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Vesa Matteo Piludu

## The ritual art and paraphernalia of the Nepalese jhankris and Tamang bombo

### Ritual objects become "ethnic art"

There are several private collections of Nepalese shamanic objects in Europe and in North America. The collectors buy single items or entire collection in Nepal or from other collectors. Nepalese shamanic objects are 'living a second life' abroad: they are appreciated by art lovers as 'object of art', valued for their esthetical value, presented in exhibitions and galleries to a variegated public interested in ethnic art. The catalogues of exhibition are officially presenting the objects as 'art'. An example is the title of the book and catalogue *Art chamanique népalaise-Nepalese Shamanic Art*, published in 2007 by the *Galerie Le Toit du Monde* of Paris. Sometimes in some artistic catalogues Nepalese mask and statues are appreciated for their 'cubist' forms or some other aesthetical characteristic that remind a particular style of Western arts.

It is very difficult to obtain precise ethnographic information about the objects of different private collections. Obviously the *jhankri* or *bombo* (shamans) are not selling often their ritual objects personally, explaining their exoteric meaning to collectors or ethnographers. The collector Andrey Tischenko stated that generally the villagers who sell the items are collecting them around their area and the memory of the shamans who build the *paraphernalia* or the exact ritual use of the object is lost. Dating the object is also quite complicated: it is necessary an accurate stylistic comparison. It is possible that an older *phur-ba* is tied to a newest drum.

Another problem is that the best scientific literature on Nepalese shamanic traditions focused on the analysis of rituals and beliefs. Descriptions of dresses, drums and paraphernalia often lie on the 'background' of these studies. In few

words we do not have a classic monograph on the typologies of Nepalese shamanic objects.

With all this limitations, it is possible to try to do an effort to describe some the basic meaning and ritual use of the objects of the collections. In the present article will try to analyse, following the objects of two collections:

- Tamang objects of the Finnish collector Susanna Aarnio, presented in an exhibition in the Finnish Pohjanmaa's Museum of Vaasa 2007<sup>1</sup>
- The Nepalese and Tamang collection of the Russian collector Andrey Tischenko, presented in an exhibition in the Tischenko Gallery in Helsinki (2012–2013).

As most of the items are Tamang, the present article is strongly focused of the tradition of the Tamang *bombos* (shamans). A more general term to indicate the shamanic ritual specialist in Nepal is *jhankri*: the word is sometimes used also by Tamang. But all Nepalese ethnic minorities have other native terms to indicate their specialists in shamanic healing. In Nepal there is a large quantity of different shamanic traditions, but some of these shares some objects, symbols or beliefs. Peters (2007) stated that Tamang *bombos* could have patients or apprentices of different ethnic origins, and that is an indicator of a common core of shamanic beliefs in Nepal. However local or individual differences or variations should not be underestimated, but valued. The structure of this article is based on the model offered by several articles and monographs written by Hoppál (Hoppál 2010: 123–135).

### The headgear, porcupine quills and peacock's feathers

The headgears of the Aarnio and Tischenko collections are basically of two types. The first one is made only with porcupine quills (Fig. 1). These can be used also as 'magical arrows' and kept in a wooden cylindrical tube or on the Tamang altar rise vessel called *chene*. The porcupine<sup>2</sup>, "a night-active animal, is said to 'search' in holes covered by dead leaves and under wood" (Höfer 1994: 60). The quills, once activated by a mantra, become sparking projectiles send out to annihilate an enemy or to light the way of the *bombo* searching for the enemy at night. The quills are also employed to counteract a particular type of contagious black magic (*doi nemba*), namely to detect and bring back the nail clipping or hairs from a person, which his enemy has stolen and hidden beneath a stone (Höfer 1994: 60). In the Gyasumdo tradition, the quills are "shot" by the shaman and "said to light the way during the search by sending sparks of flame (Mumford 1989:

<sup>1</sup> The name of the exhibition was *Karhun kannoilla – samaanien jäljillä*.

<sup>2</sup> On the similar function of porcupine quills for shamanic specialists in other areas see Macdonald 1976: 319 (Darjeeling).



Fig. 1. Tamang *bombo* headgear with porcupine quills. Tischenko Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012



Fig. 2. Tamang *bombo* headgear with peacock feathers. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

120). Long quills could be used for curing certain kind of disease or for acupuncture. Normal ones have also defensive powers: they drive away demons and protect the altar (Müller-Ebeling, Rättsch and Bahadur Shani 2002: 193) (Fig. 2).

The second type of headgear is made of peacock feathers. A Tamang myth tells that the peacock feathers "come from a time after sorcery broke the Rainbow Bridge that connected heaven and earth. When the bridge broke the humans became mortal and began to suffer. The daughter of the Cosmic Mother/Father deity looked down at the suffering and felt compassion for humanity and its need for healing. She sent the peacock with its iridescent feathers that, when worn by the *bombo*, allowed the healer to create a temporary bridge to the spirit world and to get the healing humanity needed" (Pratt 2007: 485).

The peacock feathers are generally present also on altars, representing the art of flying (Müller-Ebeling, Rättsch and Bahadur Shani 2002: 193). *Bumba* jugs or water pitchers could be also decorated with fan-shaped peacock feathers. As the quills, the feathers of peacock are considered projectiles that pierce the enemies: "they can fly over long distances in the air. Both the quills and



Fig. 3. White robe of a Tamang *bombo* with rosaries and chains with bells. Aarnio Collection. Photo by Vesa Matteo Piludu, 2007

I climbed the nine steps and saw Ghesar Gyalpo at the top, sitting on his white throne. He was dressed in white and his face was all white. He had long white hair and his face was all white. He had long white hair and a white crown. He gave me milk to drink and told me I would attain much sakti to be used for the good of my people. (Peters 2007: 91).

White is also the color of the *narling mendo*, the sacred flower representing purity (Peters 2007: 95).

The colored Tamang dress of the Tishenko collection is from the area of Helambu or Low Lang tang, in the northern part of Katmandu valley (Fig. 4).

the feathers are said to return into the *chene* vessel after having fulfilled their task" (Höfer 1994: 61). There are also other variants: some head-gears are made with feathers of other birds. Feather headdress are also common among the shamans of the Turks of the Altai (Hoppál 2011: 43).

### The ritual costume

The ritual robe (*jāmā*) of the Eastern Tamang *bombos* is generally white, as the one of the Aarnio collection (Fig. 3).

Its ankles are generally of nine pieces, measuring nine *hāt*, a length from elbow to finger tips (Höfer 1994: 69). Nine is a recurrent number in many shamanic traditions, representing the nine levels of the sky. White symbolism seems to be connected to the heavenly sphere and to the Tamang sky god Ghesar Gyalpo. The *bombo* Bhirenda related his meeting with the supreme white divinity:



Fig. 4. Colored dress from the northern Katmandu valley. Tishenko Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

### The rosaries and chains

Two rosaries (*phrenma*) and two chains with bells (*syansayn rolmo*) are generally worn forming four crosses on the chest and on the back of the Tamang *bombo*. The Tamang rosary is made with berries of the *ruddrāche*<sup>3</sup> berries or the black ones of soap nut berries. The rosary of *ruddrāche* berries is used also by the followers of the Old Sect in Tibet (Höfer 1994: 69 and Waddell 1959: 209) and by Shaiva ascetics.

The number of the depressions (*muhk*: 'face' or 'mouth') on each berry is connected to a particular symbolic value: one 'face' is sky, tree 'faces' is the four corners and five 'faces' the underworld. The rosary should be made of over one hundred beads, it should be done following an ideal composition of different 'faces' and it must be 'empowered' in different ways when the *bombo* is dealing with different kind of supernatural beings. Counting the beads the *bombo* can call certain divinities or made prophecies (Höfer 1994: 70).

<sup>3</sup> *Eleocarpus ganitrus* or *Eleocarpus sphaericus*.

The rosaries are also making sacred sounds when the *bombo* is shaking during the trance. Their function is also protective and they are considered supernatural shields against the attack of malevolent beings. Peters (2007) mentions that rosaries could be used as a whip and a weapon when the *bombo* is chasing away daemons, ghosts or spirits causing illnesses. In the ritual described by Peters, the assistant of the *bombo* Bhirenda, called Seto, took off his rosary and struck a woman possessed by a daemon "lightly but repeatedly around the neck. (...) Raising the sacred rosary over his head was like calling in action the 108 gods the beads represent. It was similar to raising a cross in the presence of one possessed by the devil. She cried while she was being beaten, and each time Seto raised his arm over his head, his face set in exaggerated grimace, she winced and lifted her arm to protect herself. Kanchi, that is the spirit possessing her, was on the defensive. Seto had the situation under control" (Peters 2007: 124).

The function of the small bells of the double chain is quite similar, and their sound invokes and pleases the gods. The general idea is that bells are attracting positive energies and in several part of Nepal they are symbolically connected with female powers.

Chains and rosaries are, in fact, an integral part of the dress. Holmberg reminds that "the costume of the *bombo* forms a being" (1980: 302). Tamang *bombos* and Nepalese *jhankris* shares similar dresses and rosaries with other ascetics, exorcists or low-caste artists.

#### Necklaces made of skeletons of snakes

A typical necklace of Tamang *bombos* is made of the skeleton of a snake. Sometimes it is provided with a tooth of wild boar. The object is connected with the symbolism of Shiva, generally portrayed with snakes coiled around his neck. In the shamanic tradition Shiva is considered the Lord of Poisons, able to cure poison diseases. The necklace protects the *bombo* against magic arrows or projectiles, curses and spells (Höfer 1994: 63). It is often put on the altar.

#### The Tamang *dhyāngro* and the *phur-bas*

As Michael Oppitz (1991: 84) remarks, in Nepal there are basically two types of shamanic drums. Some drums of the Tishenko and Aarnio collections are Tamang and of the first type, called *dhyāngro*: they have two membranes and a long wooden handle connected to the ring. The skin is generally of a domestic goat. The stick or beater is shaped like a snake: it is considered a symbol of *nāgas*, the snake-spirits or divinities of the underworld. The snake is also a representation of the 'shaking' trance of the *bombo*.

The handle differs from one used by the Tibetan lamas: it is carved in the shape of a *phur-ba* (ritual dagger) (Fig. 5).

The metal *phur-ba* used in bon, tantric and lamaist traditions has been analyzed by Huntington (1975), Marcotty (1987) and Rawson (1973). Unfortunately the shamanic wooden *phur-ba* have not been studied with the same attention. The shamanic *phur-ba* could be the handle of the drum, or an independent ritual tool, which is generally put on the altar or used to fight, nail and kill daemons or other supernatural being.

The carvings of the wooden *phur-ba* are extremely various: every dagger is unique. But quite often their basic structure is similar: they are divided in three parts, representing the levels of the universe. The *phur-ba* is clearly a kind of axis mundi.

The upper part of the *phur-ba* of the drum in the Tishenko collection represents tree faces surrounded by intertwined protective snakes with many heads (Fig. 6).

According to Höfer (1994: 64) the tree faces represent the deity *Phur-ba*, but in other interpretations of the *bombos* this deity could be considered a more specific personification of the divinity or spirit of the ritual dagger owned by the shaman.

It is necessary to add that in different ethnic groups of Nepal the tree faces could be called with different names and sometimes they are related to the Hindu triad Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. A Kirati shaman referred that the frightening aspect of the faces cautions against thoughtless use of the powerful weapon (Müller-Ebeling, Rättsch and Bahadur Shani 2002: 13). Fournier (1976: 108–109) wrote that the Sunuwar shamans called the tree faces *lama* and precisely: *Tsinge Lama*, *Nima Tele* and *Urgin Tele*. The scholar added that *sen-ge* or *sin-ge* perhaps means 'the lion', *nyi-ma* 'the sun'; and *urgin* according to A. M. Blondeau is the



Fig. 5. Drum with *phur-ba* handle, Tishenko Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012



deformation of the Tibetan word *U-rgyan* or *O-rgyan*: the birthplace of *Padmasambhava* or *Guru Rinpoche*, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism and the *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. He used a *phur-ba* to consecrate the ground when he established the *Samye* monastery in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Fournier noticed the scarcity of *Sunwari* terms in the nomenclature of the drums symbols: the majority of the terms were Nepali or Tibetan.

Another possible interpretation is that the tree faces belongs to *Mahākāla*, one manifestation of *Shiva* that is particularly relevant in several schools of Tibetan Buddhism and represented on the metal *phur-ba*. Or they could be *Mahadew*, a manifestation of *Shiva* popular in Nepalese and Tamang shamanism. It could be considered also *Bhairab*, another fierce Himalayan manifestation of *Shiva*.

Analyzing the deity of Tibetan metal *phur-ba*, Marcotty (1987: 30) stated:

And who is Phurba? This question cannot be answered to the last detail. Deities of the Himalayas can mostly not be conceived as clearly definable individuals. More often

Fig. 6. A *phur-ba* handle. Upper part: carving of tree faces surrounded by snakes. Central part: carvings of the Endless Knot and the Thunder (*vajra*). Lower part: carvings of tigers, the elephant-water monster *makala*, a bow, helping spirits, peacocks and snake spirit helpers of the Underworld. Tischenko collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

than not they are emanations or personifications of other deities and it remains at times uncertain who personified who. It is, however, undisputed that *Phurba* stands in relationship with the horse god *Tamdin* whose Sanskrit name is *Hayagriva*, which amounts to "the one with the horse's head". Here again we find a relation with the nomads, to the consecration of the soil and to the tent pegs. Over and above that *Phurba* is also regarded as a belligerent emanation of a principle which is manifest in the deities *Mahakala* (a distant relative of the Indian *Shiva*), in *Avalokiteshvara*, the patron of Tibet, and last but not least in 'Guru Rinpoche', in *Padmasambhava* that Indian sage who allegedly had discovered and perfected the dagger cult.

If the identity of *Phurba* is so uncertain and fluid in Tibetan Buddhism, in Tamang and Nepalese shamanhood it is probably even more multiple and complicate. It is necessary remember that Nepalese and Tamang shamanhood are oral traditions with many local variations: quite often the shamans offer individual interpretation of the symbols of their dagger and it is very plausible that a shamanistic pantheon is 'hidden' under names of Hindu or Tibetan deities or names. The number of the faces is variable: sometimes they are four.

Below the faces, the Tischenko Tamang drum *phur-ba* has carving representing a variation of the 'Endless Knot', known as *dpal be'u* in Tibetan and *shrivatsa* in Sanskrit. It is also called Tibetan Knot, Mystic Dragon, Knot of Eternity, and Lucky Diagram. It is a symbol of unity and endlessness of the universe and of Buddha's infinite wisdom compassion. Actually is one of the 'eight auspicious emblems' of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism. In the shamanic interpretation, the knot could represent the shamanic energy (called *shakti* in several regions) or a spiritual connection existing between the three realms of the universe.

In the central part, it is found the carving of *vajra*, the thunder bolt: one of the most relevant and fascinating symbols of Himalayan Buddhist and tantric traditions. In the *bombo* tradition, the thunder bolt is particularly connected to the "shaking" trance. The thunder is also a "spiritual weapon" used to fight and kill daemons. Representation of the Endless knots and the thunder bolt are present also on the *phur-ba* handle of one drum of the Aarnio collection.

The lowest part of the *phur-ba* is the three-edged blade of the dagger, on which is present the carving of a mythological being similar to an elephant, with a long proboscis. According to Höfer (1994: 64–68), it is a marine monster called *chyudirin* or *makara*. Oppitz (2007: 106), analyzing a Tamang handle of the village of Dabcha in the Kabhre-Palchok district, noticed that the mythical beast is locally called *guru godul* and the description makes one think of *Garuda*, but the configuration more of a sea monster *makara*. Sometimes *makara* is represented like a "crocodile monster". One *phur-ba* of the drum of the Aarnio collection is carved a kind of crocodile-like monster with two hands: he is grasping and devouring a *nāga* (snake), an agent of sickness. But more often *ma-*

*kara* is a hybrid sea monster with an elephant-like face. In Hindu tradition the elephants are associated with the Goddess of prosperity *Lakshimi*, and with the rain clouds that presage a good harvest. Elephants are obviously connected also with Ganesh: a deity that is venerated by several Nepalese *jhankris*. But also in these cases, Ganesh has been interpreted in a shamanistic way: the God with the elephant head is believed to be the "opener" of the gates of the universe, and he is mentioned in some opening ritual songs of the *jhankris*. Ganesh is often represented with a *phur-ba* in one of his hands and in the tales he is often fighting and beating several kinds of daemons. In some Hindu myths Ganesh has been killed and resurrected by Shiva and has been considered like a mythic metaphor of shamanistic healing and the shamanic 'dead-like' experiences: dreams, visions and initiations. Ganesh, as a human-animal hybrid, sometimes is connected with the furry and primordial 'forest' shamans (the *Dunsun Bon* or *Ban-jhanrkis*) that appear in the first visionary experiences of the neophytes. This point is interesting, because Höfer (1994: 67) refers that some informants considered the "monster face" as *Dusun Bor*, the fist Shaman, the ancestor and spirit protector of the *bombos*. For other Tamang informant, the face represents the mythic bird *Garud*.

Höfer (1994: 68) stated that when the "monster head" points ahead, the *bombo* is beating the "violent" membrane of the drum in order to expel spirits. By contrast, when the monster head points toward the *bombo*, he is beating the "mild" or "peaceful" membrane, the one used to invoke gods (Fig. 7).

On another corner of the *phur-ba* blades of the Tischenko drum probably there is a representation of a mythical bird called *Khyun*: the *bombo* send it to 'tame' and kill certain dangerous beings, above all the ones 'hidden' in stones, water and steep rocky slopes. This bird is a shamanic version of the Tibetan *khyun* and Hindu *Garuda*, the destroyer of evil snakes, or *nāgas*.

On the last corner of the three blades of this *phur-ba* handle it is carved a tiger or feline being. Sometimes in Nepalese shaman traditions the tigers are connected with the destructive tiger-rider goddess *Durga*, interpreted as a destroyer of daemons and associated with *Kali*. In India and Nepal there are also several beliefs about human or deities changed into tigers, an animal suitable to represent the shape-shifting qualities of the *bombos*. Tiger and the cats in general are also considered shamanic animals for their ability to see in the dark and 'in the world of the dead'. Sometimes tigers are represented on the very top of wooden *phur-ba*.

On the lowest part of the *phur-ba* blades, regularly there are representations of two or four intertwined snakes: these are not illness snake, but the snake spirit helpers (*Namdul* and *Samdul*) of the Underworld. *Namdul* is said to pierce the

"floor that separate the underworld from the upper world": it is the opener of the gate to the lower world.

On the *phur-ba* could be carved several other symbols: a bow with an arrow, the trident of Shiva, a *bumba*, the sun and the moon. The arrow is another weapon used by *bombos* in the battle against the daemons. The arrow is considered one archaic symbol representing the ideology of shamanism as a 'hunt' of souls. In Nepal hunting and shamanism are still strongly connected in some cultures, as the Tharu. Sometimes the bow is related to Shivaism: *Shiva Dhanush* or *Pinaka (Ajagav)* was the divine bow of Lord Shiva gifted to King Janaka by Sage Parashurama for safe-keeping while the sage performed penances. The bow is also one of the most typical weapons of Durga, often melted

with some local daemon-killer goddess, like the Newari *Kurkula Devi*. The arrow is present also in the altar of *tantrikas*. In any case, the arrow is used as a kind of magical dagger and it often present on the altar of shamans.

The sun and the moon are very common symbols on the *phur-ba* and they are painted in red and white on the membrane of the drum. They are somewhat linked with opposite but complementary energies: for example the feminine and masculine forces of the cosmos. Some *jhankri* connects the moon and sun with the divine couple Shiva and Kali, Mahadew and Mahadeva or some local deities representing male and female principles. In Hindu iconography Shiva is portrayed with the moon attached to his top knot.

The *bumba*, or *kalasha* is a copper or brass pitcher, often present on the altar with a *phur-ba* on the top opening or with a fan-shaped peacock feathers. The Tamang *bombos* are using it as a container of holy water and some white flowers are stuck into it. It could be used as an incense holder and, according to some Newari shamans, it represents the elephant god Ganesh. By contrast some Tamang *bombos* apostrophe the *bumba* as 'Mistress'.

The peacock, a symbol explained in the paragraph on the headgear, it is also carved on the surface of many *phur-ba*.



Fig. 7. Particular of a *phur-ba* handle. Carvings of a mythical bird, an elephant-water monster, a brass pitcher. Tischenko Collection. Photo by Vesa Matteo Piludu, 2012

All these carvings are not mere symbols, but representations of divine forces that could be activated during the ritual. Höfer (1994: 68) stated that some Tamang informants told her that drum is only temporarily 'inhabited' and 'operated' by divine beings, such as those represented by the carvings on the handle.

The drum is not only used for musical purposes. It serves for divination and to discover the supernatural origin of the troubles or illnesses of the patient. On the membrane, held horizontally, the *bombo* collect also other vital substances that could be transferred to the patient, as a kind of blessing. 'Stabbing' with the wooden blade of the *phur-ba* handle into the ground or towards the body of the patient, it 'nails' or frightens dangerous spirits. In many cases the *phur-ba* handle substitutes the wooden ritual dagger that remains on the altar (Höfer 1994: 68).

The *phur-ba* is the most relevant object in the dreadful initiatory calling vision of the *bombo* Bhirenda:

In the cemetery, I saw many *lagu*, some with long crooked fangs, other with no heads and eyes in the middle of the chest, still others carrying death flags and decaying corpses. They chased me. Before I knew it, they were on top of me and devouring my body. I was horribly afraid and, in last hope, cried out for the gods to save me, telling them I was only a young boy. I drew out my father's magical dagger to defend myself, but it fell to the ground and struck a rock. This created a spark of light and everything changed. Suddenly it was daytime and the demons were gone. I was alive! (Peters 2007: 81)

The initiatory vision contains the episode of 'body dismembering', extremely typical in the spirit-calls of several shamanic traditions.

#### The Chepang drums with only one membrane

The second type of drum is represented by the Chepang drum of the Tishenko collection (Fig. 8).

The instrument is very similar to the Siberian ones, has only one membrane and a small chain with various metal pendants. The inner part has a cross-handle. Riboli (1995: 180–181) related a relevant account on the Chepang beliefs about the building of the instrument. The neophyte has a dream, in which a mythical bird appears and shows what the right tree is pecking seven times on it. After that, neophyte fells the tree, under the supervision of his *guru* (guide), an older *pande* (Chepang shaman). If the tree "shakes" and seems to bleed, it is the right one. Oppitz (1981: 124–125) mentions a similar dream related to the building of the drum of Magar shamans. Fournier (1976: 110–111) reported another dream in which the helping spirit of a Sunuwar neophyte is ordering to cut a particular tree. The Chepang wooden drumsticks are straight and often on one side there are carvings representing a spirit portrayed in a praying position (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8.  
Chepang drum, Tishenko  
Collection. Photo  
by Vesa Matteo  
Piludu, 2012



Fig. 9.  
Chepang drumsticks  
with carvings of  
spirits, Tishenko  
Collection. Photo  
by Vesa Matteo  
Piludu, 2012





Fig. 10. Horn phur-ba. Aarnio Collection.  
Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

### The "natural" sacred daggers

On the altar there are many objects that are used as sorts of 'natural' daggers. The beak of hornbill represents the mythic bird (*Khyun*) that defeats daemons. Several horns and fangs of wild animals (local goats, antelopes, stags, deer, gazelle, and boars) are considered as 'original' or 'natural' *phur-ba* and are often present on the altar or are parts of the collars of Tamang *bombos*. The *gajal* (Tibetan gazelle, *Procapa picticaudata*) is used for the 'hunter spell' (*shikari mantra*), pronounced during the shamanic flight into the heavens (Müller-Ebeling, Rättsch and Bahadur Shani 2002: 209) (Figure 10).

### The tortoise shell

On the Tamang altar, the tortoise shell is the support of the beak of hornbill. Probably that disposition is connected with the role of the tortoise as the support of the world in Indian and Tibetan mythology.

### The iron tridents

The small iron trident (*trishul* or *tir-sula*) of the Aarnio collection is the typical one used on the altars and *chene* vessels of several *jhankris* and Tamang *bombos* (Fig. 11). In the *bombo* tradition the trident sometimes is considered the body of Shiva-Mahadew, but it is also apostrophized as the "Three-Faced Mitress" and said to blow "raking in the sky and earth in



Fig. 11. Beak of hornbill, iron tridents, tortoise shell and *phur-ba*. Aarnio Collection.  
Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

search of what is concealed", and to drive away evil spirits (Höfer 1994: 63). The trident is very often carved on the surface of the wooden *phur-ba* and painted on the surface of drums. In the shamanic interpretation of the symbol, the three heads of the trident could represent the three worlds (sky, earth and underworld). Sometimes, the trident itself could be used as a *phur-ba*.

One larger Tamang trident of the Tishenko collection was probably used as an ex-voto in some full moon ritual or pilgrimage on the top of a mountain sacred to Shiva-Mahadew and his consort. The small and flat horizontal metal vessel was used to burn oil, following the Hindu tradition.

### "Thunder-stones" and *pholas*

Prehistoric axes and crafted stones are considered *vajra dhunga*, 'thunder' and "lightning" stones. They are valuable tools when battling and destroying harmful daemons or spirits.

The *bombos* and *jhankris* use many other stones, fossils and crystals. Tamang ritual stones are generally called *pholas* and are believed to strike evil spirits after being activated by mantras (Fig. 12).

### The brass lamp

The Tamang lamp of the Aarnio collection is kind a Tibetan butter-lamp, but generally the *bombos* fuel it with oil, like the Hindu Nepalese in their rituals. The lamp illumines the altar and in this way the *bombo* is able to see the gods and spirits gathered around it (Höfer 1994: 62).

### The *darlun*

The Tamang *darlun* is a stick with strips of five different colors representing the four directions or 'corners' of the world and the vertical zenith. It attracts magical substances that transfer prosperity (Fig. 13).



Fig. 12.  
Altar, headgear, brass lamp, little phur-ba,  
thunder-stones and pholas. Aarnio Collection.  
Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012



Fig. 13. Aarnio Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012



Fig. 14. Aarnio Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

### Bone and shell trumpets

The bone trumpets are generally made of bones of 'man-slayer leopards' or tigers. Some are said to be made of human bones, preferably of a buried shaman or lama. Similar instruments are used by lamas. According to the Tamang *bombos*, the sound of the instrument terrifies ghosts and evil spirits. It could be used for trances and shamanic travels into the Underworld. Sometimes the blowing is connected to a special "bone mantra".

Conch trumpets could be used to invoke spirit, to support meditation or trance, or to frighten and scare evil spirits. The conch is relevant as an instrument or containers of holy water in Hinduism (the *Panchajanya* conch of Vishnu), and it is one of the eight fundamental symbols of Vajrayana Buddhism: it stands for the fame of Buddha's teaching. The conchs that have a spiral following a clockwise direction are particularly sacred, representing the celestial motion of planets (Fig. 14).

### Conclusions: a way full of open questions

The present article is a general overview of the problems concerning the paraphernalia of the Tamang and Nepalese shamanic traditions. Obviously it is far to be complete. The complexity of the topic calls for larger and more detailed studies, considering also other ethnic groups and objects. My intent was to present a set of 'open questions', not 'sure answers', about a picture that does not offer clear and bright colors, but a large quantity of shades and hues. Nepalese shamanic beliefs are based to a set of oral traditions, subject to a great degree of variability. The variations of the wooden *phur-ba* symbols are impressive (see



Fig. 15. Boar fang, spear, *phur-ba*, thunder-stones and *pholas*, bone trumpets. Aarnio Collection. Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012

the photos in the section *Iconographies of the Phurba and Dhyangro Handles* in Gaborieau, 2007: 34–74). Even so, Oppitz (2007: 106) demonstrated that it is possible to develop a general geographic typology of the basic structures of Nepalese *phur-ba* handles: “the waves of transformation advance from piece to piece, place to place, region to region, group to group (...) with a quiet regularity”. The Hinduist and Lamaist symbols present in the Nepalese shamanic objects and in their beliefs are fascinating, but very problematic. It is necessary to remark how all that elements are reinterpreted considerably by *jhankri* and *bombos* and other local shamanic healers. Sidky, Spielbauer, Subedy, Hamil, Blangero and William-Blangero (2000: 44) noticed that all the *phombos* (shamans) of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal worship *Mahadi*, identified with *Mahadev* and Lord Shiva, but the deity is clearly interpreted in a shamanistic way:

One Phombo explained: “The Mahadi was himself a Phombo, the original one, and in the past he used to perform the services of the Phombo for everyone. It was Mahadi who also created the Ri Phombo, or Ban Jhankri, as his first disciple and to cure the God when he himself became ill. But now, in this present age, the gods have turned into stone statues and so their spirits must now enter into the body of humans. What Mahadi used to do, is now done by humans, whose bodies become the receptacle for the spirit of the god.

This statement reveals clearly that the god Mahadi is fused with the concept of the shaman ancestor and he is fully included in a shamanistic mythology and ideology. This theological flexibility is typical of Nepalese and Tamang beliefs.

Admitting the presence of Hindu or Lamaistic influences does not mean that the shamanic beliefs descended from these religions. By contrast, the shamanic lore seems to be more ancient and dominant in the rituals of the *jhankris*. However, the shamanic healers are clearly using, quite creatively and for their own purposes, religious symbols that are present everywhere in Nepal and Tibetan areas. In the villages everyone knows the differences between the activities of a *bombo* and a lama: these are well expressed also in the popular legends about the contrast between a proto-*bombo* and a proto-lama, stating the diversity of

their ritual domains. Even so, a dialectical dialogue between the two religious specialists has been detected by several scholars. Exploring Tamang beliefs and rituals, Holmberg (1989) demonstrated how a religious system that contains Buddhist, shamanic, and sacrificial practices may be understood as a whole. Not by chance Mumford (1989), titled his study about Tibetan Lamas and Gurung shamans *Himalayan Dialogue*.

Last but not least, one of the most relevant issues that should be developed in future articles or monographs on Nepalese shamanic objects is a detailed survey about their uses in different rites, considering regional, situational and symbolical variations due by the differences between ritual performances.

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Denita Benyshek

## Artists as shamans: Historical review and recent theoretical model

The following review presents the trajectory of thought linking artists and shamans, followed by important findings from a recent study presenting a theoretical model of contemporary artists as shamans. The literature is primarily drawn from Western sources. As such, the ideas are mostly productions of the "Western mind," which, as explained by Tarnas (2003) encompasses the evolving "major world views of the West's mainstream high culture, focusing on the crucial sphere of interaction between philosophy, religion, and science" (xiv), where also resides mythology, iconography, anthropology, psychology, archaeology, and, I will add, art.

### Ancient myth and paleolithic graves

The multi-directional relationships between artists and shamans were recognized in stories of culture written collaboratively over millennia, begins in myth and prehistory. Khagalov, in his 1916 manuscript, expressed his belief in the matriarchal foundation of shamanism based, in part, on legends from the northernmost Mongol people, the Buryat (Znamenski 2003). Their supreme deity ordered an eagle to give power to a woman who becomes the first shaman. Because shamans utilize forms of art in their rituals, the Buryat's first shaman was also considered their first artist.

An excavation at Dolní Věstonice, in the present Czech Republic, unearthed the oldest known grave of a shaman (Tedlock 2005). Analysis of the skeleton discovered that the shaman was a woman who lived during the Upper Paleolithic era, 60,000 BCE. The same site provided the grave of a second female also assumed to be a shaman.



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Elvira Eevr Djaltchinova-Malec



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*Colored dress from the northern Katmandu valley. Tischenko Collection.*  
*Photo by Paavo Hamunen, 2012*

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Umberto Sansoni

## The shamanic-ecstatic hypothesis for the Alpine rock art of Valcamonica

### Introduction

Shamanism and similar ecstatic techniques are highly important features within the magico-religious traditions of ancient and historical cultures, while also demonstrating clear foundations in prehistoric and proto-historic contexts. It is only by considering the vast distribution in time and space of the variety of cultures and the deep connections with basilar psychological structures (Bolmida 2012; Sansoni 2012) that we can propose with confidence the animist-shamanic complex, or at least its roots, is the most ancient religious practices experienced by *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, recent studies have detected the fundamental role of shamanism within hunter-gatherer types of societies since Palaeolithic times (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1992; Clottes, Lewis-Williams 1996). This deep-seated role still strongly persists in some nomadic-pastoralist contexts, while seemingly has decreased among farming groups to the point where it disappears with the first occurrence of segmented urban societies. The implications are whenever a society becomes complex and organized, it also starts to develop divergent ways of interacting with the spiritual world, thus 'sublimating' and frankly marginalizing animistic-shamanic experiences. In fact, this kind of approach to spirituality is very hard to regulate, considering the deep personal connection of involved individuals with the sacred and nature. But still, some distinctive traits of shamanism – such as lucid visions which can sometimes be assimilated into trance (the soul's flight), the role of animal guides, fighting off demons, different magical therapies, the use of hallucinogens, etc. – are preserved in both oriental and occidental mysticism. Additionally, we have evidence of shamanic practices derived from historical texts since ancient Greek and Roman times as well as the

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