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**Re-Told Tales:  
Towards an Understanding of Spirit Possession in Central Nepal<sup>1</sup>**

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Spirits, as much as people, inhabit the hills of central Nepal. One can not linger long in central Nepal without becoming aware of the complex interactions among manifold varieties of spirits and humans, attested to through numerous offerings, possessions, and cures, and repeatedly re-interpreted through frequently retold tales of possessions. The presence of spirits and the threat of possession are facts of everyday life: everyone knows people who have been possessed by a *bayu*, *masan dokh* (Nep. ghost or spirit of the dead), *bhut* (Nep. evil spirit), *ban manche* (Nep. forest spirit), *bokshi* (Nep. witch), or some other malevolent entity. This paper grew out of efforts to understand the significance of the disparate forms of spirit possession and their treatment I observed and heard discussed in central Nepal.<sup>2</sup>

While the observations offered here may apply to a wider set of phenomena, I am primarily concerned with altered states of consciousness attributed to spirits and diagnosed as illness requiring the intervention of a trained and gifted individual (the shaman or *jhākri* himself to become possessed by a benevolent spirit in order to aid the afflicted individual. While there are significant differences between the two types of possessions (most obviously, the first is spontaneous, uncontrolled, and unwanted while the latter is initiated and controlled by the *jhākri*), it is most enlightening to consider the illness, its diagnosis, and its treatment as parts of the same process. Thus I speak collectively of spirit possession (referring to the involuntary and uncontrolled possession of an individual by spirits) and shamanic cures as a single process.<sup>3</sup>

### Generalized versus Localized Shamanism

#### Shamanism as Generalized Tradition

Studies of the Himalayas tend to address the phenomena of spirit possession and shamanic cures in one of two ways, both of which have serious limitations. One approach elevates shamanic practices that treat spirit possession to the status of a "tradition" (often identified as "Himalayan shamanism" or "Nepalese shamanism") and equates this "tradition" to the two other reified traditions

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<sup>1</sup>This article is a revision of a paper first prepared for the panel "Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas" at the 17th Annual Conference for South Asian Studies, Madison, Wisconsin, November 1988.

<sup>2</sup>This article is based on fieldwork conducted in 1981, 1982-84, and 1987. Portions of this fieldwork were assisted by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award, a Columbia University Traveling Fellowship, and a grant from the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, all of whose support I gratefully acknowledge.

Without systematically seeking information about spirit possession or targeting it as the central topic of research, but while nevertheless participating in rituals and conversation just as any other member of the communities in Dhaulagiri Zone within which I lived from 1982-84, I observed more than a dozen trance exorcisms and scores of cures, and listened to tales of over a hundred possessions.

<sup>3</sup>This is in contradistinction to approaches that catalogue types of spirit possession or varieties of shamanism. For a discussion of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary possession see, for example, Oesterreich (1922), Lewis (1971), and Hitchcock and Jones (1976).

which dominate the scholarly literature--"Hinduism" and "Buddhism". The second approach focuses on ethnic and localized manifestations of spirit possession and shamanic practices reifying them as "Tamang shamanism", "Gurung shamanism", or "Bhujel shamanism", for example.

In the first, generalizing approach, local and ethnic differences are dismissed as superficial and the similarities and family resemblances among local manifestations are taken as evidence of a far-ranging tradition. Spirit possession is discussed most frequently in the literature on Nepal in terms of the rituals and practices associated with the *jhākri*, practices which have often been cited as the original or indigenous religious "tradition" of the area.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars associate the rites of the *jhākri* with *bon nag* practices in Tibet, and others see them as a kind of shamanistic animism common throughout the hills of Nepal (e.g. Iijima 1963:48). More generally, the terms *dhom*, *jhākri*, and *bon* have been used to refer to a wide variety of unrelated practices which do not fit neatly into the categories of Hinduism or Buddhism. The attempt to analytically isolate and analyze Himalayan patterns of spirit possession and shamanic practices is particularly difficult because ethnographically they always co-exist with other forms of religious and healing practices. Indeed, the tendency to isolate and reify shamanism and treat it as the third party of a triumvirate of Himalayan religious traditions undermines our understanding of the religious pluralism practiced in the central Nepalese hills where, rather than discrete systems or "traditions", various forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and shamanic practices are intimately intertwined with one another.

The colloquial use of the term *jhākri* in central Nepal is not synonymous with the scholarly use of the term "shaman". "*Jhākri*" is used to refer to practitioners who deal with the spirits or the souls of the dead, whether the practitioner goes into trance or not: thus not all those identified as *jhākris* go into trance or heal. Conversely, not all healers or intercessors with the spirits are called *jhākris*. Some informants make distinctions among the various practitioners, most notably between those practitioners who intervene to alter a spirit's actions, and those who act solely to prevent a spirit's dissatisfaction. Individuals who go into trance to heal are always called *jhākris*; individuals who intercede with the spirits without going into trance are sometimes called *jhākris*; individuals recognized as having specific but limited healing powers, but who are not trained to intercede with the spirits, and who, consequently, do not go into trance, are never referred to as *jhākri*.<sup>5</sup>

Though the term "*jhākri*" is used ambiguously, informants attempt to distinguish individuals who go into trance and through whom spirits speak. This communion with the spirits is believed to allow these individuals to diagnose and sometimes to cure illnesses. In central Nepal, *jhākris* who trance are thought to see the world from a new perspective provided them by the tutelary spirits they call. They are not seen as the instrument of either tutelary or malevolent spirits, but, instead, are considered privileged intermediaries between men and spirits, between the past and the present, between life and death. The appellation "*jhākri*" may be used for healers of either sex, of any *jat*, and of any social or

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<sup>4</sup>Turner translates *jhākri* as "diviner, conjurer, wizard" (1931:231); it is more commonly glossed as "shaman". For an introduction to the *jhākri* see Hitchcock and Jones (1976) and Hitchcock (1967). Some informants suggested that there is more than one type of *jhākri*, the distinctions among the types depending on the different ritual functions provided by these practitioners. Some ethnic groups specifically differentiate among those who deal with spirits and those who deal with "gods". The Thakali, for example, refer to individuals who go into trance to deal with spirits as *mang dhom*, and distinguish them from *lha dhom*, the Thakali practitioners who do not go into trance but who intercede with spirits of the dead and with household, lineage and clan gods, etc. See Fisher (1987) and Vinding (1984) for further discussion of the Tamhang Thakali *dhom* practices.

<sup>5</sup>There are numerous individuals in central Nepal renown for possessing a skill or gift that makes them adept at healing specific ailments--e.g. ear, eye, or throat infections, dysentery, etc. Some individuals have a skill that helps ward off attacks by witches. Though they do not go into trance, have not undergone an apprenticeship, and are not acknowledge as *jhākris*, they are said to have some of the *jhākris*' knowledge.

economic class. But this implies a more open selection process than is the case in some instances.<sup>6</sup> In general, *jhākri*-s are male and the largest number belong to one or another of the low-status service *jats-sarki, damai, kami*. The shamanic healer is but one among numerous religious and medical practitioners. His practice represents one alternative among many, all operating within complex cultural systems, and the specific set of alternatives available varies from place to place and from group to group. The tendency to overgeneralize misleads; there is no single tradition of Himalayan or Nepalese shamanism.

One can argue further that there is no such thing "shamanism". The ethnographic literature addresses under this rubric a variety of practices divorced from their cultural milieu and tied to generalized functions. Though phenomena identified as spirit possession and shamanic practices are found world-wide, they have effectively resisted comparative analysis. This is in part because there is no consensus on the definition or interpretation of spirit possession and its frequent companion, "shamanism"; indeed, there is remarkable variation in the terms' use, depending upon the academic context (e.g. psychology, religion, biology, anthropology) within which analysts view these phenomena, or, more rarely, upon the context within which the people studied view these phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Comparative studies of spirit possession have been sociological (Lewis 1967, 1971), experiential (Peters 1981), historical (Eliade 1972, Watters 1975), and psychotherapeutic (Obeyesekere 1981). These studies generally postulate universal motives or functions, an enterprise that often confuses cause and consequence, and fail to adequately account for the extent to which these practices are mediated by culture. Numerous social functions may be served by spirit possession in some instances: the explanation of coincidence; the satisfaction of social and psychological needs of women in male-oriented societies; the provision of a culturally constituted public idiom for the expression of psychological illness (Obeyesekere 1970); or the loosening of the chains of ideological hegemony (Boddy 1988: Ong 1987). But while spirit possession serves or may be made to serve these functions in one context or another, none of these potential functions offers a satisfactory explanation of all the disparate cultural practices lumped together under the rubric of spirit possession. Such approaches unnecessarily flatten our understanding of what human lives are about. Spirit possession does not have one role or function but varies in significance and function from area to area, from class to class, and from one historical era to another. It may be that possession is, in central Nepal, a way for deprived and oppressed individuals to seek power, attention, and status in cathartic and redressive activities. Indeed, it may well offer the downtrodden an opportunity to alleviate the poor treatment they receive, to obtain some material benefits, to have some fun, and to gain at least temporary prominence--perhaps even to raise their status. However, the relationship between spirit possession and its social and psychological consequences needs to be examined anew in each social setting.

The very notion of spirit possession assumes the importance of indigenous categories and modes of interpretation; unlike "trance" or "possession-trance", which may be treated as objectively recognizable cross-cultural psycho-physical states, spirit possession refers to a wide range of behavior induced by indigenously perceived spirits.<sup>8</sup> While studies of spirit possession range from the measurement and analysis of the psycho-biological state of the possessed to determinations of the social function of spirit possession, two conditions--one based on an ostensibly objective analysis of psycho-physical phenomena and the other on indigenous beliefs--underlie most scholarly definitions of spirit possession. These conditions are: 1) the occurrence of apparently altered states of consciousness, and 2) the existence of an indigenous belief in the ability of spirits to take possession of a human body and to speak through

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<sup>6</sup>Some intercessors with the spirits designated as *jhākri* must come from a specific *jat*, (in some instances they must be of a specific clan) and be of a specified gender. In other instances, the gender, *jat*, and descent of the individual is completely irrelevant.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Bourguignon (1973), Eliade (1972), Hitchcock and Jones (1976), Lambek (1981), Lewis 1971, Noll (1988), Peters and Price-Williams (1980).

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of trance, possession trance, and other forms of altered states of consciousness see Bourguignon (1973).

that body. As perceived by most scholars, spirit possession is, then, an altered state of consciousness subject to a particular indigenous interpretation. Crapanzano (1977:7), for example, defines spirit possession as "any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit." Similarly, Jones (1976:1) defines it as "an altered state of consciousness on the part of an individual as a result of what is perceived as or believed to be the incorporation of an alien form with vital and spiritual attributes, e.g. the spirit of a superhuman form such as a witch, sorcerer, god, goddess, or other religious divinity." The catch is that since the significance of spirit possessions is dependent upon their cultural context, it is impossible to attribute them to a single universal motive, cause, or interpretation. Explanations of spirit possession cannot be reduced to cross-cultural theories about trance, but must first explicate indigenous theories about spirits. At issue then, are indigenous ideas about spirits prevalent in the Himalayas: How uniform are these ideas and how closely linked are they to ethnic and geographical boundaries?

### Localized Shamanism

Studies following the second, more particularizing approach, acknowledge that spirit possessions and "shamanism" are not uniform phenomena, and take some account of: 1) the wide variation of indigenous forms of spirit possession; 2) local ideas about their causes, their manifestations, and treatment; and 3) the interrelationships among shamanic cures and other ritual and social practices. Instead of seeking the basis of a Nepalese or Himalayan shamanism, this approach focuses on specific and local forms of spirit possession and shamanic practices, reifying them as "Tamang shamanism" (Holmberg 1980), "Gurung shamanism" (Messerschmidt 1976), "Bhujel shamanism" (Hitchcock 1967, 1976), and so forth. Though it avoids the overgeneralizations described above, this second approach exaggerates the significance of geographic and ethnic boundaries. Although Nepal has a remarkably diverse population marked by differences in culture, class, caste, ethnicity, and religion, all too often this tremendously complex cultural pluralism of Nepal is subdivided by scholars into more manageable units purported to reflect discrete bounded cultural entities defined by geographical isolation, and ethnic distinctiveness. This process reifies the subdivisions as cultures-in-themselves and obscures the interwoven complexity marked by overlapping identities of caste, ethnicity, village, religion, region, etc., through which people are bound together by some identities as tightly as they are divided and distinguished by others. Many Himalayan populations are isolated enough to maintain a great degree of distinctiveness, but numerous and frequent contacts--through seasonal labor migrations, trade, religious pilgrimage, radio, video, schools, government offices, development projects, tourism, anthropologists--have long provided a broad exposure to the way things are done elsewhere. As is the case elsewhere, ethnic identity in Central Nepal emerges less from isolation than it does in interaction and confrontation with others.

The localizing approach to spirit possession and shamanic cures seems particularly inappropriate in central Nepal. In areas that are ethnically pluralistic, discourse about spirit possession both reflects and constructs social, political, ethnic, and economic relationships--it is a means by which individuals and groups negotiate identity, membership, and affiliations. Central Nepal is a particularly diverse area and the population and culture subsumed by it are not homogenous.<sup>9</sup> The area is crisscrossed by numerous commercial routes which go through the Kali Gandaki, Myagdi, Bhuji, and Nisi river valleys, and the area has, moreover, seen extensive migration over past two hundred years--from north to south, from ridges to valleys, from the valleys to the cities of Pokhara and Kathmandu--and there has been constant contact with areas both to the north and south (Fisher 1987). Consequently, knowledge about cultural beliefs and practices extends far beyond one's own village, ethnic community, valley, or region, and people are aware of affinities and differences between their own beliefs and practices and those followed elsewhere in Nepal. Through shared beliefs about and shared vulnerability to possession by specific spirits people acknowledge affinities and affiliations that cross-cut ethnic, caste, or class differentiations.

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<sup>9</sup>The area is populated by Brahman, Chhetri, Thakur, Magar, Chantel, Gurung, Thakali, Newar, and occupational *jats*--Kami, Sarki, Damai. No single *jat* forms a local elite: Newars, Thakalis, and some Brahman/Chetri tend to be wealthier; the occupational *jats* are economically and socially disadvantaged. All residents along the trading routes speak Nepali as their first language.

Conversely, variations in beliefs and differences in perceived susceptibility to possession are criteria people may exploit to emphasize differences between themselves and others. As the affinity of beliefs about and vulnerability to possession are open to constant reinterpretation, discourse about spirit possession, its proper diagnosis, and its treatment may serve to define a social community. The tendency to localize and reify spirit possession and shamanic practices obscures the crucial point that, while specific manifestations may vary from place to place, from group to group, and from time to time, these manifestations are rarely bound by locality or ethnicity, but both transcend conventionally conceived geographic and ethnic boundaries and vary within them.<sup>10</sup>

### Repossessing possession: the "ism of "shamanism"

If we should neither reify unique brands of shamanic practices nor reify spirit possession and shamanic cures as generalized phenomena, how, then, are we to make sense of possession and its treatment? If there is any "ism" about shamanism or any commonality to spirit possession in central Nepal, it is to be found in the common discourse about possession--gossip, tales, dialogues, and their interpretation in the forms of audience response and repetition--through which experiences can be immediately expressed and interpreted. Understanding how individuals make sense of possession and account for what has befallen their peers is crucial to uncovering beliefs about the nature of the human world and the spirit world, the kinds of behavior symptomatic of spiritual illness, the differences perceived between spiritual and physical illness, and the meaning of complex relationships both between humans and spirits, and among humans. Spirit possession and its treatment entail a social process of talking and thinking about the world: taken together, the two constitute an ambiguous and open-ended discourse about status, social organization, power and propriety.

There can be no definitive catalogue of central Nepalese spirits, causes of illness, or means of treatment, etc. Residents of central Nepal recognize that their knowledge of spirits, of the influence that spirits have on humans, and of the most effective means of appeasing these spirits is incomplete and varying, and they actively seek information about previously unknown and unfamiliar spirits and influences. However, while they actively seek to expand their knowledge, their acceptance of additional information is selective: they endorse and adopt some opinions about appropriate treatments, but they do not indiscriminately accept everything they hear. Differences in locale, descent, or, less frequently, *jat* are cited as significant factors affecting vulnerability to particular spirits or the appropriateness of a specific cure. Some spirits are specified by their source, the set to which their potential victims belong, or by their locale, while others are unspecific.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, local diagnostic and healing rituals are variously interpreted: the diagnoses and revelations of shamanic healers are often ambiguous, and the public telling and retelling of tales of possessions, diagnoses, and cures allow for variable interpretation and reinterpretation of each case's causes and treatment. While the pronouncements of specialists have a privileged status, they are not always consistent with one another nor are they unrefuted by the statements of other specialists or by lay interpretations. *Jhākrīs* are not accepted as infallible or all-knowing: though their diagnoses are politely accepted at the moment of their utterance, later they are often explicitly contradicted, rejected, or revised by other community members. In lay narratives, interpretations of spirit possession, its cause, and its ritual cure often differ in significant ways from interpretations offered by practitioners and by

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<sup>10</sup>In only a few instances is a form of shamanic practice coterminous with ethnic boundaries. One example might be the Thakali *dhom*, a trained practitioner who intervenes with the spirits of the dead on the behalf of the Thakali. But even in this example, ethnic boundaries and the domain of the *dhom* are in question (Fisher 1987).

<sup>11</sup>For example, a *bayu* is said to only trouble members of its own *kul*. Consequently, one's status as a member of the *kul* may be indicated by one's susceptibility to a *bayu*, or by the danger one's *bayu* poses to members of a *kul* after one's death. The *bayu* of a woman haunts the *kul* of her husband and not that of her father. In ambiguous marital relationships the susceptibility of a woman to a *bayu* or the danger posed by a woman's *bayu* after her death becomes an issue of great controversy.

outside analysts. But while there is disagreement about the specifics of possessing spirits and the methods by which to overcome them, there are similarities in the form of possession and its cure throughout central Nepal.

In spite of the variability of interpretation, the parameters of discourse about spirit possession are defined by some common perceptions about the nature of spirits and their influence on humans. In central Nepal, spirit possession is a persistent and conspicuous aspect of daily life. It is commonly accepted by central Nepalese specialists and non-specialists alike that supernatural beings can possess humans; this possession is not seen as emanating from a disturbance of the individual psyche but is attributed to social malpractice (e.g., incorrectly performed funerals, or neglected ancestor worship), individual misfortune, or the capriciousness of spirits. The victim often remains unaware of the way in which she or he has offended or trespassed against the spirits. Numerous circumstances expose one to the danger of possession: for example, fright or travelling alone past sites known to be haunted (e.g., cremation sites). Typically, the host to the possessing spirit speaks and occasionally acts with another persona, sometimes behaving unpleasantly and aggressively by making demands on the people around him or her. The occupying spirit is perceived as a troublesome, problematic presence that must be exorcised or appeased by being given something it wants before it will leave the human alone and permit him or her to return to normal life. The possession affects not only an individual but a wider social network: if left unappeased, the possessing spirit may be a threat to the family, community or descent group of the victim. The extent of the influence depends on the nature of the possessing spirit. The diagnosis and the cure require the victim's family to engage a gifted and trained individual (the *jhākrī*) to undergo possession, allowing a benevolent spirit to possess his or her body in order to communicate with and exert pressure upon the occupying spirit of the victim. In some cases the obligations that fall upon the victim's family appear to be deliberately manipulated by the possessed, but this is not always apparent. The connection between social tensions within the family or community and possession is frequently a subject of great debate; often an individual accused of being a *bokshi* is known to the members of the community and is an individual with whom the family of the victim have had outstanding and unresolved conflicts.

While the general parameters of possession as a phenomenon are indigenously drawn, these boundaries are not the ones scholars have tended to make when interpreting Nepalese society. Significantly, informants make no clear distinction between physical and spiritual sickness. Yet while the well-being of the soul and the body are seen as linked, it is generally recognized that disturbances of the soul take precedence over those of the body; that is, physical ailments may stem from disturbances of the soul. Spirit possession, on the other hand, is not said to stem from physical causes. And while informants acknowledge the necessity to treat both physical and spiritual manifestations of illness, they concede that treatment of the physical ailments, while it may alleviate some symptoms, fails to address the cause of the illness. It is not uncommon for the ill to simultaneously seek diagnoses from more than one type of healer. Spirit sickness is but one category within the larger category of illness; spirit sickness may manifest itself in many ways before culminating in possession and it is responded to with various levels of treatments and by a number of skilled healers. Thus, there is no prescribed order in which individuals will seek out shamans, shopkeepers who stock pharmaceuticals, health post personnel, or other individuals reputed to have skills for diagnosing and treating illness. Individual practitioners acknowledge the interrelatedness of physical and spiritual symptoms but tend to specialize in either the physical or the spiritual aspect of illness. Specialists readily refer potential patients to other specialists who may be able to help them. *Jhākrīs*, for example, do not diagnose every condition presented to them as spirit disease: that is, they do not contend that all physical ailments can be cured through spiritual intercession alone.

What makes spirit possession stand apart from other manifestations of illness and leads to the temptation to treat it as a isolatable phenomenon is its public character: possession requires a publically enacted diagnosis and treatment in which a number of people have specified roles; it involves a wide network of participants, attracts an audience, and engenders a public discussion and interpretation of the event. Possession is a dramatic interference in the life of an individual by a spiritual entity, an interference that has ramifications for the wider community. But it is the variability of its public manifestation that suggests that we focus not on a reified tradition but on the ambiguity of interpretation, and not on an isolated or isolatable phenomenon but on the interrelatedness of

possession, diagnosis, and cure with the ongoing creation and recreation of society. Through the telling and retelling of tales about spirit possession the original event is reinterpreted and shaped to human needs: we need not assume that tales bear strict adherence to an objective reality. Spirit possession has no culturally unmediated reality: the significance of the variation in and ambiguity of its interpretations derives from its power to formulate and reformulate social differences and alliances in a context of cultural pluralism.

### A Central Nepalese Case

The context of the discourse must be as much a part of the analysis as the discourse itself: the significance of the tale lies, in part, in the circumstances of the telling (Crapanzano 1977, Dwyer 1982, Rosaldo 1976, Kendal 1988). Tales of possession are told and interpreted by people of diverse class, caste, and ethnic backgrounds, of different sex and age groups, with different marital or migratory experiences, and with varying exposure to traditional and modern influences. Why is it that some tales and not others are told time and time again? Why, when, and to whom are these tales told? Who tells them? Why do they tell and interpret the stories in one way and not others? Perhaps not surprisingly, individuals most frequently tell and retell stories of possession that affected their peers, and stories that reveal the dangers to which they are or perceive themselves to be most vulnerable. Women tell stories about the possession of women; village elites tell stories about the possession of their social or economic peers. These narratives about permeations of social or natural order are repeated and embellished frequently without being directed by the interrogation of an outsider. They are part of the fabric by which culture makes sense of itself. Understanding spirit possession as a phenomenon necessarily entails understanding the context in which it is spoken of or told about.

Even the most common of possessions sets off a discourse of interpretation and negotiation. A brief consideration of the discourse initiated by the case of a young, middle-class woman who was possessed in the Myagdi valley will help to illustrate this process of interpretation. The tale was first related to me by her sister about a year after the possession occurred.

Last year my sister Sahile<sup>12</sup> was attacked (Nep. *tokeko*--literally "bitten") by a *bokshi* while staying at Bijaya's house [the home of the possessed woman's friend] one night. They say that suddenly she started talking without knowing what she was saying. No one could understand her except once and a while when she would threaten to jump into the river. Everyone stayed up with her throughout the night. Prasad [the storyteller's male patrilateral cross-cousin and the ex-beau of the possessed] also came and helped to hold her and calm her. At one point, Sahile broke away and ran to the window where she threatened to jump out, saying she wanted to throw herself in the river. The next morning they brought her home. We were all so worried about her, Ama cried all day the first day sitting by her side. Sahile couldn't stand and lay all day in the house; everybody thought she was going to die. Even Ama said she would die. She complained that her stomach was burning and she ate very little during that time. Often she imagined that she heard footsteps coming up behind her and she was frightened. We tried everything to cure her. Bal Bahadur *jhākri* came from Jugja and said that both a *bokshi* and a *ban manche* had attacked her, but though he sat with her and beat his drum and went into trance he couldn't cure her . . . Several other *jhākri*-s were called and they sat with her many times . . . Each time we had to sacrifice a chicken or a goat . . . but, even though we did what the *jhākri*-s said, it never seemed to do any good. She stayed sick for two months . . . There were always a lot of people in our house holding her, talking to her and feeding her . . . then one day she just sat up and said "I'm hungry," and she's been well ever since . . . but we never dare talk to her about what happened.

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<sup>12</sup>All names are pseudonyms.



Spirit possession in central Nepal, as elsewhere, has psychological, sociological and cultural dimensions. Psychological theories might see this incident of possession as a rather common example of the disturbed psyche of a recently jilted young woman manifesting its psychological disturbance through the idiom of possession: possession then is a culturally specific form of exhibiting a universal psychological disturbance.<sup>13</sup> Its sociological implications are apparent in the obligation incumbent upon her family to rally to her support, and to express their concern through ritual sacrifices and public performances: possession is a means by which an individual can improve, or attempt to improve his or her social standing. Both of these functions might be served in this instance, but there is more going on here than is explained by either of these interpretations.<sup>14</sup>

As the event evolved and the community negotiated the diagnosis, members of the community both verified their cosmological and sociological views of the world, and clarified their relationships and obligations to each other. An initial issue of concern was the nature of the possessing spirit: What caused her possession? Who, if anyone, was at fault? Who else was at risk? Was the possessing spirit one which, if left unappeased, would threaten the family, other women, or the community at large? Many illnesses are traced to problems among people, living or dead. Witches and spirits may be provoked by envy. Unresolved social relations leave the ghosts of the dead to threaten the living. Local and clan deities need to be regularly fed, and propitiated to avoid their anger. These spirits are as much a part of the local community as the living, and through them relationships among the living are maintained. Some spirits are identified by their source (e.g., the ghost of Dil Kumari who died in childbirth), their potential victims (e.g., spirits who threaten specific categories of people--women, the descendants of Rag Prasad, or the residents of a particular locale), or their locality (e.g., the *bhut* of Baktini Dhara), while others are unnamed and unspecific, referred to only by a generic category (e.g., *ban manche*). These spirits all exert dangerous influences upon individuals; rarely is a single influence cited as the cause of possession or illness.

In Sahile's case, there was considerable disagreement at the time about the causes of her illness, and the discussion that ensued revealed much about the tensions within the community. As mentioned above, the recognition of shared susceptibility or vulnerability to possession by a particular influence separates insiders from outsiders. In discussing influences and susceptibility, villagers may seize upon similarities if they wish to include an individual or they may emphasize differences if they wish to exclude someone. While they may acknowledge that all Nepalese or all hill-dwellers (Nep. *Paharis*), or all humans are vulnerable to the influences of ghosts and spirits, they will often argue that only they are vulnerable to a particular ghost.<sup>15</sup> In this instance, the discussion of causes led to a thorough consideration of Sahile, her relationships within the various communities of which she is a member, and her family and its relationships within society. By emphasizing one possible interpretation over another, people emphasized aspects of Sahile's and Sahile's family's position within the village community, the

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<sup>13</sup>Women appear to be vulnerable to the widest network of spirits and there are frequent discussions of the dangers that await them: "There are so many spirits that attack women. Sometimes they grab us early in the morning when we go out to fetch water. *Byauni*-s are out at night and can't be seen. . . *Ban manches* may attack us if we are alone in the forest . . ."

<sup>14</sup>While many stories concern so-called "peripheral possession", and the ambiguity of discourse about spirit possession is a weapon the weak wield against the more powerful, it is important to acknowledge that possession is not limited to "peripheral" individuals but affects members of all jats and people of all statuses (see also MacDonald 1975).

<sup>15</sup>This process of marking inclusiveness or exclusiveness works upon the anthropologist as well: the more intimately the anthropologist becomes included within the community the more frequently he will be perceived as being vulnerable to ghosts and other spiritual causes of diseases. But this vulnerability is not likely to be universally recognized. At the first sign of physical illness close informants are likely to call a *jhākri* while less involved members of the community are apt to express disbelief that a foreign anthropologist from a developed country could be affected by the spirits of Nepal. At issue is the extent to which the anthropologist has been accepted as a member of the community.

local Thakali community, and within the Nepalese society. In the absence of a certain means by which to determine the causes of the illness, consensus is rare and often, as in this case, even the statements of the *jhākri* are rejected by many members of the community. Even when the *jhākri* succeeds in a cure, there are those who express disagreement with the diagnosis.

In this case, discourse about the possession allowed the community to articulate a variety of concerns: the suggestion that she might have possessed because of the justified envy of a *bokshi* or by a spirit offended by the penurious character of her family grew from and reflected the hostility of portions of the community to her nouveau riche father; the interpretation that she was possessed by a *byauni* while out at night revealed the concern of the community with the new and looser mores governing women's behavior; the insistence that she was possessed by a local Chhetri *bokshi* encouraged discussion of the resentment of the displaced Chhetri elite toward the Thakali community; the theory that she was possessed by a *bayu* known to afflict the lineage of her maternal uncle reflected her disavowal by the members of the Thakali community because of her mixed parentage; the fact that she was possessed while residing in an area known to be infested with Magar and other non-Thakali spirits was disdainfully cited by some Thakalis as evidence of the degree to which Thakalis in Khane Khuwa lost their culture (see Fisher 1987); while the insistence by members of her family that she was probably possessed by *bayu* particular to her father's patrilineage reflected their desire to be accepted as Thakali despite the mixed marriage of the parents. In this context of religious, ethnic and cultural pluralism, the telling and retelling of tales of possession illuminates diverse points of view, facilitates the formulating and reformulating of alliances, and encourages the drawing and redrawing of social boundaries. This discourse reveals not a well-integrated world of tradition, but a complex, semiotically formulated and negotiated series of experiences that require creative interpretation and reinterpretation.

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**Here, There, and Everywhere:  
Place and Person in Nepalese Explanations of Illness<sup>1</sup>**

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We ethnographers of Nepal always begin by localizing our generalities, placing statements about Nepalese culture and society between the qualifiers of "this ethnic group" or "this region."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the picture of diversity in Nepal is quite complex. The high-caste Hindu-dominated nation is home to myriad peoples, mostly of Tibeto-Burman origins, whose languages, customs, rituals and ways of life reflect both distinctive cultures and centuries of cross-group interactions. Regional differences are quite pronounced: from the southern plains to the middle hills, to the high mountains; from east to west; every district, every river valley has its own unique configurations. And so the ethnography of Nepal has been concerned primarily with illuminating the pieces of the ethnic mosaic, and only secondarily with tracing the patterns and shapes that constitute people's picture of a national society.

However, it is clear that difference and diversity are organized in Nepal: institutionally, through the state, and culturally, through the ways people conceptualize their relationships to other people and other places.<sup>3</sup> How do people in a given place in Nepal understand themselves as unique? What do they believe they have in common with their neighbors of a different ethnic group, with the people over the ridge, the people in Kathmandu, with people anywhere? If culture is a way of understanding the world, it is also, for individuals, a way of understanding one's place in it. In this sense, any culture contains the outline of its own folk anthropology, an often implicit theory for conceptualizing human universals and local particulars.

This paper focuses on how themes of universality and particularity are played out in Nepali people's explanations of illness. Understandings of what makes people sick, and explanations of why someone--here, now--is sick contain densely meaningful propositions about locality, social placement, and trans-local relationships.

For the ethnically-diverse people living around Bhojpur Bazaar, in eastern Nepal, a sense of locality is especially pronounced. By placing themselves they make sense of the relationship between different ethnic groups, between regions in Nepal, and between underdeveloped and developed countries. People's knowledge about who they are and who they are not emerges from the accumulated details of their collective experience beyond the locality where they farm. I emphasize this because the prevailing image of Nepalese villages is that they are remote and isolated closed communities. But in fact villagers do have a trans-local, even trans-national perspective. People of the Bhojpur area have a long history of travel, whether for pilgrimages or petty trade, seasonal migration to the plains or permanent migration to Sikkim, Assam, and Bhutan, or tours of duty in the Gurkha regiments of the British army.

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<sup>3</sup>Studies of state organization of diversity include Burghart 1984a; Gaborieau 1982; Höfer 1979; Levine 1987. Levine 1987 and Holmberg 1989 (especially chapter two) address cultural conceptualizations of difference.