

1984

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Molnar, Augusta (1984) "Female Ambiguity and Liminality in Kham Magar Belief," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol4/iss2/6>

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FEMALE AMBIGUITY AND LIMINALITY IN KHAM MAGAR BELIEF

Augusta Molnar

As I tried to decide upon an appropriate contribution for this special issue, quite a few of the influences that John Hitchcock has had upon my research and my way of thinking sprang to mind. These influences include insights that are both directly anthropological and ones that are more general intellectual tools. One invaluable insight of the second sort that I gained as John's student was one he himself no doubt acquired as a student of English literature, before he turned to anthropology. At Madison, while editing my work, he always stressed the importance of clarity of writing, beyond the actual ideas being espoused. A clearly written idea is a well-formed idea, he told me repeatedly. If you are having trouble expressing your point on paper, it is most likely that you do not really understand that idea. Let's take your idea apart, he would say. Sure enough, I found that I had as much difficulty making my point clear to him verbally as I had writing it down. A simple point perhaps. But I have seldom found exceptions to it and find it particularly useful in tailoring my writing both to an anthropological and to a non-anthropological audience.

Anthropologically, John Hitchcock's most important contributions for my own research have been his theories about the Magar people and culture. In my own studies of the Kham Magar, an ethnic group inhabiting a region south and west of Dhorpattan in Western Nepal, I have drawn heavily upon his Nepal research. He is most widely known for his ethnography of the Magar, written for a student audience (Hitchcock, 1966). But his theoretical contributions go beyond this to include work on Magar shamanism (Hitchcock 1974b, 1976), discussions of the origins and identity of those groups that identify themselves as Magar, such as the Chantel and the northern and southern Magars (Hitchcock 1965), and analysis of the different ecological adaptations of the transhumant and sedentary Magar farming communities (Hitchcock 1974b).

In this essay, I draw particularly upon his analysis of the social ambiguity resulting from the division of Magar society into wife-giving and wife-taking lineage groups according to rules of prescribed matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. In one article Hitchcock (1978) examines the reflection of this ambiguity in the Magar attitude toward witchcraft in a shaman's song/myth of the Nine Witch Sisters. His analysis of the interaction of the social and the ideological is pertinent to my own work among Kham Magar women and in the flexibility I find inherent in Magar social and economic roles.

Kham Magar Women's Background

In previous publications (Molnar 1980, 1981), I have examined the social and economic flexibility characterizing Kham Magar society that affords women a variety of role options. A sizable number of Kham Magar women live socially and economically independent of male kin to a greater degree than is commonly reported elsewhere in Nepal. Socially, the flexibility in Kham Magar society stems from a system of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, which links wife-giving and wife-receiving lineages; women retain strong dual kin affiliations after marriage in both their natal and marital lineages. From a social perspective, women's circumstances combine with their conscious use of this dual affiliation to determine the role options available to them. Women's economic flexibility stems from a complementary pattern of responsibility between the sexes in the household and from the delegation of considerable authority over resource allocation to women. As a result, women enjoy a large degree of economic independence among the Kham Magar and can support themselves in a variety of social situations.

The flexibility that enables women to choose between different role options, however, also lends a certain ambiguity to women's position in society. At marriage, a woman becomes a member of her husband's lineage, yet she is never fully incorporated into that lineage. She remains affiliated to her natal lineage and may decide to return to that lineage under various circumstances such as divorce, widowhood, or conflict with a co-wife. Her relationships with natal and affinal kin are thus potentially

in conflict. Even if she remains married and bears her husband's children, she may choose to side with her brothers instead of her husband, in the event of conflict between the two lineages. Or she may identify so strongly with her husband and their children that she precipitates the inevitable split in the joint household earlier than her in-laws would prefer. The problematic nature of woman's position is also inherent in her role as childbearer. Her fertility is valued as a means of perpetuating her husband's patriline, yet fertility is not assured. These are some of the ramifications of women's roles in Magar society that I have described elsewhere. In this essay, I am concerned with the perceptions of women in the religious and ideological sphere as they reflect the problematic nature of women's position in Kham Magar society.¹

The Female in Kham Magar Belief

I will examine the female in Kham Magar belief² from two perspectives: ambiguity and liminality. These two perspectives paint a picture of women's roles that complements the one resulting from a socio-economic perspective. In order to discuss the concept of ambiguity, I will draw upon two myths: a local myth of the Baraha complex, Bhuju and Baraha, and a myth of the first shaman, The Shaman's Song³ recorded and analysed by Hitchcock (1974b, 1976, 1978) among the Bhujel.⁴ In both of these myths, the ambiguity of a woman's affiliation to two lineage groups, her own and her husband's, is given expression.

The first myth deals with a complex of gods collectively called Baraha. At the time, Baraha is the name used by the Kham Magar to refer to a central nature diety. There are a number of myths concerning Baraha. In some, Baraha is seen as a single god, and in others as a number of gods.⁵ In general, Baraha is worshipped in the high summer pastures of each Kham Magar community and is said to protect the flocks from harm. Individual households sacrifice a sheep at one of the several shrines clustered in the high pasture for the well-being and prosperity of their families and the well-being of their herds. The particular myth I will analyse involves the story of Baraha's arrival in the pasture area around Ngankhar.

Baraha is the god of the high Himal (mountain) called Pipal. He has seven sons, all called Baraha. One day Baraha goes to the domain of [father] Sat Salle a god/king who lives in the pasture area called Jal Jalla,⁶ an area exploited by the villagers of Ngankhar, my research site. Baraha is searching for a wife for his seven sons. There in Jal Jalla, he meets the daughter of Sat Salle and arranges for her marriage with his sons. This daughter, whose name is Bhuju, consults with her brothers before leaving Jal Jalla for Pipal Himal. Her brothers tell her that if she is unhappy with her husbands, she is always welcome in Sat Salle's abode and that she must return to her maiti (natal home) and their territory if anything goes wrong.

Bhuju goes to the Pipal Himal to live with her husbands. Pipal is cold and snowy all the time, however, and she soon longs for the lush, mountain pastures of Jal Jalla. She plots with the husbands to conquer Jal Jalla and regain her homeland. Baraha has a dream in which he attacks her brothers and Sat Salle and conquers them, appropriating Jal Jalla as his own. He calls Bhuju to him and the two consult. They both decide that it is an omen and that they will be victorious. The seven sons and Baraha begin a war with Sat Salle that lasts a long time. There are many battles. In one battle they go to the area near Ngankhar and meet two Kham Magar archers on their way hunting. The gods call to the archers and tell them that when the archers hear a scuffle in the sky the following day, they are to shoot off their arrows. This act will rally Baraha's forces to charge against Sat Salle's forces. The next day, the archers hear a great hurricane wind and shoot their arrows faithfully. When the wind subsides, Baraha and his followers have defeated Sat Salle and Baraha is now god of Jal Jalla. His daughter-in-law, Bhuju, becomes one of the forms of Baraha worshipped in the high pasture. Because of the help given to Baraha by the archers, the Kham Magar are given protection by Baraha.

This myth contains an interesting opposition between Bhuju as the faithful wife, and as daughter-in-law, and Bhuju as a member of her natal lineage. Her brothers express their continued allegiance to her at the wedding arrangements and tell her that she is always welcome in her natal home. When she becomes despondent in her husbands' home, she does not return to live with her brothers, however, but plots their defeat.

Two social relationships pervade the myth. One is that of father-in-law/daughter-in-law and the other is that of brother/sister. The role of the seven sons of Baraha is secondary as is that of the father, Sat Salle, is secondary in Jal Jalla. This is interesting in light of Kham Magar social structure. The relationship between father-in-law and daughter-in-law is traditionally seen as conflict-laden as a result of a woman's continued attachment to her natal lineage. The father-in-law views his son's wife as the bearer of sons to perpetuate the patriline, but also fears that she will use her influence with his son to force a property division of the joint estate soon after marriage, establishing her own sphere of authority at the expense of her parents-in-law. He also fears her loyalties to her brothers.

The brother/sister relationship can also be conflict-laden. While the relationship between a brother and sister is traditionally seen as a close one, if the sister returns home after an unsuccessful marriage, there is a potential conflict with her brother's wife, who feels her authority is threatened by the sister's presence. This often mars the loving ties between brother and sister. The sister's return home is also structurally tense insofar as it negates the alliance made between her brothers' and her husband's lineage.

Female Ambiguity

The ambiguity of a woman's position as simultaneous member of her own and her husband's lineage is most marked at or soon after marriage. It is in this period that she often spends equal time at her natal and her husband's home; it is during this period as well, that she is likely to be desirous of an independent household. It is also a period during which her fertility is unproven. When her complete incorporation into her husband's lineage is at the cost of a property division, an event her husband's father usually sees as uneconomical, the attitude towards her is ambiguous.

A woman is desired as a childbearer to perpetuate the patriline, but she is also a potential disrupter of the household. Not only may she divide the joint house, but she may prove disloyal and return home to her parents. From the perspective of her natal lineage, a woman is to be feared as well. A sister who has married out may be an important link between her own and her husband's lineage, but her loyalties are not secure. She may support her husband and children's interests at the expense of her own brothers.

Rather than depicting the usual conflict inherent in these relationships socially, the myth reverses the outcome and thus resolves the ambiguity of the married woman. Bhuju sides with her father-in-law rather than with her brothers when she becomes despondent in her new home. Rather than returning to live with her brothers and divorcing her husbands, as would an earthly woman, she sides with Baraha and drives her brothers out. Unlike her earthly counterpart, who remains ambiguously between two lineages throughout her lifetime, she becomes completely incorporated into her husbands' lineage by totally defeating her natal lineage.

The ambiguity of woman as a link between two lineages is also expressed in the second myth, the Shaman's Song, but the resolution is quite different. This myth is found throughout the Kham Magar area as a central song sung by the local shaman (jhankri) in seances. It is central partly because of the pervasiveness of witchcraft and witch-evil. Witches (zhea) can be both living individuals as well as spirits of individuals who have died. They are generally female. Witch-evil is said to emanate from the nine witch sisters of the myth. These witches infect female embryos so that some are born as witches (Hitchcock 1976:181). While certain women, particularly older widows, are suspected of witchcraft, public accusations are seldom made; most reference to witchcraft is made only in veiled terms, even by shamans (jhankri) during a seance. (8)

Witches are believed to cause a number of ills, from human sickness to the death of animals or mishaps involving property. Usually, witches do not actually cause an illness, but make a weak or slightly ill individual mortally ill. One means witches use to harm their victims is to poison their food. Many informants believe that witches gain initial power over an individual by stealing a bit of cloth, hair, or nails from that person's body and... (9) They can also befuddle a victim and cause them to fall from a cliff or to cut themselves with a knife or ax, something that should not happen to a normally competent individual. People who die from such witch-induced accidents become wandering ghosts under the control of the witch and can harm their families.

Witches have several attributes that are noted by villagers. While normal women keep their hair combed and tied in a knot in the back or in a long plait, witches let their hair fall loose so that it is wild and unkempt. Witches wander at night long after normal villagers have gone to bed. Women

rumored to be witches are thought to have been seen wandering in the night in the village. Witchcraft is an ever-present fear for a villager.

The shaman (*jhankri*) is the religious specialist who controls witches and other forms of evil (10). When a person falls ill or is beset by misfortune, it is the task of the shaman to diagnose and exorcise the evil through controlled possession. Shamans can be either men or women. Most shamans are, however, men. To be a shaman requires considerable strength and courage to encounter the supernatural realm successfully, and few women are thought to have such attributes. In Ngankhar, there was one female shaman during the period of my research, and in a village to the north, there were three.

The following synopsis of the myth/song of the first shaman and the nine witch sisters is taken from Hitchcock (1978:5-6) and describes the encounter of the first shaman with witch-evil in the form of the nine witch sisters.

In the myth, the original shaman is called upon to remove witch-evil. The source of this primal evil is the nine witch sisters, whom he invites to travel with him through the mountains. During the course of the journey, he kills them one by one, until only the ninth sister is left. When he is about to kill her, she reminds him that if he does so, there will be no more evil for him to remove and he will deprive himself of a job. He agrees to spare her and she promises to leave his clients alone when he performs the witch-removing ritual. There is a strong suggestion of erotic attraction between the two, and the witch pleads to come and live in his home, with the implication that she would be his second wife. Her pleading includes a long series of requests for places to stay in the shaman's house. The shaman denies each request and his denials reveal the kind of fear witches arouse. The ninth sister cannot stay in the attic because her glance would contaminate the water in the water pots; nor in the back room, because it is the place where the ancestors are worshipped; nor on the porch because children playing in the yard would fall ill, and so on. In the end, the shaman persuades the witch to leave the village altogether and live at a nearby crossroads. He then returns to his faithful wife.

Hitchcock (1978) analyses this myth in terms of two oppositions: one between wife-givers and wife-receivers and a religious one between the shaman as both one who exorcises supernatural forces and one who gains his powers to exorcise by allying with these forces. It is the social opposition that is of interest to me here.

The opposition between wife-givers and wife-receivers is expressed in ritual by the fact that wife-receivers "must approach wife-givers as supplicants when seeking wives, and during funeral rites they must perform polluting services for their wife-givers" (Hitchcock 1978:4). There is a mystical expression of this as well. Wife-givers are feared because it is believed that there is a 'witch-evil' emanating from wife-givers that flows to wife-receivers. This evil is referred to in veiled terms by shamans during their seances (1978:5).

The wife becomes an ambiguous figure, as she is the link between her husband's lineage and her own. Her incomplete incorporation in her husband's lineage is apparent in the fact that she visits her natal home frequently (11), and in the fact that she may divorce if unhappy with her marriage. In the myth, two aspects of the wife are expressed. "She is both the alluring witch and the homebody and mother. In one guise, she is a wanderer and undependable, a threat to village and brotherhood. In the second guise she remains at home and bears children by whom the brotherhood is perpetuated" (Hitchcock 1978:6).

This myth complements the myth of Bhuju and Baraha in its expression of an ambiguity between a woman's role as 'wife' and 'daughter-in-law' in her husband's lineage and her role as 'sister' or 'daughter' in her natal lineage. It also adds the interesting ambiguity of the witch and witch-evil. My own data bears out this ambiguity that Hitchcock describes for the Bhujel. An additional opposition becomes interesting in this regard, that of controlled and uncontrolled. In figure 1, I have diagrammed the various images of Woman socially and supernaturally as they emerge from the two myths. I have used two sets of categories: the categories of safe, unsafe, and ambiguous; and the categories of controlled and uncontrolled.

The opposition of wife and witch posed in the shaman myth can be seen as an opposition between a conception of Woman as safe and controlled and unsafe and uncontrolled. The witch is a figure that is

FIGURE I. WOMEN'S AMBIGUITY IN THE SOCIAL AND SUPERNATURAL SPHERE

	SAFE CONTROLLED	AMBIGUOUS CONTROLLED UNCONTROLLED		UNSAFE UNCONTROLLED
SOCIAL	Faithful wife Sister Mother	Married sister after marriage	Young Daughter- in-Law Divorced Sister in brother's household	
SUPER- NATURAL	Bhuju	Female Shaman	Bhuju in the Course of the Myth	<u>Deotini</u> (Woman possessed by a Diety) Woman possessed by <u>Pittar</u> (Ancestor spirits)

always viewed as dangerous and to be feared. She is also uncontrolled. Her hair is unkempt and loose and her tendency is to wander. In Kham Magar conceptualization, her sexuality is also uncontrolled. She presents an erotic picture to the shaman, one of temptress. In other stories of witches, witches are believed to cavort shamelessly with demons and to dance wildly at night, another indication of the erotic imagery that surrounds the witch. The faithful wife provides a contrast to the witch. Her sexuality is controlled by her marriage to her husband and she does not wander. As mother, she bears children that perpetuate the patriline of her husband and that serve to incorporate her more fully into her husband's lineage.

The other conceptions of women are ambiguous. The married sister after marriage is controlled by her marriage, but may be a source of conflict. If she fails to bear sons, she may return home and divorce her husband. From the husband's perspective, her ties to her natal home may prove stronger and she may side with her brothers in the event of a conflict between lineages. She is controlled, but remains ambiguous. The young daughter-in-law is a more dangerous figure. Her marriage is too recent for her incorporation into her husband's household to be complete. Her allegiance to any particular lineage group is ambiguous and unstable. She may easily divorce and return home. If she remains married, she may pressure the son (her husband) to force a property split at an inopportune time. Like the daughter-in-law, a divorced sister is also problematic and ambiguous. She is a potential disrupter of her brother's household and her sexuality is uncontrolled by marriage. While she may remarry, there is no guarantee that a second marriage will be any more successful than the first. Her position is thus conceptually like the young daughter-in-law, uncontrolled.

Bhaju, the daughter-in-law in the Baraha myth, is also an ambiguous figure. In one guise, she is safe and controlled, but she may easily prove ambiguous and uncontrolled. As a young daughter-in-law she proves troublesome and unhappy. Her incorporation into her husband's lineage is resolved in the myth but only at the expense of her brothers and father. From the perspective of the natal lineage, Bhaju becomes, in a sense, the faithful wife. She acts for the worshipper at her shrine in Jal Jalla as protectress and one of her roles is giver of fertility, a role she shares with the other forms of Baraha. When propitiated by the worshipper, Bhaju is controlled through ritual and a positive figure.

There is an interesting parallel in terms of the opposition of controlled and uncontrolled that emerges from an examination of women and possession among the Kham Magar. Women can become possessed by their pittar, or ancestor spirits, or by a diety.

There are a number of women in Ngankhar who are periodically possessed by their pittar. Some continue to be possessed throughout their lives, while others are only possessed for a period of several years. Interestingly, the pittar who possess them, whether they are married or single, are those of their natal household, not those of their husband's household. (12) The cause of possession is never clear in such cases, but women usually claim that it is the result of a ritual transgression, a failure on their part to uphold some rule of ritual purity or to propitiate their pittar properly. For example, one woman who was possessed periodically believed that this was because she ignored an injunction against the eating of pork. (13) During possession, a woman experiences uncontrollable shaking and cannot speak clearly. The cure for such possession is to give the woman distilled liquor and rub her body with a purifying plant. It is not uncommon for this possession to pass from sister to sister.

Possession by a diety is also an uncontrolled and periodic occurrence that affects relatively fewer women. One woman from a neighboring village was believed to have 'inherited' this possession from a deceased Ngankhar woman. Another young woman had just begun to be possessed at full moon when I completed my research.

These forms of possession stand in contrast to that of the shaman. Shamans, whether men or women, are taught by the spirit that gives them power and by the shaman who acts as teacher to control that possession and to protect them from possible harm (Watters 1975). I would suggest that there is thus a further expression of an opposition of controlled/uncontrolled in the roles of woman as female shaman, a controlled role, and women possessed by pittar or another diety, both uncontrolled.

The picture of woman and possession in terms of this opposition is also presented in figure 1. In the framework of ambiguity, women who are possessed fall into two categories. The woman possessed by her pittar is uncontrolled, and while possessed, unsafe. The female shaman, although controlled by her training, is an ambiguous figure. In her guise as one who exorcises, she is a positive figure and a curer. But she only obtains this power to heal through an alliance with the very supernatural forces that she seeks to exorcise. In this sense, she is a dangerous, or unsafe figure.

Female Liminality

There is another perspective on women in religious ideology, one that arises from the concept of liminality. Liminality is a concept that has been used by many theorists for the analysis of religious ritual. Van Gennep (1960) uses this concept to analyse life cycle rites, rites of passage. Such transitional rites, e.g. puberty rites, take the participant from one state of being to another, from one life stage to another. In the movement from one completed state to another, there is a period of liminality in which the participant is between states. The liminal state is one that is inherently dangerous. Rituals that mark the passage from one life stage to another serve to protect the individual from the dangers of liminality.

The concept of liminality is important for understanding birth and death among the Kham Magar (see Douglas 1975). In Kham Magar belief, transitions between life and death are dangerous; this danger is expressed in terms of pollution. A death is polluting to an entire lineage group; a birth is polluting to both the mother who gives birth, as well as to her house and household members. At the completion of the death rites, the soul of the deceased enters the realm of the ancestors. Until that ritual moment, the soul is in a liminal state between life and death. The soul's liminality pollutes its kindred and puts them in danger.

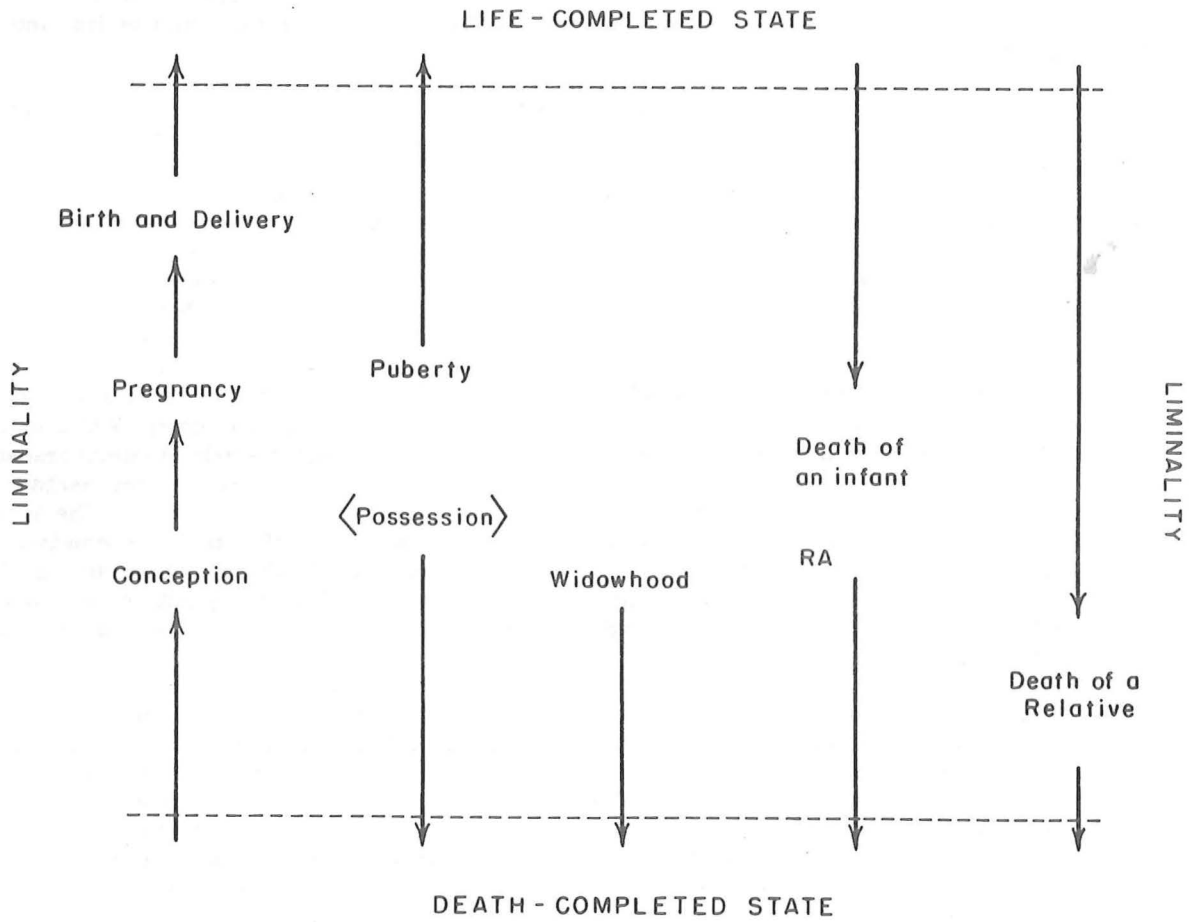
To understand the liminality of a woman during birth and delivery, a further set of concepts must be considered. Women are identified as givers of life through their role as childbearer. Only men can engage in the taking of life in Kham Magar society. It is only men who hunt and only men who slaughter animals for food or sacrifice. One common sacrificial offering in ancestor worship and other household rituals is that of a chicken. The sacrificial bird can be either a cock or a barren hen, but never a hen that has laid eggs. While women can kill chickens, unlike other animals, a chicken killed by a woman whether for purposes of sacrifice or for a simple meal, can only be eaten by other women; a man will never partake of it. This taboo stems, I would suggest, from the aura of life-giving that surrounds a woman.

A pregnant woman is forbidden to attend a sacrifice. For several months before a woman gives birth, a woman's family should not, it is said, perform household sacrificial rituals. When giving birth, a woman becomes polluted. She must remain apart from the other household members and take her meals separately. The house as a whole is polluted and strict villagers will not partake of food or water from that house until it has been purified several days after the birth. The new mother is forbidden to touch the hearth where the ancestors dwell before purification. In childbirth, a woman becomes liminal. She is giving birth to an infant that is entering the realm of the living. The mother, as giver of birth, becomes, like the infant she bears, liminal. Until the purifying ritual is complete, she is between life and death (non-life) and thus liminal. (14) In this state, she is polluted; she is both in danger and dangerous.

Danger to the woman in childbearing is also expressed in the beliefs surrounding a difficult birth, a stillbirth or a miscarriage. A breach birth usually results in the death of the mother, as well as the child. A knowledgeable woman is usually called to try and turn the baby around in the womb, but if this tactic fails, the child is believed to bite its mother's heart and cause her death. If a child is stillborn, or if a pregnancy miscarries, or if the infant dies within a year of birth, the spirit of the dead child or foetus, the ra, is believed to wander aimlessly in the realm between the ancestor world and the world of the living (see Hitchcock 1978:189). If it is not exorcised by the shaman, the ra becomes jealous of a subsequent child's place in the womb, and will try to kill the new foetus or the mother, or both. To prevent this occurrence, women who have had unsuccessful pregnancies will sometimes cut the foetus or stillborn infant into several pieces and bury them separately to confuse the ra, making unable, informants claim, to find its material body and thus to return to haunt the mother. In addition, if a mother and her infant die in childbirth, they are buried separately to protect the family. The exorcism of a ra is described in detail in Hitchcock (1978:191), Watters (1976) and Oppitz' film (1980). (15)

Fertility itself thus brings women into an encounter with the supernatural. By popular belief, a woman's power to conceive comes from Bhagwan, a general epithet for the god of creation, and from Baraha. The ceremony performed to prevent barrenness and induce pregnancy is performed to Baraha in the shrine of Bhuju. Multiple births are believed to be auspicious. Each child is seen as the 'gift' of a different nature god and thus all the infants must be saved if possible, even if the mother must resort to a wet nurse for extra children. At conception, a woman is also vulnerable to evil forces. Women informants told me that badly deformed children were the result of a witch causing a demon to be born in the womb. The liminality of the female in birth and delivery reveals an ambiguity in the

FIGURE 2. CONCEPTS OF LIMINALITY



woman's role as childbearer. A woman's fertility and the birth of sons are her means to a legitimate position in her husband's household. A woman desires children, yet the pregnancy puts her in danger, both from the supernatural and death. This leads to an ambivalence towards pregnancy and childbirth from the woman's perspective; is to be both desired and feared. (16)

Given the liminality that surrounds birth and pregnancy, it is my contention that women are seen symbolically or mystically as more vulnerable to the non-living realm. There is an interesting legend told by Kham Magar women that points to this vulnerability. This story is interpreted as a fable that teaches women not to dwell too long on death.

There was a woman who was greatly in love with her husband. He died suddenly of a fever in the prime of life. She was distraught by his death and for weeks after the funeral wailed and wept far into the night. One night as she was weeping, she rhetorically asked why he did not return to her. While she wept, the door blew open and the corpse of her husband still encased in its bamboo matting came in the door. Horrified, she begged the corpse to go back to whence it came. Only with her increasingly frenzied entreaties did the corpse depart and return to the burial ground. It is for this reason that women must not grieve too long for loved ones. One must remain with the living and not dwell on those who have died.

Possession is another expression of this vulnerability to non-living realms. Women can be possessed by the spirit of the deceased on the night of the vigil that precedes the funeral. Woman's possession by the pittar is another way of pulling women into a liminal state. They must be brought back with liquor and purifying plants. Another parallel to the work of Van Gennep can be seen in this possession by the pittar. While it is usually women who are possessed, another category of individuals can also undergo such possession: boys at puberty. They may be periodically possessed by their pittar but soon after puberty this ceases. It is only women who continue to be possessed well into adulthood and even throughout their lifetime.

Women's vulnerability is also apparent in the aura surrounding village widows. Widows are liminal at the death of their husband, and, as the above fable declares, this is potentially dangerous. While all women are vulnerable, a widow (and a divorced woman) is a likely candidate for witch suspicions. In Ngankhar, a widow of the patriline is called on the day of a funeral to purify the inside of the house of the deceased with cowdung and mud while the rest of the patriline go to the burial. It is said that any other person would be endangered by the task and lose their husband. Widows have already lost their husbands and are, in a sense, polluted anyway, so they are the best individuals to undertake the purification.

The concept of liminality thus gives an added perspective on the ambiguity of Woman. A woman's social ambiguity is expressed in ideological terms in the oppositions between safe/unsafe and controlled/uncontrolled. A woman is also seen to be, vis-a-vis her role as childbearer and giver of life, liminal and vulnerable to forces beyond the realm of the living. There is an added element of danger, then, that pervades the idea of ambiguity and uncontrol that is expressed in myth and symbol.

Summary

I have examined Kham Magar perceptions of women as they reflect the problematic nature of women's position in Kham Magar society. I have used two perspectives, ambiguity and liminality, to explore the complex of beliefs and symbols addressing the problem of women. The potential conflict in a woman's dual kin affiliation is expressed in the religious sphere as ambiguity. In the two myths (of the first shaman and of Baraha) the ambiguous nature of woman is presented in the figure of Bhuju and in the figures of faithful wife and witch. In each myth the potential conflicts inherent in the central social relationships between a woman and her male kin are given expression and a resolution made at a mythic level. Both myths express the fact that a woman is never incorporated completely into one lineage. Yet as an individual who remains between, woman is ritually dangerous. Only by denying a woman's dual role as at once wife and sister can a woman be seen as symbolically safe and controlled. The extreme expression of the potentially dangerous aspect of woman is embodied in the figure of the witch, who is both dangerous and uncontrolled. The fear of this figure is pervasive in Kham Magar reality.

In the beliefs and rituals that surround childbirth another reflection of women's social role is expressed in the concept of liminality. As childbearer and giver of life, woman is symbolically exposed to supernatural danger. In the act of conception and of giving birth, she becomes liminal and is pulled into a realm that lies between life and death. Her role as childbearer thus makes her vulnerable to supernatural forces by placing her in a liminal state. Fertility as a means of perpetuating the patriline and as a means of legitimating her position in her husband's household is an important aspect of her role in society, but it is fraught with danger.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This material originally formed part of my dissertation research. I would like to acknowledge the help and comments of John Hitchcock, Louisa Stark, Robert J. Miller, William Elmendorf, and Frances Wilson, on earlier drafts of this essay, and of Kent Lupberger on the present draft. Financial support for my research on the Kham Magar, which was conducted under the auspices of the University of Wisconsin and the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies at Tribhuvan University, was provided in part by a fellowship from NDFL Title VI and a Vilas Travel fellowship.

FOOTNOTES

1. It should be noted at this juncture that this essay focuses on only one aspect of the interaction between religious ideology and social reality. Taking the definition of religious symbols, conceptions, and beliefs from Geertz (1973:87-88) as both models of and models for reality, the interaction becomes and active one. Just as symbols and beliefs making up the religious system reflect the nature of reality and address the questions posed in the 'profane world,' so too these symbols and beliefs evoke questions about the nature of Kham Magar reality. The conceptions shape the reality and the reality the conceptions. My aims here are one-sided. I am only concerned with the reflection. Secondly, the particular dynamics of ideological elements dealt with in this essay are some of the dynamics, but by no means all. I have deleted, for example, consideration of many psychological factors.
2. The Kham Magar are nominal Hindus. The religious complex includes belief in a number of both Hindu-derived deities and local nature deities, belief in ancestor spirits, and belief in a number of malevolent demons, witches, ghosts, and godlings. The nature deities are propitiated in a series of festivals by sacrificial offerings. Ancestor worship is performed in household rituals and death rituals. The complex of malevolent supernatural forces is the realm of the shaman. The religious system is an integral part of Kham Magar life, but villagers are only concerned with this sphere as it impinges on their well-being. Propitiation is done to maintain social order and shamanic seances restore this order when it is disrupted. It is only in moments of crisis and distress that the villagers are concerned with the supernatural. While the concepts described in this chapter are pervasive, they are not a matter of daily concern.
3. Hitchcock has presented this myth in two main articles. In the first (1974b), he presents the myth in its entirety and makes the first stage of analysis, and in the second, he has made a more structural analysis of social and female ambiguity. It is this latter analysis that provides the grist for my own analysis and that is referred to here.
4. "Bhujel" refers to the inhabitants (Magar) of the Bhujel river valley near Dhorpattan.
5. There are different permutations of this complex throughout the Kham Magar area. There is considerable variation in the complex in terms of deity names and stories and the myth presented here should not be seen as exemplary except in the Ngankhar area. Since it is central to the Bhujel shrine in Ngankhar, however, I have used it to illustrate the concept of ambiguity. Baraha is also worshipped by other castes in western Nepal but is surrounded by different sets of myths. The myth presented in this essay was recounted to me by a local astrologer and his son, Ram Kumar Buda Magar, who learned the version from a deceased shaman. There are a number of versions told by the villagers, and some elements are the same. Not all put the same emphasis on Bhujel.
6. Jal Jalla is derived from a Nepali word meaning 'boggy.' There are a number of places by this name. This particular Jal Jalla should not be confused with the more commonly known pasture area northwest of Dhorpattan in Dhauligiri zone.

7. Bhuju's identity is ambiguous in villagers' conceptions. Some informants claim that Bhuju is female, but more often villagers did not know the sex of Bhuju and expressed disinterest on the subject. All villagers did, however, claim that this was the form of Baraha to be propitiated for barrenness.

8. I found only one instance of witch accusation; that accusation was later denied. Hitchcock notes that accusations are uncommon and says that the only mention he encountered was veiled mention of 'witch-evil' emanating from the direction of the wife's natal lineage village during a seance.

9. Villagers were careful to destroy bits of hair or bits of nail removed from their bodies for fear a witch might find the bits and cause them harm. Several villagers told me that bald spots were signs that witches had stolen hair while they slept. To protect themselves from witch poisoning, villagers also said a protective mantra over their food or drink when in another villager's house or travelling in a distant village. The idea of food poisoning is interesting in terms of women. Since it is only women who customarily serve food or liquor except on ritual occasions, the saying of a mantra implies that the woman serving the food might be dangerous.

10. See Watters (1975) and Hitchcock (1976) for a more complete description of Kham Magar shamanism. Extensive work has also been done by Michael Oppitz in a very complete film on the Kham Magar shaman, "Shamans of the Blind Country," (1980) available through the Museum of Natural History, New York City. Unfortunately this resource was not available to me for purposes of this essay.

11. In the 35-household sample, the visits by married women to their natal home were quite frequent. The number of visits also varied directly with age. The numbers in parentheses represent percentiles.

AGE OF MARRIED WOMAN	NUMBER OF DAYS IN MAITI IN YEAR OF PROJECT				Total
	<u>0-21</u>	<u>22-60</u>	<u>61-90</u>	<u>more than 90</u>	
15-24 years	0	1(14.3)	0	6(87.5)	7
25-44 years	5(12.7)	8(29)	0	11(45.8)	24
45+ years	8(47)	7(41)	1(6)	2(11.8)	16
<u>All Women</u>	13(25)	16(33)	1(2)	19(40)	48

12. I have some reservations about this information as I did not encounter many cases to compare. I would welcome more data on this point. Another interesting area of investigation would be the extent to which pittar possession acts as a coping mechanism. Jones (1976:22-28) cites such an instance for the Limbu, another Tibeto-Burman speaking group in Nepal.

13. Traditionally pork is considered to be a polluting food by the Kham Magar. The raising of pigs is believed to offend Baraha. In Ngankhar, the ban on raising pigs has been lifted, but strict villagers and shamans still abstain from eating pork.

14. Van Gennep (1960:182 fn. 1) notes that "in Madagascar pregnant women are considered 'dead' and congratulated after delivery for being 'resurrected.'" See also Mary Douglas' chapter on birth taboos in Purity and Danger (1966).

15. Hitchcock (1976:192) notes that this exorcism has important implications for the patients. When the infant has died young, the ra exorcism provides a symbolic way of removing the psychological attachment to the new baby that has died. In banning the ra from the world of the living, the shaman also brings back the parents who have psychologically followed the child into the world of the dead. I would suggest that it is the mother who is more endangered by a stillbirth or miscarriage as the father has not yet developed an attachment to the yet unborn child.

16. Although I do not have sufficient data to investigate this, it would be interesting to see how much women's attitudes towards pregnancy and childbirth reflect this fear. Given the fact that infant mortality is high — for Ngankhar alone it is 37% — this fear is certainly real.

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