeship when he is supposed to learn technical skills under the tutelage of human and non-human masters: ancestors and spirits of the wilderness. In short, the Kham-Magar ethnography requires us to push Bourdieu's reasoning to its limits: the more dramatic or elaborate the ritual staging is, the greater the deception at the basis of shamanic authority; and the ability of a great shaman to sing thousands of lines—10,000 to be more precise—would be a strange feat considering that, if we follow Bourdieu, the personal qualities and competences of the spokesperson are hardly relevant to the authority that he embodies. The account that follows will be necessarily brief,<sup>4</sup> with special attention given to moments when the ritual leaves space for human negotiation within the institution.

### The Consecration of a New Shaman Among the Kham-Magar: The Staging of the Sources for Shamanic Authority

The Kham-Magar are a population of about 40,000 people who live in the high valleys of two districts in West Nepal, Rukum, and Rolpa. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language locally called *kham*, which is exclusively oral (David Watters 2002 and 2004), and most of them also speak a vernacular form of Nepali.<sup>5</sup> They inhabit about thirty compact settlements alongside two service castes, the Blacksmiths and the Tailors-Musicians, whose mother tongue is Nepali, but who can speak Kham to the Magar villagers whom they call “Masters.” Kham-Magar practice subsistence agriculture (maize and wheat) and, albeit to a lesser extent than before, transhumant herding. Their standard of living has improved recently thanks to remittances from the increasing number of young men working abroad, but they remain among the poorest communities in the country. Their shamanic tradition is still very much alive in spite of the civil war (1996-2006) during which local religion, and especially blood sacrifices, were banned by the Maoist rebels.



Fig. 1. A Kham-Magar shaman in full gear. The shaman is singing during the consecration of a neophyte. He wears a crown of female pheasant feathers on the head, and skins of animals are attached to his costume in the back; photo by the author, April 2006.

<sup>4</sup>A full description of this ceremony is included in my monograph of Kham-Magar shamanic practices (de Sales 1991:99-134).

<sup>5</sup>Nepali is a written Indo-Aryan language, closely related to Hindi.



Fig. 2. The blessing of the shamans by their main master. The master shaman put a protective soot mark on the forehead of his disciples before singing; photo by the author, April 2006.

The transmission of shamanic knowledge among the Kham-Magar is supposed to be a direct transmission from the supernatural entities to the neophyte. However, a shaman also has two human masters, one being the “main master” or “blood master.” The first spiritual entity that is supposed to manifest itself is the shaman ancestor, who most often, although this is not an explicit rule, seeks to be reincarnated in his own line. He himself is the last in a long series of shaman ancestors whose names are recited at the beginning of the ritual chants.

The list of these dead shamans includes the names of the two human masters of the shaman even if they are still alive. This shows that once they are consecrated, shamans are no longer ordinary people, but belong to a shamanic line and will live on. This list goes back up to the mythic ancestor of all shamans, whatever their clan or lineage, named Ramma Puran Can, the hero of the ritual epic of which he is himself the first bard. The second category of spiritual entities includes various spirits associated with animals or special places in the landscape, as well as gods of the local Hindu pantheon. Out of the two categories of supernatural entities, the first is of human origin while the second is of non-human origin. These entities dominate the scene in the first phase of the shaman’s initiation, when he<sup>6</sup> is tormented by what are for him still unknown forces that threaten his life and the prosperity of his household. At one point, his family invites two shaman masters to identify what is going on.

The masters perform a ritual that is supposed to establish the authenticity of the neophyte’s calling: after all, he might be mad, or an impostor. The neophyte is asked to choose a ball out of three balls made of cow dung, containing, respectively, a piece of coal, a stone, and a grain of corn. The true shaman will choose the right ball in which a grain of corn was hidden. Then the main master causes his disciple “to shake.” This is understood as the shaman ancestor taking possession of his future reincarnation and revealing his identity. We must not imagine that this works without fail; I collected several accounts from shamans who were unsuccessful for several months. The reason given in one case in particular was that a powerful village shaman was angry at not having been chosen as a master, and cast magic spells to prevent the neophyte from channeling his ancestor. The ritual had to be performed three times before it was successful. I was also told of a case in which it had been too long since anyone in the lineage had felt any

<sup>6</sup>There are female shamans, but since they remain a minority, I shall use only the masculine.

shamanic calling. The elders organized a gathering of all the members of the lineage around the tomb of the dead shaman in the hope that one of the youngsters would feel the call. Eventually, one of them started to shake, but without much enthusiasm. These unsuccessful attempts to shake, as well as the hesitation before embarking on a shamanic career, are characteristic of the initiation process. They show both the coercive power of the institution and also that there is space for human negotiations: the young man could have chosen the wrong ball or refused altogether to shake at the tomb of his ancestor. As in a Christian marriage ceremony, there is at least one crucial moment when the bride or the groom can say no—although doing so requires some courage.

Being a shaman is not a sinecure. Indeed, the life of a mediocre shaman whom nobody consults is necessarily frustrating and humiliating. But the life of a shaman who is popular and spends his nights “barking like a dog” (Fieldnotes 2010), as some like to caricature themselves with reference to the long nocturnal chants they sing, is not always enviable. Being a shaman involves serving the community, day and night, at the cost of neglecting work in the fields and domestic duties. A ritual chant relates this fate nicely: while Ramma Puran Can, the first shaman, was plowing his fields, messengers of the king came to ask him to follow them to the bedside of the prince, who had fallen ill. The shaman’s two wives begged him not to follow the messengers, warning him that the road would be full of obstacles and that he might die on the way. However, the shaman abandoned the furrow he was plowing with his bulls and followed the envoys of the king saying, “whether my name will be famous or whether it will be forgotten, I will be at the bedside of the prince.” Fame is what is at stake in a shaman’s career, the “symbolic capital,” in Bourdieu’s terms, that he puts at risk every time he goes to attend a séance.

Once the ancestor has spoken through the neophyte and expressed his wishes, the initiation can start. The ceremony of consecration itself is very costly: the more guests there are the most prestigious it is for the lineage of the neophyte. The occasion lasts 48 hours, and gallons of alcohol are prepared for the occasion, not to mention food and sacrificial animals. All the shamans of the village, including the two masters who act as the neophyte’s ritual fathers, are the honored guests. As in all ceremonies among the Kham-Magar whose marriage system prescribes marriage with the maternal uncle’s daughter, two groups of relatives have a role to play: the wife-givers of the neophyte’s lineage and its wife-takers, the latter being the main helpers in the preparation of the ceremony. In another work (de Sales 1991:115-34), I have shown that at the crucial moment when the neophyte has to climb the life tree, both of these two lineages of marriage partners are at the foot of the tree; they both play an essential part in the success of the ritual that can be read as the marriage of the new shaman with his spirit wife, the daughter of the forest: the wife takers have brought the life tree from the forest and help the neophyte to climb it, while the wife givers have to pay the master shamans, who only then will let the new shaman descend. In this ritual exchange, the communication between human beings and the spiritual entities that takes place through the mediation of the shaman is structurally analogous to marriage transactions among exchange groups.<sup>7</sup> It gives a good example of the structural

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<sup>7</sup>See note 6.

“harmony” that Bourdieu saw among the different domains of social life, and would go in favor of his interpretation according to which rituals reproduce the dominant order.<sup>8</sup>

However, an empirical observation of the ceremony suggests that things never go so smoothly in practice. There is always some suspense at the moment of the neophyte’s ascent, just as there is at the moment of his descent. Things could turn bad: he could fall from the tree, demonstrating his lack of fortitude against his enemy sisters, the witches, or else the wife-givers might refuse to pay the shamans who act as the ritual fathers of the neophyte, thereby provoking a crisis. Also, something else happens while the new shaman is standing, blindfolded, on the platform that has been built halfway up the tree. His ritual fathers test his visionary capacities: the new shaman must guess the direction in which the shamans are dancing around the tree; after a few circuits, they leave the place in silence. The occasion is marked by a certain solemnity; the silence is striking after the deafening drumming and dancing of all the shamans. It is also the first time that the new shaman is confronted by his community, with all the villagers surrounding him at the foot of the tree.<sup>9</sup> It is then clear that *the community* is the ultimate authority that endows the shaman with his power. The villagers directly ask him several questions concerning the future of the village. There is an opportunity here for them to contest the authority of the new shaman. I never attended the dismissing of a shaman at this point of the ceremony; however, rumors about his capacities are rife from this first confrontation on. The shaman’s career will last for as long as his skills continue to earn him the trust and the favor of the villagers.

This brief overview of a ceremony that lasts 48 hours is enough to show at least two things: contrary to what Bourdieu suggests, the community is *clearly* staged as the ultimate source of authority as are the rules commanding the position of the actors in the ceremony. However, the community is presented *as if* it only legitimized the human representative of an institution that relies, above all, on the transcendent sources of the shamanic power. These transcendent sources are made present on the ritual stage by a series of ritual mediations: first, the initial disease and other torments of the future shaman that are supposed to manifest the will of the ancestral shaman, who is himself a reincarnation of the mythical ancestor, Ramma Puran Can; then, the spirits of the forest from whom he receives the power to heal by becoming their son-in-law when he climbs the tree. The multiple body parts and skins of animals that he wears on his costume are the signs of this new identity or, more precisely, its indices (in Peirce’s [Atkin 2005] sense of the term), since they do not *represent* the animal spirits so much as *stand for* parts of these animals; they are the tokens of their existence.

Indeed, the consecration ceremony sets up a deception in the sense that the transcendent sources are treated *as if* they were at the source of the ritual, while they actually are its result. If we follow Bourdieu, we could say that there is an “alchemy of *representation* (in the different senses of the term)<sup>10</sup> thanks to which the spokesperson makes the group that makes

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<sup>8</sup> In Bourdieu’s (1982:80) analysis of forms of politeness he observed that “the form and the information that it informs condense and symbolize the whole structure of social relations from which they derive their existence and efficacy.”

<sup>9</sup> This scene is well captured in the film *Schamanen im Blinden Land* (*Shamans of the blind country*) by Michael Oppitz (1980).

<sup>10</sup> That is, both in the sense of a theatrical “representation” and also of a legal “representative.”

him” (1982:101): the community of villagers mandates the shaman to represent it in his negotiations with the supernatural entities; by the same token, the community, which is otherwise a collection of individuals, will exist through its representative precisely as *one community*, “a moral being” that acquires its own ontology with its own power of causation of acting on reality.<sup>11</sup>

The staging of this deception is marked, however, by moments that are open to contestation or failure: in the first phase of the initiation, the future shaman may refuse or postpone his calling, other shamans may obstruct the process, accidents may (and do) happen, and finally, the shaman’s career may never take off. It could be argued that the very possibility of questioning a certain vision of reality is also the opportunity to confirm one’s adhesion to that vision. Indeed, there is no belief without doubt. It remains, however, the case that speaking of an “imposition” nips all possibility of ritual change in the bud, something that has been challenged by an increasing number of anthropologists in need of giving an account of rituals that contribute to the changing of the society within which they are performed (Bell 1997; Houseman 2011; Michaels 2010-11). This is why, in what follows, I shall pay attention to the technical competence of the spokesperson, the very feature that Bourdieu neglected in his theoretical approach. If ritual language is a mere “attribute” that does not have any power of its own and that cannot be considered as a source of authority, why then do the dominant powers of the moment, whether in the form of Hinduism or Maoism, persist in discouraging shamanic practices? It may be worth examining what this technical competence produces by itself.

### **Shamanic Speech: Violence, Persuasion, and the Reflexive Use of Language**

Observations in the field tend to confirm Bourdieu’s statement to the extent that, once they are consecrated, shamans remain shamans whether they are good performers or not. Those who sing better and know more chants than others are obviously more popular and officiate more often; however the successful outcome of a *séance*, the healing of the patient will not be attributed to the quality of the performance, but ultimately to the shaman’s intrinsic power. The reasons for this are twofold. First, in the line of Bourdieu’s theory, this is because the ritual is a well-established institution on which people tend to rely, and that is not susceptible to the competence or incompetence of one individual in particular; the second reason is precisely because a shaman is not a craftsman who is defined by his skill: he has undergone an ontological transformation that makes him different from ordinary human beings, and that gives him the exclusive power to negotiate with the spirits. This ontological transformation is not a question of belief (self-delusion or deception according to Bourdieu’s theory): a consecrated shaman is a shaman even if one does not believe in shamanism. Once he is ritually “born” in the bosom of

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<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what Durkheim (1976 [1915]:348) meant when he emphasized that “If we are to see in the efficacy attributed to the rites anything more than the product of a chronic delirium with which humanity has abused itself, we must show that the effect of the cult really is to recreate periodically a moral being upon which we depend as it depends upon us. Now this being does exist: it is society.” For an ethnographic study of this process in a Himalayan community, see Ramble (2008, esp. ch. 10).



his community, so to speak, he acquires a certain amount of autonomy and may even invent new forms of performances. Each shaman has a distinctive style.

As mentioned earlier, a shaman can sing up to 10,000 lines, a figure below that of the Greek epic, if it is not too presumptuous to risk this comparison—the *Iliad* counts just over 15,000 lines while the *Odyssey* over 12,000—but that is nevertheless considerable. We know how much research has been done to understand how such a feat could be performed by the Greek bards.<sup>12</sup> It seems that like their distant predecessors, the Kham-Magar shamans do not learn a fixed corpus of 10,000 lines by heart, but learn the chants as they would another language, with the help of recurrent formulae.<sup>13</sup> Following their consecration, they assist their masters in their healing séances and repeat the lines after them. However, the injunction to have two masters makes it impossible to repeat a fixed corpus *verbatim*, and each shaman ends up making his own synthesis of chants. Each one also claims to know more than the others and to be able to sing longer. Shamans measure their power in terms of their mastery of this oral technique. The shamans' extraordinary ability to remember the chants and to sing them at length is understood as a natural quality that they have as the reincarnation of their ancestors. Here the argument is not very different from our own understanding of a gift: having a gift is knowing how to do something spontaneously, sometimes even without learning. And in spite of their training with their human masters, all shamans claim to know the chants by themselves, through their dreams. This is why they must sing all night, even when everyone else is asleep: if they are able to do this, it must be because they are not quite like ordinary human beings. And indeed not everyone has this ability, even if everyone will have played at being a shaman from early childhood, using a plate as a drum.

We saw that the ceremony of consecration endows the shaman with a complex identity that condenses several ontological identifications. These identifications are staged during the rituals by means of various kinds of speech. I will distinguish between the moments when the shaman directly addresses spiritual entities, from the moment when they speak through him to the point where he finally sings the long narratives of the shamanic corpus. These different positions are characterized by violence on the one hand, and a capacity for persuasion, and even seduction, on the other.

### *Violence*

When he is possessed by his animal spirits—the wild boar, the monkey, or the pheasant—he behaves like them, growling, squealing, or calling. He is unpredictable, and may cross beyond ritual space of the séance, looking for evil spirits all around, eyes constantly alert. Everyone among the participants is equally attentive to what is happening. The shaman's own ancestors, as well as various deceased persons, who are all angry for one reason or another, also take

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<sup>12</sup> Following his first study on *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (1928), together with his former student Albert Lord, Milman Parry developed his hypotheses on oral-formulaic poetry on the basis of performances by Serbian bards. These were subsequently published in a volume by Lord (1960).

<sup>13</sup> In my doctoral dissertation (1985), I give about 40 such fixed formula-like verses and 36 recurrent binomials and expressions that are used in a corpus of 6,000 lines; see also de Sales (2016).

possession of him and speak through him. The villagers ask questions about the problem at the origin of the séance or about the future of the village and its inhabitants. Invariably, the ancestors and gods speak angrily and seem to enjoy abusing the audience. Here is an extract from a recorded séance:<sup>14</sup>

—Listen! Listen! All of you sitting here! Listen all you mother-f...s! There are two witches here, and they are causing a lot of trouble! Ah! Prick! Listen all you useless bunch of ignorant people!  
 —Oh Grandfather! Yes, we are listening to you! Oh Grandfather, yes, please, tell us.  
 —We are unhappy! You must kill a goat! Listen all of you! Pricks! Nobody will die! Ah! Pricks!  
 Useless bunch . . .

The information released by the ancestors is rather scanty, to say the least: there are two witches; nobody will die; we want blood. By contrast with the weak propositional content of their speech, the illocutionary force of their utterances is very strong. The ancestors clearly assert their total superiority over the humans, and their insults are based on the themes of ignorance and sex: ignorance, because human beings cannot know what the ancestors know: they are blind concerning their future and are therefore at their mercy; sex, because speaking of sex transgresses social conventions. Not that villagers are prudish—far from it—and their language is often quite rough; however, they treat their ancestors with respect and are careful not to hurt them with improper or impure behavior. In the context of this asymmetric relationship between the ancestors and their human descendants, sexual interjections from the part of the former are a demonstration of their power. The swearword “pricks” is used less as if it were a component of linguistic communication than as an object thrown at the members of the audience in order to shock them. I suggest that the verbal aggression of the ancestors contributes to their presence in the ritual sphere: however much one may have come to doubt the ancestors’ existence, the emotional charge of their invectives cannot but be real. This outburst of violence manifests their taking over the shaman, the master of ceremonies, and, by the same token, their power over human beings. The most skeptical villager will listen to what they say.

Now, the language that the shaman uses when he speaks for the ancestors contrasts with his highly formalized and controlled singing when he addresses the supernatural entities. The ritual chants that fill up the time of the séances are marked by strict parallelism, with systematic use of binomials, and are characterized by poor syntax as well as a number of formal features such as onomatopoeia, repetition, archaisms, and insistence on deictic. Elsewhere I have described these formal features of Kham-Magar shamanic speech (de Sales 1991:272-307); here, I would like to draw attention to its *reflexive* dimension: the words are understood as the *vehicles*, in the literal sense of the word, of the supernatural entities, either the witches that the shaman tries to evict, or the soul that he recaptures and restores to the patient.

But, before going any further, I must address the question of the extent to which people understand these narratives. This is a difficult question since shamanic knowledge is not supposed to be accessible to just anyone, and showing one’s understanding of it could easily be interpreted as an illegitimate claim to shamanic power. People usually deny knowing anything in

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<sup>14</sup> Séance recorded in Lukum Village (Rukum district) in 1982.

this matter and invariably refer the visiting anthropologist to the ritual specialist. But this admission of incompetence must not be taken literally, and I very often heard members of the audience reminding a shaman who had drunk too much in the course of a long séance that he had forgotten to sing this or that part of a narrative, demonstrating in this way that they not only knew what was being sung but also they were paying attention. This does not mean that they would be able to explain every word of the chants, nor would they be able to sing and know how to conduct a séance in the same way as a shaman. But the elder members of the community, who have been attending shamanic nights since they were born, do understand what is going on in the narratives. However, as we will see in the conclusion, this is not true of the increasing number of younger people who left the village at an early age.

*Persuasion and the Reflexive Use of Language: Two Ritual Journeys*

The following lines are extracted from the recitals of two travel songs. These chants are not the *description* of the ritual journeys that the shaman is supposed to undertake with his soul, they *are* the ritual journeys themselves. In the first chant the shaman is trying to bring the soul of his patient back to the fold before it reaches the border of the human world. There run two rivers, the river of forgetfulness and the river of memories. Once the river of forgetfulness is crossed, the soul will never remember its village and will be lost forever, leading to the patient's death. The shaman cajoles the soul with presents and with words:<sup>15</sup>

Please accept this turban, take this blanket  
*Sira pagari bujha pāwae baithak bujha*  
 Lose yourself in my recital, lose yourself in my sweet words  
*Ngākāhānta buliwa ngāmohanta buliwa*  
 Lose yourself in my words, lose yourself in what I say  
*Ngārasita buliwa ngābāsita buliu*  
 Do not get lost on the upper way, do not get lost on the lower way  
*Emtar tābulichyo emdu tābulichyo*  
 Back home I brought (the soul) skirting the left, skirting the right  
*Griyā mātālchi āba dāwae ghumāi lyayañ bāwae ghumāi lyayañ*

The last line is intended for the audience, with the shaman using the image of a sheepdog recovering a lost ewe to announce that he has brought back the soul of the patient and that the journey is over. In the preceding lines, addressed to the soul, it is clear that the words of the shaman are supposed to exercise an irresistible power of seduction on the spiritual entity that should be enchanted by them. Like the magic flute of the Pied Piper of Hamelin that enraptures children as irresistibly as it does rats, the magic words of the shaman have power on negative and positive elements. The chant refers to its own words that are meant to attract the soul, and introduces a reflexive dimension into shamanic speech. We are also left wondering whether,

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<sup>15</sup> These lines are quoted from a travel chant called *ri dumne* "Collecting Impurities" recorded in Lukum Village in 1982 (Fieldnotes V p. 92). The language of most of the Kham-Magar ritual chants of this area is partly Kham, partly Nepali, and usually presents corrupt forms of both.

under the pretext of addressing the soul, it is not the audience and especially the patient whom the shaman wants to captivate with his words. This configuration would be similar to that which was analyzed by Todorov, where the magician acts on the patient while pretending to act on the referent.

In the second travel chant, the shaman is driving away the diseases of his patient and the witches, the nine sisters who are responsible for them. It displays the same reflexive use of language, referring to the words as the vehicles for the invisible entities.<sup>16</sup> In this extract, we are coming to the end of the journey (de Sales 1994):<sup>17</sup>

On my words, go sisters, go, *chyo, chyo*, go younger sisters on what I say

*Ngārāsisa chyo chyo bainā ngābāsici chyo chyo*

On my dancing, go sisters, go, *chyo, chyo*, go younger sisters on my drumming

*Ngānācaisa chyo chyo bainā ngā bājaisa chyo chyo*

“You had a good time, younger sisters, you played well in the river Cedi

*Hāns jedo khela jedo bainā khelo jedo cedira kholāzāla*

You, who have bad intentions, who have a bad look

*mania mansyani mpania manmatti*

You stopped (on the way), you had fun, you played in the river Cedi

*Rāsan je basanci hāns je kheliwata kuda jedowata cedi kholāzāla*

You drank to quench your thirst, you drank as much as you wanted

*Je richoza saiwo je bachoza saiwo*

...

In the place of my séance, little sisters, I was true to my word, I kept my promise<sup>18</sup>

*Thāram ngābeṅdāla bāini sēcā ngābānike bēcā ngābānike*

I, your uncle, I make the offerings

*Kākā je kākā sai sakkka ngāleu*

From the left hand I give, from the right hand I give

*Wara kuini ngācyo rito kuini ngācyo*

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<sup>16</sup> In a recent study, Rozenberg (2011:277) tries to clarify the use of the notion of reflexivity that, he remarks, has spread “like a virus” in the anthropology of rituals, and not always wisely. His useful reminder leads me to stress that what I mean by reflexive use of language here is the simple fact that the shamanic words refer to themselves in the chant. This is a characteristic that shamanic speech shares with poetry. I do not wish to suggest that this makes the chant a ritually powerful chant. I would like to thank Gregoire Schlemmer for drawing my attention to Rozenberg’s article.

<sup>17</sup> The whole chant (244 lines) is published in de Sales (1994).

<sup>18</sup> Given the interpretation that I will offer of the notion of truth, the translation of this line needs some clarification. The Nepali term *bēcā* means “promise” or “oath,” and is often combined with the term *sātya* “truth,” like in *sātya bēcā* “promise” (Turner 1931:431). Here, *bēcā* is combined with another Nepali term meaning “truth,” *sāci*, in the binomial *sēcā ngābānike bēcā ngābānike*; the action of making a promise is usually translated by *bēcā bādhnū*, literally “to bind a promise.” Here, the verbal expression *ngābānike* is composed of the Kham pronoun *ngā*, “I” and a corrupt form of either Nepali *bādhnū* “to bind” or Nepali *bhannū* “to say, to speak” (the aspirated *bh* does not exist in Kham). The termination —*ike* of *bānike* indicates the past tense in Kham. In this line the shaman does not make a promise, but reminds the witches that he has kept his promise and has given them their due. The promise through which the shaman commits himself for the future comes at the very end of the chant and is repeated nine times.

In the place of my séance, little sisters, I was true to my word, I kept my promise  
*Ngābeñdāla bāini sēcā ngābānike bēcā ngābānike*  
 Up to 12 divine years, until ferns blossom, until stones germinate, until stones are worn out  
*Dibe dibe bārai barsa athera jugi uniya phulyo dunggi tusāyo pathar rulyo samma*  
 Do not come back, little sisters, do not walk back  
*Wari nāhune bainā phari nabale hai*  
 In the place of my séance, little sisters, I was true to my word, I kept my promise  
*Ngābeñdāla bāini sēcā ngābānike bēcā ngābānike*  
 Let's go and close the way in the land of dangers, let's go and close the way in the South  
*Bāta thunigāyā gāundā deshzāla bāta thunigāyā melā deshzāla*  
 I made the promise one time, two times . . . I made the promise nine times, promise, promise."  
*Ekaliko bēcā dawāliko bēcā...nawa tyāli bēcā bēcā bēcā*

The shaman invites the nine sisters to frolic in the river and to drink water as young people like to do on such occasions. This is also the opportunity for them to give free rein to their personal inclinations, and the passage is not free from sexual connotations: the “bad intentions” and “the bad look” of the witches, their “thirst,” as well as the “playing” halt at the river hint at lovemaking. It is surprising to see a song that is intended to expel evil ending in bucolic antics, and surprise is indeed the effect that the shaman wants to have, but on the witches. He wants to take advantage of the momentary submission of his “dear little sisters” and evict them from the village “until ferns bloom”—forever. The shaman took the witches for a ride in all senses of the term: he took them on a long journey in order to get rid of them while humoring them. Here again the words of the shaman literally “carry away” the spiritual entities, as do also his dancing and drumming. But this is not all. The shaman ends his address to the witches with a promise. This promise concerns the pact that Ramma Puran Can forged with the nine mythic witches, and that lies at the foundation of shamanic practices among the Kham-Magar.

### *The Truth Conditions of Shamanic Speech*

The shaman is about to destroy the nine witches forever, when the youngest of them, and also the prettiest, prevents him from doing so for his own sake. She argues that if she and her sisters are no longer there to harm humans, he will lose his patients, and with them, his source of income. If he instead spares the nine sisters, they will provide him with the knowledge and remedies that will cure those whom they have afflicted, and grateful patients will cover the shaman with gifts. If this agreement marks the death of men and therefore also of the shaman, it nevertheless brings him the fame that will survive him. Thus the shaman feeds the witches who perpetuate human misery, but give him the power to overcome their ailments . . . for a time. All shamanic rituals end with the sacrifice of one or more animals in which the witches have a share.

Toward the end of the chant, the shaman reminds the witches that he kept to the terms of the contract—he was true to his word. Indeed he gave them their due “from the right hand, from the left hand,” and now they must leave. The expression that he repeats several times is based on a binomial paralleling the notion of truth with that of promise. Both notions, promise and truth, are omnipresent in the shamanic chants: all recitals end with the promise by the shaman to keep

to the terms of the contract that binds him to his invisible partners—the quoted song gives an example of this oath that the shaman repeats nine times—and most of the magic spells or mantras are formulated as oaths.<sup>19</sup> As to the notion of truth, it is often invoked in shamanic rituals: following a Hindu tradition, most narratives start at the Age of Truth, *satya jug*, that we must understand as a sort of Golden Age when human beings were not yet corrupt.<sup>20</sup> Also, a mixture of seven grains called the “Seeds of Truth,” (*sātabyū*), plays an important role in the séances: the shaman mutters magic spells over a small bag of these grains that he scatters around him to protect the place of his performance. Ritual chants relate how these divine grains were found by a hunter in the gizzard of a bird (a dove or a falcon, depending on the versions) that he happened to kill. The hunter (man or woman) sowed the grains that were, so to speak, fallen from the sky, and this was the origin of agriculture. This was also the origin of alcohol, which is described as a beverage that brings vitality to the weak.<sup>21</sup>

The “truth” of the seeds does not stand in opposition to untruth or lying, but rather to illness and death. In the same way, the shaman’s truth here lies in his being faithful to the pact that is at the foundation of his power to see what ordinary humans cannot see: the invisible reality, the past, the present, and the future. This conceptual configuration is reminiscent of the notion of *aletheia* in archaic Greece. In his attempt to trace the historical evolution of the notion, Marcel Détiene (1990 [1967]:11) recalls that it needs to be understood in relation to two religious powers: the Muses, that are “the sung speech, the rhythmic speech,” and Memory, that is not so much the power to memorize words as the power to see the invisible. Luminous *aletheia* would be also the opposite of *lethe*, sombre oblivion. However, the author has to nuance this understanding of *aletheia* when, in the course of his demonstration, he remarks that the magico-religious speech is invested with “a dual power, positive and negative” (66). The words of the poet are informed by *aletheia*, but they can also lead the audience toward *lethe*, or at least the sweet side of oblivion that makes people forget their lot of suffering. “The two antithetical powers are not contradictory, they tend toward one another; the positive tends toward the negative, that, in a certain way, ‘negates’ it, but without which it is not sustained” (72). In the same way, the shaman’s discourse stands between seduction, a pleasant version of deception, and faithfulness to a contractual pact between human beings and their supernatural powers—a pact that stands at the source of his authority and that sets up the truth conditions of his speech.

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<sup>19</sup> See Gregory Maskarinec (1993) on oaths and mantra. The author translated two corpus of shamanic chants that belong to the same shamanic tradition as the Kham-Magar corpus analyzed here, but in Nepali rather than in a mixture of Nepali and Kham: the first set of chants was collected in the district of Jajarkot by himself in the 1970s, among shamans of the Blacksmith caste; the second set is made up of shamanic chants that the anthropologist John Hitchcock recorded in the Bhujel valley (Baglung district) in the 1960s but never published in his lifetime. To these chants, Maskarinec added the songs that he himself recorded, almost 50 years later, from the descendants of the Bhujel shamans. The two volumes, respectively published in 1998 and 2008, include several indexes that help to retrace the occurrences of certain words like “oath” and “truth.”

<sup>20</sup> In Maskarinec’s corpus we also find the expression “world of truth” (see index in 2008:768).

<sup>21</sup> For a published version of this widespread narrative, see the recital of the “Seeds of Truth” in Maskarinec (1998:265-8).

*The Pragmatic Effects of Shamanic Speech*

The reflexive use of language tends to transform the words into ritual objects with their own agency: we saw that they are “thrown at” people with violence or are referred to as the vehicles that bring back the soul or carry away the witches; they are no longer (or not only) a “transparent” medium of communication that refers to elements of the world, just as, in linguistics, signifiers refer to signified; they are themselves the elements of a symbolic-religious world that the shaman creates, not unlike the poet who uses words as much for their meaning as for their sound. However, this reflexive use of language is not enough to make the chants ritually powerful. Power is achieved through a wealth of speech acts (insults, threats, orders, oaths, contracts, and promises) that act on the world in such a way that the world must adjust to the words:<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the soul must come back to the patient, and unless this has been accomplished, the speech act is not successful and cannot be recognized by people. The shaman’s speech acts are performed in accordance “with sets of constitutive rules,” in Searle’s (1965:223) terms—the constitutive rules that set up the very possibility of a world within which the shaman is invested with the power to heal. In this sense, the shamanic world is self-referential; it owes its existence to these rules.

In his seminal article on ritual language, Carlo Severi (2002) tries to identify the marker of what makes ritual communication different from ordinary communication. He starts from the observation of a healing ritual among the Kuna that is exclusively conducted through the shaman’s speech: the shaman starts his ritual journey with a detailed description of himself performing according to the rules, and speaking of himself in the third-person. Severi suggests that this description of the rules for acting as a shaman is not just a way to store ritual knowledge, but rather, a way of departing from ordinary reality and producing a ritual context: “. . . from the moment the singer starts to mention a chanter about to begin to recite his chant, from the point of view of the definition of the enunciator, . . . an entirely new situation is established: the enunciators have become two, one being the ‘parallel’ image of the other” (32). Severi suggests that in this Amerindian ritual the “double presence” of the enunciator is the premise for his healing power.

One episode of a long-standard ritual chant among the Kham-Magar displays a similar configuration: the two wives of Ramma Puran Can insist that he reveal what will lead to his own death, so that they can protect him—or so they claim. Ramma Puran Can, who knows everything—past, present, and future—knows that if he reveals the secret of his death, then the witches, who are secretly listening, will know how to bring about his end. He hesitates, but in the end he gives in and describes what will happen: he will be walking along a high ridge when nine birds, the nine witches that have metamorphosed into birds, will fly up in front of him, surprise him, and cause him to fall from the cliff. Events unfold as he has predicted, and Ramma Puran Can duly dies. The point here is that the hero relates his destiny before the event itself features in the song. There is a narrative within the narrative, and through this narrative device, Ramma Puran

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<sup>22</sup> I refer to the distinction that Searle makes between the category of speech acts by which words adjust to the world (simple description of the world), and the category of those by which the world has to adjust to the word *in order to be successful* (Clément and Kaufmann 2005:13-14).

Can is himself also a narrator, like the shaman who is singing the ritual chant. In Severi's terms, the performer is double, the two identities being the image of each other.

Other features of Kham-Magar shamanic discourse also stand in comparison with Amerindian shamanic speech and support the hypothesis about their pragmatic effect on the audience. The interchangeable usage of first and third-person pronouns, the "I" of the performer and the "he" of Ramma Puran Can, confirms the "double presence" of the enunciator. The systematic use of parallelism makes this even more striking when the first-person pronoun is used in the first hexameter of the line and the third-person pronoun in the second. Also, the use of the present tense is often set in parallel to the use of the past tense, or else the tense is not marked—a feature that sometimes makes the text impossible to translate. Indeed, the function of ritual speech is less to develop narratives as to give the shaman the power to heal and to make the mythic world present in the *hic et nunc* of the séance.

Unlike the Kuna shaman, the Kham-Magar shaman not only sings, but also often acts dramatically. One last example will show how the shamanic world is rooted in the ordinary world. The shaman is supposed to retrieve the patient's soul from the underworld by carrying the patient on his back. He bounces up and down to dramatize his return from the underworld. As he does this he sings the chant that relates how the mythic hero, named Pudara, brought back the heroine, named Biselme, from the underworld. But the shaman neither incarnates Pudara, nor does he suggest that the female patient whom he is carrying incarnates Biselme. He rather provides a sort of subtitle or voiceover to the ritual act. This ritual device generates an oscillation into the spectators' perception of what is happening in the performance, since the action of the officiating shaman is also that of the mythic hero. The mythic world is invoked in the séance, but the shaman and his patient are not actors; they remain who they are, as doubles of the mythic characters. We might also say that the specific event that the spectator is attending is endowed with a paradigmatic character.

Shamanic speech displays what Alfred Gell (1992:60) called "technical virtuosity." Although Gell focused primarily on visual art, his study applies equally well to language, which he recognized as "the most fundamental of all technologies." He suggested that certain artworks appear as "a technical miracle . . . because it is achieved both by human agency but at the same time by an agency that transcends the normal sense of self possession of the spectator" (49). The viewer experiences the emotional effects of this technical virtuosity without being able to recognize or expose the actual techniques at work; he is reduced to making assumptions ("abduction") about the origin of the work: he is enchanted, hence the expression of the author of art as "a technique of enchantment." However, if Gell (52, emphasis added) is interested in the cognitive impact of the object of art on the viewer, he remains a social anthropologist and recognizes that the society is, ultimately, the source of this process of enchantment: "In reconstructing the processes which brought the work of art into existence, [the viewer] is obliged to posit a creative agency which transcends his own and, hovering in the background, *the power of the collectivity on whose behalf the artist exercised his technical mastery.*" Gell meets Bourdieu here, when he sees the artist as the representative of his community from which he gets his status as an artist and also the power to transcend the sense that the viewer has of himself. Technical virtuosity would not be sufficient in it self to generate that power. However, contrary



to Bourdieu, Gell (43) has the merit of paying attention to “the concrete products of human ingenuity” and to the complex relationships involving the viewer and the object.<sup>23</sup>

The Kham-Magar chants are performed by a human agent, the shaman, but the spectators are in a position to assume that the ancestor is at the origin of his extraordinary power to sing these long chants in a non-ordinary language—a language, moreover, that creates its own universe in which the shaman is defined as a complex enunciator. In this way, the verbal virtuosity, the shaman’s “attribute,” sets up the conditions for the possible existence of a transcendent source of authority.

## Conclusion

It should be clear that this study of Kham-Magar shamanic speech does not claim to be valid for all shamanic oral traditions in the Himalayas. The purpose of this paper was primarily to address the question of the sources of authority for shamanic speech, starting from Bourdieu’s strong views on the subject of the power of speech. Where does a shaman’s power come from, his community or his technical competence? I have looked not only in the cosmology of the Kham-Magar and their rituals, but also in the formal features of their shamanic speech. Like the Kuna shaman analyzed by Severi, the Kham-Magar shaman is a “complex enunciator.” A thorough comparative study would be necessary to see whether this formal feature is recurrent in other examples of Himalayan shamanic speech.

We have seen how, in the consecration ceremony, the human community invests its shaman with the authority to negotiate its fate with the nonhuman holders of its prosperity. But we have also seen that speaking of the ritual imposition of the dominant vision of reality, as Bourdieu does, ignores the multiplicity of spaces for contestation that the ceremony offers in practice. And even if these spaces may have the effect of confirming the community’s support to the dominant order—the only point that has been retained by anthropologists who see rituals as mainly coercive—these spaces nevertheless remain open to possible negotiations of reality.

Regarding this other source of authority, ritual speech, which is claimed by shamans but dismissed by the sociological approach as a mere artifice with no power of its own, I hope to have shown that, besides having the agonistic power over reality that any language has, it pushes that power further and succeeds in shaking the cognitive self-control of those who are listening. It establishes its own universe of truth and makes a transcendent presence possible. Whether this transcendent presence is the community itself or not, once there, it is interpreted differently by each and every individual, and acquires a certain autonomy. We are therefore in a position to nuance a little the notion of deception that both the sociologist and the linguist saw at work in the “magical” power of words. If indeed deception is at the source of all authoritative speech, this

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<sup>23</sup> This is not the place to discuss the relevance of Gell’s theory as far as art is concerned. It is rather his analysis of the technologies of enchantment and his subsequent notion of the agency of artworks that I am using here. For a radical but lucid criticism of Gell’s theoretical claims concerning the anthropology of art, see Bowden (2004); and for reflections on influential sources for Gell’s work, such as Ernst Gombrich’s *The Sense of Order* (1979), see Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini (2010).

deception is not controlled by a mastermind. What it produces through the technical competence of the spokesperson remains open and not fully predictable.

Finally, the shamanic universe is challenged by the younger generation of villagers who have attended school, and in many cases have even been abroad. They participated in the civil war and the transformation of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal into a democratic republic in a variety of ways that included ethnic claims and the need for recognition of local cultures. These “intellectuals,” as their elders call them, criticize their shamans on two conflicting fronts: on the one hand, they accuse them for being superstitious or for exploiting uneducated people’s credulity, and on the other hand, they challenge their monopoly of the local “tradition.” They reject the ritual part of this tradition, including the blood sacrifices, but want to retain the “wisdom” that these “stories” may convey, and on which part of their cultural claims are based. The highly formalized shamanic speech is obviously an impediment to their access to that knowledge, and they turn toward their shamans to translate the myths into ordinary language. The shamans’ responses vary, but it seems that apart from being naturally reluctant to give up their exclusive power, they are simply *unable* to sum up the sung myths. Shamanic knowledge and authority are embedded in their ritual speech. I have tried to show how this speech might make sense without reducing it to mere propaganda for the ancient order of things.

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