

TRADITIONAL HEALERS:

# THE SHAMANS OF NEPAL



*The mysterious world of Nepalese magic and healing –  
story and pictures by Virginia Westbury*

If the Himalayas can be called the rooftop of the world, then I must be near the upstairs balcony. The setting is a graveyard, 3000 metres high in the Himalayan foothills. A cold, three-quarter moon is rising between phalanxes of cloud above the tops of distant snow peaks, a pallid mist curls gently around burial cairns, mixing with smoke from a campfire just a few metres away from the edge of a sheer drop.

Beside me, hunched up in a two man tent, are a Danish anthropologist,

an investment consultant from Washington D.C., a Californian businessman, a chicken and two shamans - traditional Nepalese healers and sorcerers - both smoking. Any minute now, around 10 p.m., masaans, spirits of the graveyard and the underworld, are due to appear.

There are 16 masaans, all of them bad, ugly and dangerous to humans. What we have to do is sit tight and obey the instructions of our protectors: a husband and wife team named Krishna and Miru, for the ceremony we have come to witness is to test the mettle of apprentice shamans, which is what this motley collection of Westerners, believe it or not, issupposed to be.

A shaman, usually called a *dhami* in Nepal, can be a lively mediator between the spirit world and everyday life. Healings, fortune telling and consultations with the spirit world, ceremonies for the dead and the newly born, spells to remove curses, to change a run of bad luck or to bring love are all part of his/her repertoire. Performances are dramatic, at times startling, with colourful costumes, drumming, chanting, whirling and dancing and the singing of sacred songs called mantras to summon deities or expel spirits.

Attacks by spirits – *jungalis*, *masaans*, serpent shaped *naags*, witches called *boksi* and arrow shooting *sikari* – are believed to be

the most common causes of illness in Nepal. The dhami must diagnose which one and come up with a cure, either by making an offering or by sucking out the offending spirit from the patient's body through a "spirit bone", usually a human thigh bone. There is nothing genteel or New Age "nice" about the process. Shamans deal in matters of life and death and their work consists of graphic struggles with other worldly forces. For the Nepalese those struggles are as convincing and sometimes as effective as drugs, surgery and radiation treatment.

At The Institute for Shamanistic Studies in Kathmandu – run by Danish anthropologist and expert on Nepalese shamanism, Dr Peter Skaftø – I had the chance to meet and observe three shamans: Jebi, Maili and Krishna.

Jebi began studying to be a shaman when he was only six. As a child he had fits and trembled, signs that marked him as a potential dhami. When his father, also a shaman, lay dying, he transferred his power to the boy by biting his little finger. Maili, 39, mother of a one year old son, claims she was initiated differently, kidnapped at age five by a spirit

called a *banjabhri* and taught the trade by him. Female shamans are not as common as male ones in



Shaman calling the spirits – by Romio Shrestha  
From "The Tibetan Art of Healing"  
(Thames & Hudson)

Nepal, perhaps because of fears of witchcraft but they are often regarded as more powerful healers. Krishna, at around 58, is the oldest and most silent member of this trio. Like Jebi he inherited his trade from his father who. “..was concerned about all the witches around our place so he asked me to become a shaman to help him get rid of them,” he explains softly. Before the old man died, he put a lighted taper in Krishna’s mouth and made him promise to always tell the truth. Krishna says that if he breaks the oath he will die.

Speaking the truth is the first rule of the shaman’s code. Every practitioner must learn how to drum and chant himself into trance so as to communicate with the spirits of the upper, middle and lower worlds and to relay their messages. Often a shaman will perform a *jokhana*, a divination done with rice, either on a brass plate or the surface of a drum. How the grains fall determines the patient’s future and the nature of his/her problem or illness.

Shamans also claim to be able to see spirits near their patients. “If they are white and near the altar I know the person will live. If they are black and lingering around the door, he will probably die,” Maili confides. How soon? I ask. “Within the week,” she says.

Western medicine has eroded some of the dhamsi’s power. “We used to have a

lot of respect,” Jebi tells me. “Now doctors do some of our work and so that respect has been reduced but people still call on us when doctors can’t help.”

Sometimes a healing comes in the form of re-aligning a person’s planetary forces, their *grahas*, a kind of astrological fix. Krishna performed one of these for a member of our group, Emanuel, after he told her that a “hex” had been placed on her early in life. Someone who was supposed to care for her had actually cursed

her, he said. In order to be helped, she had to be severed from the curse and from her “bad luck”. A *graha* ceremony would do the trick.

Later that night Emanuel, looking pale and

ill from flu, sat nervously behind the drumming and chanting elder shaman as he began his preparations. The ceremony centred on a tree, nine concentric circles drawn on the ground (representing the *grahas*), a chicken and egg. First Krishna danced around Emanuel, brandishing sharp bladed knives over her head and circling her with the chicken, then at the climactic moment, the bird’s head was lopped off, the tree cut down, a string to Emanuel’s wrist was severed and the egg, representing the curse, was crushed. She was instructed to turn away and not look back. In one fell swoop she was separated from her “bad luck”.



Jebi in trance

Emanuel reported that during the ceremony she was surprised by a vision of her mother lying dead on a cart. Although her mother had beaten and abused her as a child, she hadn't suspected that she might be the source of Krishna's curse. The image gave her a sense of finality and release. "After that I ascended up to the sun. Maili opened it, took out a skeleton and replaced it with a dove."

In the days that followed Emanuel cheered up and began to eat; her flu waned as did the pallor in her skin. "I do feel that this whole experience has been a completion for me, a healing," she said.

**B**ut was it? How are we in the West to relate to this arcane craft with its strange spirits and stranger cures? Do we have anything to learn from traditional healers? I believe we do. For a start, shamanism sheds much needed light on the psycho-spiritual and energetic dimensions of healing – very much missing in our medicine. We in the West might have lost our "masaans" and "jungalis" but we haven't lost the things they stand for: diseases, griefs, longings, fears and anxieties. Shamans not only give forms to these, they provide a tangible means of dealing with them at the psycho-spiritual level.

In Nepal I consulted Jebi about a long-standing problem, a feeling of sad-

ness about my mother who had died several years earlier. Jebi consulted his rice grains. "She's not satisfied, she wants something from you," he told me. "Go to a river near where she lived and make her an offering of some food, drink, things she used to enjoy. Throw them in the river and tell her 'this is for you' and say her name." Feeling a little awkward I did what he ordered. It's hard to describe the effect of that event. I can only say that it gave me a sense of peace and a resolution I had not been able to feel.

What Jebi had "seen" was grief and in that simple ceremony he gave me a practical way of handling it.

All over the world this ancient craft of healing and soothsaying is vanishing, thanks to the incursions of Western medicine, technology and re-

ligion. Nepal is one of the few places where it survives but who knows how long that will last? Jebi and Krishna say their own children are not interested in becoming shamans. Change is taking place rapidly inside Nepal. For all we know the ceremony we saw in the remote graveyard may be the last of its kind.

If it is, the world will have lost something much more than a quaint cultural tradition. It will have lost part of its soul.

*Virginia Westbury is an internationally published journalist, writer and teacher and the editor of Paragate.*



Emanuel preparing for the "graha" ceremony