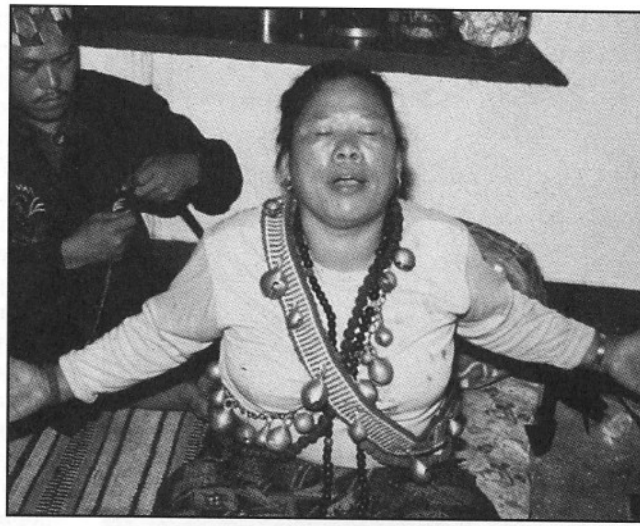


*During a man chinni, Aama gets a chicken to pick up and remove the "rainbow bridge" strings connecting the patient to the putla effigy.*



Aama Bombo invokes her spirits.

## The Man Chinni Exorcism Rite of Tamang Shamans

Text by Larry G. Peters, Ph.D.

Photos by Larry Peters and Carol Peters

In two previous *Shaman's Drum* articles (Peters 1997a; 1999), I have discussed my participation in shamanic pilgrimages in Nepal, under the tutelage of my teacher and friend Aama Bombo (literally, "Mother Shaman"). In this article, I will focus on one of the most dramatic of her healing ceremonies, the *man chinni*<sup>1</sup> exorcism or deossession ritual that is used to treat cases involving sorcery. A *man chinni* exorcism is typically called for when it is determined that a bad spirit has possessed a victim, causing antisocial behavior or unusual physical complaints.

Aama Bombo lives and works in the Kathmandu Valley town of Boudhanath, sometimes called "Little Tibet," which has a population of perhaps 100,000 persons, comprised primarily of the Tamang, a Tibetan-speaking ethnic group, and other, more recent immigrants from Tibet.<sup>2</sup> However, because Aama has achieved some notoriety as a powerful shaman over the last thirty years, her shamanic healing rituals are seldom limited to the Tamang, nor to Tibetans, nor even to the residents of Boudhanath. Her clients have included physicians, businesspersons, Buddhist lamas, Hindu Brahmins, and even some members of the Royal Families of Nepal and Bhutan, as well as the poor and illiterate. Her patients come from most, if not all, Nepalese ethnic groups, and many

travel long distances to Boudhanath to see her and receive healings.

Of all the healing rituals conducted by Aama and other Tamang shamans, the *man chinni* exorcism is certainly one of the most elaborate and impressive. The term *man* (Ta: *sems*)—which refers to the "heart-mind" that is thought to reside in the physical heart (*mutu*)—has been translated variously as "consciousness," "imagination," or "spirit-soul."<sup>3</sup> In the context of the *man chinni* ritual, *chinni* (from the verb *chinninu*) means "to break apart" or "to untie, sever, or cut through," and it refers to the ritual of severing the hold of the malevolent spirit that is possessing the patient's *man*.<sup>4</sup>

Spirit possession (*laagu chaapya*) occurs when a malevolent spirit (*laagu*) "holds onto" or "sticks to" (*chaapya*) the heart-mind of a person, like print on paper, or rides on it (*chaadhnu*), thereby polluting the actions, desires, morals, feelings, and speech of the possessed victim. *Laagu* is a broad diagnostic category that includes all types of malevolent spirits that may attack or possess a person, causing the person to suffer.<sup>5</sup> Although *laagu* may attack a person on their own accord, they are most often sent by sorcerers (*boksha*, male; *bokshi*, female) who "feed" and keep them, in order to use them to do their nefarious bidding. In other words, although it is the *laagu* that cause illness and

problems, the root cause is typically the sorcerers who control them.

Although sorcerers can work on their own, it is often assumed that they have been hired by others who are at odds with the patients. To counteract the harmful effects of sorcery, the shaman makes the sorcerer's spirit or the attacking *laagu* take possession of the patient during the *man chinni* ceremony. Then, after interrogating the spirit, the shaman uses his more powerful *mantra* (magic spells) to subdue it and remove it from the patient, and get it to make a sacred vow to stay away from the patient's environs, thereby freeing the patient.

The *man chinni* exorcisms that I've witnessed have been held either at the home of the shaman or at that of the patient's family, and they have been open to anyone wishing to attend and lend support. Because the *man chinni* tend to be very dramatic events involving complex community issues, the healings are often attended not only by the patients and their families and friends, but also by various neighbors who are alerted to the ritual by the shamanic drumming that continues late into the night.

The first part of the *man chinni* ritual involves coercing the attacking *laagu* or the sorcerer to take possession of and speak through the patient, so that the shaman can determine its identity and the reasons and



Sitting at her altar, Aama uses a broom to cleanse a patient of harmful influences.

circumstances of its attack on the patient. In most *man chinni* that I've seen performed by Aama Bombo and other shamans, it is a sorcerer's spirit and not a *laagu* that is summoned forth and that possesses the patient. Because the sorcerer is a living person, the *man chinni* rituals can have dramatic effects on community and interpersonal relationships. In due course, I will discuss these issues, but first I want to turn attention to the spirit belief system that gives form and meaning to these ritual exorcisms.

### The Spiritual and Cultural Context

Nepal stands at the geographic crossroads between two great civilizations and religions: the Buddhism of Tibet to the north and Hinduism from the Indian plains to the south. Over centuries of cultural contact, Nepal (especially the Kathmandu Valley) has become the meeting ground of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism, with these traditions blending into an eclectic unity. For example, the Tamang identify themselves as Buddhists, but they also regularly celebrate Hindu holidays and rites, and they frequent Hindu shrines, viewing the Hindu gods and goddesses as manifestations of Tibetan Buddhist deities. Buddhists consider Guru Rinpoche, the cultural hero who popularized Buddhism in Tibet, to be an incarnation of the prominent Hindu deity Shiva, known in Nepal as Mahadev (Great God). Buddha himself is considered an incarnation of Vishnu, and the Buddhist goddess Tara is seen as one with Vishnu's consort Lakshmi.

In much the same way, Nepali Hindus have adopted and integrated Buddhist dei-

ties and practices into their belief structures. For example, Gorakanath, a Shivaite saint, is identified as another incarnation of Guru Rinpoche. In fact, Hindus and Buddhists both worship Manjusri, the God of Wisdom, who formed the Kathmandu Valley and created Nepalese culture (arts, crafts, and education), and both groups propitiate the fierce goddesses Vajra Yogini and Ajima, who have prominent shrines in the Valley. Even the legendary shamans, sometimes called "Tantrics," are identified as heroes by both faiths. When I queried my teachers about these apparent unorthodoxies, they all maintained that "in Nepal, it's all one," (cf Dowman & Bubriski 1995, Slusser 1982).

This fusion of traditions is also evident on numerous other levels. For example, the Mother Goddess is very popular throughout Nepal, and shrines dedicated to both her benign and her terrifying manifestations are omnipresent in the Kathmandu Valley. She is the beautiful Parvati, as well as the dark warriors Durga and Kali. In her multiple forms, the Mother Goddess gives birth and nourishment to all life through her power (*sakti*) that manifests the world. Without her *sakti*, Shiva and the other gods would be mere corpses.

In the Valley, there are many female healers who embody cross-cultural manifestations of the Mother Goddess (Dougherty 1986). For example, Aama Bombo, a Buddhist by faith, embodies the Hindu goddess Kali in many of her rituals. According to Mircea Eliade (1958), the current popularity of the Mother Goddess within both Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism may represent a

resurfacing of the ancient, pre-Aryan Indus Valley feminine-centered religion.

A third, very important strand of Kathmandu Valley spirituality is the oral shamanic tradition, sometimes called "dark Bön," which has its origins in pre-Buddhist Tibet. The practitioners of this tradition are shamans who are said to have control over powerful spirits and even deities. It is said they possess *tantra-mantra*, secret knowledge and magical formulae that can be used to command the very forces of the universe (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, Samuels 1993). This animistic Bön tradition is quite compatible with other animistic traditions extant amongst the indigenous Hindu groups in the Valley, who believe the natural world is populated with spirits of varied forms and dispositions including demons, deities, demigods, ancestors, yeti, and tutelary gnomes, just to name a few (Deitrich 1998, Slusser 1982).

Incorporating elements from diverse traditions, Nepalese folk religion is neither strictly Hindu nor Buddhist, Bön nor Tantra, but a fusion of all. For this reason, shamans must speak a mixed vocabulary understood by all Nepalese, and they must be able to "play" (*kelnu*)—that is, develop relationship with—a panoply of deities and spirits from the many strands of Valley spirituality. Their principle adversaries—the sorcerers—work in this same world, but with very different purposes. The shamans strive to prolong life and improve the well-being of their clients, whereas the sorcerers' actions seek to destroy their victims.

The spiritual, "non-ordinary reality" (Harner 1990) of the shamans and sorcerers—the plane where the spiritual struggle of good vs. evil, and illness vs. health is played out—is not a transcendental, un-earthly realm. When the shaman calls upon deities and spirits, he or she does not beckon them from distant heavenly realms but from the middle-world, here and now. The shaman's world includes invisible presences, but it is a world in which all of nature—the organic and inorganic, from rocks to the air we breathe—possesses an ontology, a "thou-ness," a beingness that can be sensed and known, and with which relationship is developed. The shamans may "see" things that clients and other lay persons do not see, but their insights must fit the imminent consensus reality of their patients in order to transform the clients' experience and give meaning to their daily lives.

### The Minor and Major Healing Rites

Tamang *bombo* by no means treat all disorders. Before agreeing to do a healing, a shaman must first determine the origin of

the patient's illness or problem. Only if a problem is caused by a malevolent spirit will the shaman attempt a ritual treatment. If Aama Bombo divines that a patient's problem has arisen on its own (*aph se aph*)—that is, “spontaneously” through the laws of karma—she will advise the patient to consult a medical doctor.<sup>6</sup>

After it is diagnosed that *laagu* are the cause of a problem, the shaman will first attempt a minor healing ritual (Peters 1998). In an average day, Aama Bombo typically performs about thirty of these rituals, which may each take five to ten minutes. The shaman first divines the spiritual nature of the problem—it may be due to sorcery, evil eye, contact with a polluted person or place, or perhaps possession. Aama also performs divinations (*jocano*) in order to “see” the series of events leading up to the problem (such as being attacked by hunter spirits due to being alone in the forest after dark, or being attacked by a sorcerer due to interpersonal conflict and enmity). Aama relates what she “sees” to her patients during the divinations, and they frequently confirm what she reports. Such divination is often very impressive and can be quite detailed. Aama humbly says it is not she who is speaking but Kali, whom she often channels during the minor rituals.

There are many problems—too numerous to mention—for which Aama will perform a minor healing *puja* (ritual). Symptoms of such problems may be minor or severe. In one case, Aama treated a patient, seemingly paralyzed, who had to be carried into Aama's crowded ritual room. Ten minutes later, the woman walked out unaided. More typically, however, minor rituals are used to treat aches and pains, colds, stomach problems, loss of appetite, and crying and crankiness in infants. They may also be employed to help solve domestic problems and marital stress, obtain passports and visas, attract customers, awaken hearts with love-magic, find lost objects, empower pens for school exams or amulets for protection, and much more.

The treatments used in these minor rituals typically involve one or another form of *phukne* (the blowing of *mantra*) at the afflicted bodily area of the patient. Aama sometimes employs a hand broom to apply *mantra* and to brush away (*jharpuk*) the bad spirits or other painful spirit intrusions (*ban*) sent by sorcerers. *Mantra* may also be blown into food, water, or oil that is then given to the patient to eat or apply as spirit medicine in order to keep away the attacking *laagu*.

When it is discovered during a divination that the patient suffers from soul loss (*saato gayo*) or possession by a *laagu* or a



(LEFT) Aama blows a mantra at a patient. (RIGHT) She invokes spirits by chanting.



sorcerer (*bokshi chaapya*), the shaman or patient may request a major healing ritual (see Peters 1995, 1998). There are several different types of major healing rituals, but possessions often require a *man chinni* exorcism.

Because shaking is considered a symptom of possession, the patient must shake at some point in order to be diagnosed as possessed. Reports of spontaneous possession, or shaking, in the presence of others may be enough to sanction a *man chinni*. The shaking may occur unexpectedly in a patient during the minor ritual, or Aama may elicit it in the patient or herself.

#### Man Chinni Exorcisms

*Man chinni* are always held at night and always involve the use of shamanic drumming. They can last from a couple of hours to an entire night. On one occasion, discussed in more detail below, the ritual spanned two separate nights. According to Aama, the *man chinni* ritual involves four primary ritual acts: identifying the source of the problem, severing the hold of malevolent spirits that are possessing the patient's heart-mind, transferring the spirits and illnesses into a surrogate, and then returning the spirits to their “proper place.”

The *man chinni* ceremony starts with the shaman singing and drumming to the deities and spirits: the shaman's spirit guides, those that embody sacred objects, the *Sarma* gods of the four directions, who have control over the bad spirits, and more. Aama's songs seem to be partially improvised, changing slightly from ritual to ritual. Often

they recall her recent pilgrimages to the shrines of specific deities. By remembering her experiences there, Aama Bombo soul journeys to these holy sites. By singing of the deities' potent powers and mythic miraculous deeds, she invokes the gods and asks them to bless her ritual with *sakti* and success. During her soul journeys from one shrine to another, Aama may briefly embody the deity of the shrine and shake. When this happens, she often releases the deity into her *asan* (sacred space), asking it to take a “seat” as a helper in order to witness and ensure that the bad spirits and sorcerers keep any promises elicited from them during the ceremony.

During a *man chinni*, Aama Bombo constructs her *asan* around a small table, about two feet high and wide, and four feet long, set against the eastern wall of her ritual room. Aama's *asan* typically includes an incense bowl and candle, a water vessel (*kalash*; Ta: *bumba*), some alcoholic beverage in a vase, and a metal tray of rice in which she has placed some of her ritual paraphernalia, including her *phurba* (Ta: magical dagger), *kun lung* (Ta: small thighbone trumpet), *mala* (rosary), and more.<sup>7</sup> When she drums and sings, she sits in front of the *asan*, facing east.

There can be as much variation in the *asan* of different shamans as there can be in the content of their *man chinni*. One shaman's *man chinni* may even vary from patient to patient. Different situations call for different methods, yet there are basic elements used in most exorcisms. For example, one of the signature features of every *man chinni* is



Aama grabs the hair of a "bokshi" (embodied in the patient), forcing it to answer questions.

that the ritual exorcism involves an animal sacrifice—always a chicken and sometimes a goat, as well.

As mentioned above, the first stage of a *man chinni* involves enticing the bad spirit or the sorcerer's spirit to take possession of the patient so that it can speak to the shaman and the others attending the ritual. To accomplish this, Aama sits cross-legged, knee to knee with the patient, while playing the drum. She speaks kindly at first, saying, "Come here now. Don't be shy." Then she asks, "Who are you?" or "Why are you bothering this person?" To further aid the ritual embodiment, Aama may promise the spirit an offering of food, or she may drum and turn in the four directions, gathering the *laagu* into her drum and then placing the drum handle against the patient's chest (upon the heart-mind) in order to cause the bad spirit to possess and shake the patient.

When the patient becomes possessed, the shaking may range from slight tremors to dramatic actions. Some patients just lie on the ground, trembling and moaning, while others may jump a foot or more in the air from a position of sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Once the patient shakes, indicating possession, Aama quickly encircles the patient with white rice, entrapping the spirit so it is unable to leave or hide. At this point, Aama's demeanor changes radically. She may begin to yell, speak angrily, and shake her finger, drumstick, or iron dagger crossly at the patient, demanding that the bad spirit talk. "Speak now. Shame on you for spoiling this person."

If the spirit doesn't respond, the demands can escalate into threats. At one ritual, Aama threatened the sorcerer possessing the patient, "If you don't tell us what we want to learn, I'll put hot coals in your mouth.... If you don't talk now, you'll never talk again.... You'll suffer so much, you will welcome death." The threats, although spoken to the patient, are actually directed at the sorcerer.

It is not unusual for Aama to attack a possessed patient, grabbing a lock of hair in one hand and slapping the patient's face with the other. Sometimes, she will scoop up a fistful of rice, blow a *mantra* into it, and throw it from point-blank range at the patient's face. Gajendra, another of my teachers, would remove his long *mala* from his neck and strike the patient on the back.<sup>8</sup> It is believed that when the shaman hits the possessed patient, the punishment actually befalls the sorcerer. Indeed, stories abound of bruises and burns appearing on the bodies of suspected sorcerers soon after patients have been hit or burned during ceremonies.

During the *man chinni*, possessing spirits will often curse the shaman, boasting that they are not afraid, they cannot be hurt, and they possess more *tantra-mantra* than the shaman. Most are contained by threats of violence and the power of the shaman's spirits, because the process of possessing the heart-mind of the patient makes the sorcerer's *man* more vulnerable to being captured and punished by the shaman. However, from time to time, rituals can get out of hand, and the possessing spirit may become boisterous, throwing things or even attempting to ruin the ritual and destroy the

shaman's *asan*. When this happens, the shaman and his assistants may need to use physical force to restrain the client.

Aama tells a story of a rather large male patient who came after her during one *man chinni*, swinging a heavy metal statue at her head. In fear for her safety, Aama took a porcupine quill from her altar space and jabbed it through the patient's cheek. Although seemingly brutal, her impromptu response subdued him, allowing the ritual to continue and eventually leading to the patient's depossession and recovery. I've met this man many times at Aama's house, and he speaks of his and his family's indebtedness to her for having released him from possession by a *bir*, a particularly violent and malevolent spirit that had been endangering his family's well-being.

I have not personally seen any sessions turn this violent. In fact, more often than not, the patients may attack themselves, pull their own hair, and strike themselves. I have seen a few patients initiate violence, but once threatened or slapped by Aama, they quickly cowered in submission before her, pleading for mercy and calling her *guru*.

As mentioned above, the spirit called to possess the patient during the ritual is most often that of the sorcerer sending the *laagu* and not the *laagu* itself. In either case, once the spirit possesses and speaks through the patient, the interrogation begins. Although Aama often orders the spirit to identify itself, and considerable information about the circumstances leading to the possession may be divulged, the sorcerer almost never divulges his or her identity, fearing community reprisal. Even if Aama knows for certain who the sorcerer is, she almost never accuses the person by name, because, she says, this could endanger her and her family.<sup>9</sup> However, the possessing spirit may hint at its identity, providing a village name or describing the appearance of the home in which the sorcerer lives. Sometimes, the patient's family may reach consensus as to the sorcerer's identity, but this is rarely confirmed by the possessing sorcerer, the shaman, or the patient, who claims not to remember the events of the possession. Thus, some doubt typically lingers, discouraging vengeful community reprisals.

If the spirit is unwilling to speak through the patient, Aama Bombo will transfer the spirit (*man sarnu*) into her own body and force it to speak through her. The transference is accomplished by ritual gestures. First, she touches the handle of her drum to the top of the patient's head and/or heart area, and then she does the same to herself. At this point, Aama typically shakes rapidly, with large seizures moving throughout her

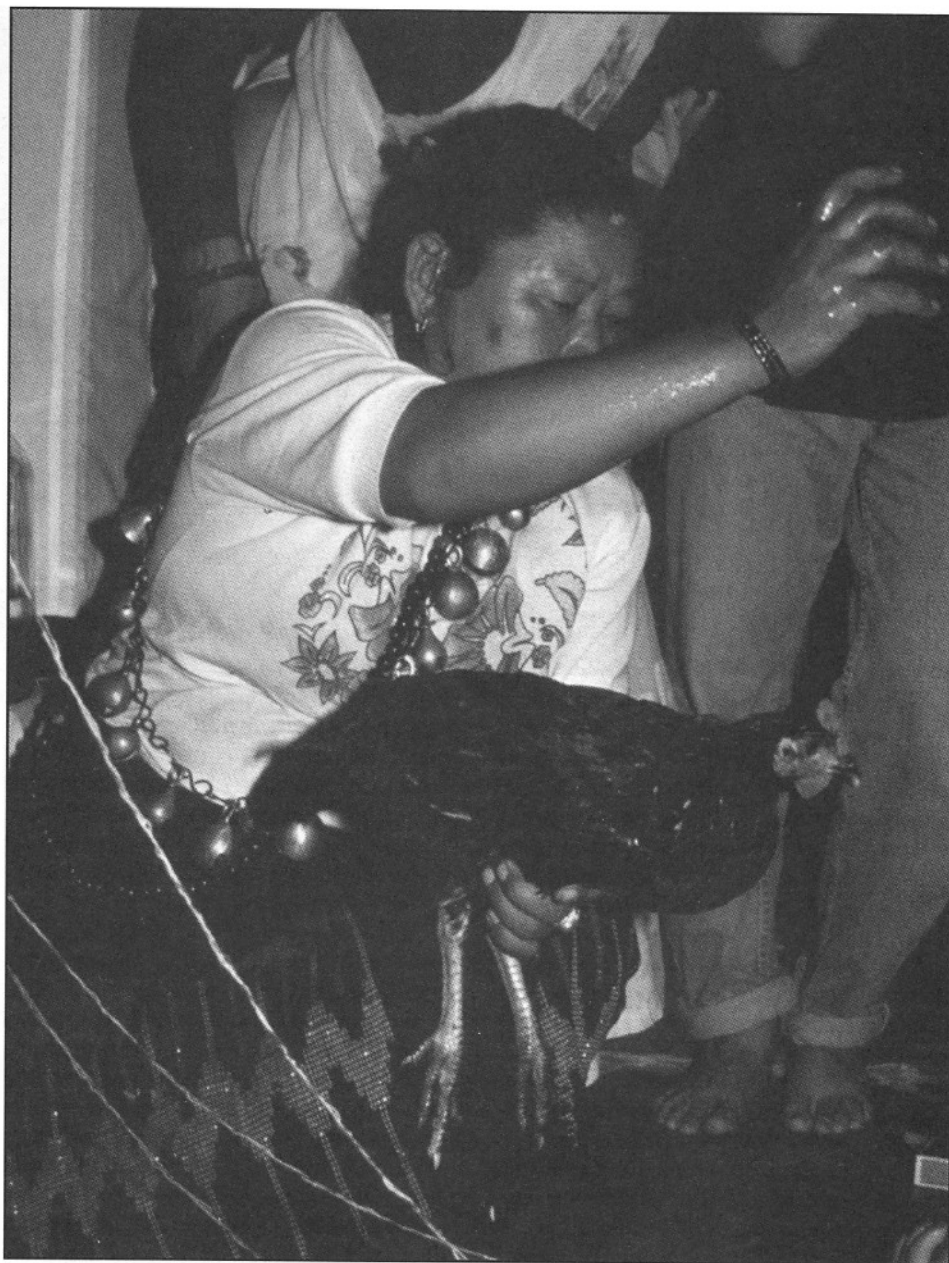
torso and extremities. If the spirit is particularly powerful, Aama will sometimes fall to the ground and lie motionless for a few minutes, only to arise embodied by the spirit, who is now invariably under her control.<sup>10</sup>

In one of the most poignant *man chinni* rituals that I have witnessed, Aama identified the sorcerer while she was embodied by the sorcerer's spirit. In this case, the revelation was in agreement with widespread public opinion, and it was the only time I've seen her or any other shaman directly identify the sorcerer. It was common knowledge that the patient's family had been involved in a brutal internecine battle over some valuable property that had been left by the family patriarch, a wealthy landowner who had died recently, leaving numerous wives, children, and mistresses to fight over their shares. The patient's husband's side of the family and one of the old man's former "concubines" were locked into a dispute over land that the old woman claimed was her rightful inheritance. By producing a "forged" marriage certificate (or so the patient's side claimed), the woman had won a key court decision. Shortly after that, the patient had become ill and had begun to shake uncontrollably, moaning and alternately laughing and screaming every night for a week, and suffering from backaches. The patient's husband's family had accused the old woman, who had a reputation of being a "witch," of engaging in sorcery.

During the *man chinni*, Aama transferred the spirit of the sorcerer into her own body, and the spirit related the history of the dispute from the sorcerer's perspective. The sorcerer's spirit (speaking through Aama) stated she was angry at the patient's husband, his brothers, and his mother, because they had sold for profit some holy land entrusted to them by her deceased "husband." The sorcerer's spirit complained that the land was supposed to have been used to support a community religious shrine, and the patient's husband's family hadn't had the right to sell it. Although none could prove her claim, most of the community had held that belief. Thus, the possession provided a social forum for a discussion of politically sensitive material. In the end, the sorcerer was seen as "half bad and half good"—her sorcery was bad, but her motives were understood by everyone. In this way, the less-than-ethical activities of a powerful and wealthy family were publicly censured. The following narrative was transcribed from portions of the ritual, which I videotaped (parentheses mine):

Sitting knee to knee with the patient, facing her, Aama prods the spirit to speak:

"Who is your guru? Who sent you? Who



*Aama sprinkles water on a chicken, asking it to serve as a sacrificial vehicle for the healing.*

coerced you to spoil others? Who is causing you to confuse this child and make her run back and forth? Who is that one? Where does she live?

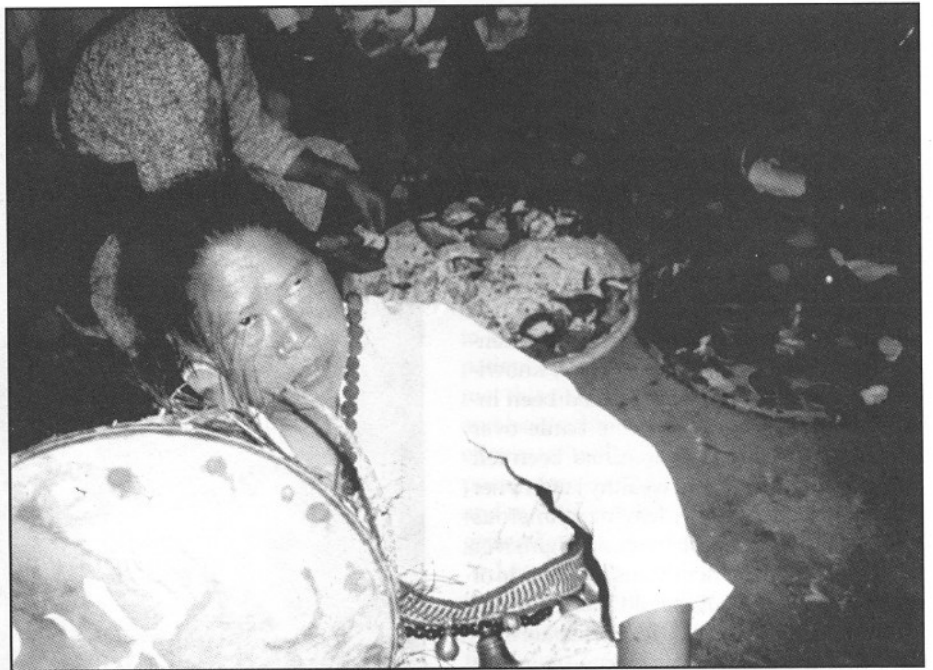
"I know you don't like anyone. You feel alone. But if you don't speak, you are sinning. Open your heart. Open your mouth. It's my work to make you speak up. You know so much. Why not tell me one thing? (Holding her drumstick, she threatens the spirit or sorcerer.)

"Wake up. Wake up. Why rest? Has your guru (the sorcerer) told you not to speak? What do you want to eat? I will give it to you. Tell me fast. Who are you? Are you Ajima (the fierce goddess)? Are you a *nag* (serpent spirit)? A *bokshi* (sorcerer)? If so, tell me fast or I will beat you. I will whip

you with my stick. If not, I will get a (heated) spoon, and burn you."

Aama picks up her drum and plays for five minutes or so and then places the drum handle on the patient's head and then on her own, thereby making the spirit transference. Aama sneezes, then shakes violently, indicating she is embodied—in this case, by the spirit of the sorcerer who has been making the patient sick.

"I have a right to be here," states the spirit, speaking through Aama. "This is my village. I got my part, and the gods and goddesses are my witness (referring to the court case). I have attacked this person, her heart-mind and her backbone. A *masaan* (cemetery ghost) covered with white ash from the *ghat* (cremation grounds) has at-



(LEFT) Prepared by the shaman prior to the *man chinni* ritual, the *putla* effigy becomes a substitute for the patient's body. (RIGHT) Using her drum, Aama embodies and then releases into the *putla* the *laagu* spirits troubling the patient.

tacked her knees, backbone, and *man*. He (the *masaan*) eats (my offerings) and she (the patient) gets cold (shivers and is possessed). I bring discord and cause fights in the house. I make these people's efforts useless. I bring unhappiness."

The patient's husband asks, "What is the solution?"

The sorcerer's spirit, embodied in Aama, approaches the patient's husband and puts her fingers down her throat, dramatically pretending to vomit on him. "I vomit on everyone in your house—ugh, like this, ugh, like that. You want a solution. I will tell and you will be ashamed because the guilty person is here (pointing at the husband)."

"Who are you?" ask Aama's assistants, Maya and Ram.

"I am the grandmother," the spirit says (pointing towards the patient's husband again), "you, the grandson."

The husband replies, "Have you forgotten when I was young and I protected you?"

The patient says, "It's not my business. Why do you blame me?"

The husband challenges the spirit: "You will go to hell. You are so angry. Why are you my enemy? You are my aunt, but out of respect I call you grandmother. Why do you do *tantra-mantra* on me? Go play magic on others. I don't know how to play these games. Why do it to me and my family? Do it to my brother. He is the one who took the property. Go to my uncle. He took the property and sold it. He took the holy land and sold it. Not me."

"No," answers the spirit. "You have taken

some of it. You can't hurt me. In two or three days, I will spoil you. No shaman can help you. You are in deep trouble."

"Go ahead and try!" shouts the patient's husband.

"What do you get out of spoiling us?" asks the patient.

"So what if you suffer," answers the spirit. "The land is gone. I am punishing everyone in the house."

The husband says, "This is how you sin, and that is why you are alone. Do it to my brother, to my uncles."

"I respect you always," says the patient.

"You bow, but you have no respect. Your mother (mother-in-law), your husband, you all called me a witch," responds the spirit.

"When did I say you were a witch?" asks the husband.

"You don't have to tell me; I know from inside," answers the spirit.

"I never said you were a witch," retorts the husband.

"You lie. You told Aama." (Since it is Aama speaking of herself in the third person, everyone present laughs, knowing the husband has been caught in a lie.)

"What do you want?" asks the husband. "Go spoil my other uncle."

"I'll get you and torture you all your life. I am not scared of you. I'll suck your blood. I will make you vomit blood and die."

The husband replies, "Don't you remember, when I was a kid, you used to love me?"

"I am powerful," says the spirit. "I know many *mantra*. I come and go as I wish."

Aama's assistant Maya interjects: "What

if I make you shake (send spirits to attack you)?"

"I have so much power, nothing can affect me. I do whatever I like."

Maya replies, "Why do you play *mantra* on your grandson?"

"I'm going now."

Ram, who is somewhat inebriated, says a *mantra* and asks, "What do you want?"

"Your *mantra* don't affect me. I will chew you up and blow you out of my ass," replies the sorcerer's spirit.

Maya asks, "Why are you half good and half bad?"

Ram shouts, "Witch! Eat my balls!"

"Eat my vagina!"<sup>11</sup> screams the spirit. "I am going."

Crossing and uncrossing her arms and snapping her fingers, Aama releases herself of the possessing spirit, bringing the interrogation portion of the ritual to a close.

Whether the "grandmother" ever learned that "her spirit" had been embodied by Aama Bombo or that it had confessed at the ritual to engaging in sorcery, I do not know, to this day. At the time, the woman was staying in a mountain village far away.

This *man chinni* was unusual in that it took two sessions to exorcise the sorcerer and the arsenal of bad spirits that had been tormenting the patient and causing painful somatic symptoms. The second *puja* was scheduled for a few days later at the patient's house (the first had been at Aama's house). During that second session, the patient made it clear that she wanted no more part of her

husband's family's struggle, and she subsequently recovered; she has not had another shaking episode or backache since then.

Ironically, the patient's husband has been experiencing "bad days" for the two years since the ritual. It may be that, once the sorcerer and the *laagu* stopped bothering the woman, the *laagu* attached itself to her husband, as it had threatened to do during the *man chinni*. Furthermore, the husband's uncle and brother are angry at him for accusing them as the agents responsible for cheating the community, and for telling the sorcerer to go get them. The husband has been calling on Aama Bombo almost daily for minor *phukne* healings, which seem to provide only temporary relief.

### *The Substitute Body and the Spirit Bridge*

After a patient's or shaman's possession ends, and a brief intermission ensues, the second major act in the *man chinni* drama unfolds. During the *man chinni*, the shaman must transfer the patient's illnesses and the possessing spirits into a small mud and clay statue (perhaps eighteen inches in height), called a *putla* (Ta: *gLiüd*), that is placed in the center of a straw winnowing basket (*nanglo*), along with numerous offerings.<sup>12</sup> Except for the *putla*, which is made by the shaman several hours before the *man chinni* begins, the ritual offerings in the basket, including the tailored clothes worn by the *putla*, must be procured by the patient or the family.

At some point, immediately following the patient's minor ritual or when the *man chinni* is scheduled, Aama conducts a short divination ceremony, embodying her guru (her deceased father, who was a famous shaman) or Kali in order to divine what is needed as an offering for a successful *man chinni*. Obtaining these spirit offerings can prove quite difficult and involve hours of preparation for the entire family, procuring fruits, grains, flowers, eggs of various types, prayer flags, a chicken of a specific color, and more. In one case, Aama's spirit asked the client and her family to gather water from seven rivers. They managed to get to only three rivers, but the water they brought was later deemed sufficient by the spirits.

Because the *putla* serves as a surrogate or scapegoat for the patient, the patient is asked to place nail clippings from every finger and toe, plus a few strands of hair and some threads from clothing worn near the heart, near the *putla* in the offering basket. The body clippings and the threads—a clipping from every end of the body and something in contact with the heart-mind—help link the patient and the *putla*.

During the *man chinni*, the shaman also hangs multicolored strings, four to eight feet



After Aama recites a mantra, the chicken picks up the "rainbow bridge" strings in its beak.

long, between the patient's head or shoulder and the substitute offering, forming a magical connection between the patient and the *putla* and basket. White strings connect the bones of the patient to the *putla*, giving it bone; red strings give it blood; yellow, flesh; green, hair; and blue, the breath of the patient. Thus, the *putla* is ritually transubstantiated into the body of the patient, making it easier for the shaman to entice the attacking spirits and illnesses to change bodies.

The strings also function as a rainbow bridge or road, used for transferring the possessing spirits from patient to *putla*. Sometimes, in order to open the path, Aama sits halfway between the *putla* and the patient, singing her *mantra* as she burns incense and wafts the smoke with hand motions along the strings toward the *putla*. At other times, while playing the drum, blowing her bone trumpet, or carrying leaf-plates of food offerings in her hands, Aama may dance back and forth alongside the strings. She brushes the food offerings along the strings, always away from the patient's head and toward the basket, eventually depositing them in the basket for the attacking spirit. Occasionally, if need be, she may even shapeshift into one of her power animals (a lion or a tiger) in order to subdue or chase away obstacles that might obstruct the pathway or hinder the purpose of the ritual.

### *The Sacrifice*

Most Nepalese will observe that the most fundamental difference between a shaman and other types of spiritual healers is that a shaman performs animal sacrifices, or "cuts"

(*kutnu*) the lives of the sacrificial animals. This is not done frivolously but as an offering to substitute for the patient's life and well-being. Interestingly, the animal (always a chicken for *man chinni*) must voluntarily accept its sacrificial role, as indicated by its shaking after the shaman sprinkles water on its head. If the chicken doesn't shake, it is unwilling to be a sacrifice, and a new chicken must be found. This is rarely necessary, however.

Once the chicken shakes, Aama picks it up by its feet and holds it over the patient. With sweeping motions, she repeatedly brushes it away from the patient's head, across the strings, and over to the *putla* and basket. With these motions, she transfers the illness, the attacking spirits, the intrusions, and whatever diseases reside in the patient's body into the corresponding organ of the chicken. Thus, Aama will say, "From body to body, from blood to blood, from bone to bone, stomach to stomach, lungs to lungs," until she has swept the patient's entire body and the disease from each part has been absorbed into the chicken's body. At the end of each sweep along the strings, the chicken's body is shaken over the basket, depositing the disease into the *putla*.

Finally, the shaman cleanses the patient's last and most important organ, the physical heart (*mutu*). It is believed that when the *laagu* or the spirit of the sorcerer takes possession of the patient's heart-mind, it remains hidden in the person's *mutu*. Unless this hold is ritually severed, the patient cannot be healed. As long as the afflicting spirit remains in the person's physical heart, it



easily controls the patient's heart-mind. Most *laagu* and illnesses can be enticed out of the patient with offerings of grains, fruit, flowers, water, incense, nail clippings, strings, and the *putla*, but only one thing will entice the primary possessing spirit out of the patient's heart—a new, living residence that is linked to the patient's heart. The ritual transference from heart to heart requires a living heart, which is the reason, Aama says, live sacrifices are necessary for healing work.

In order to "prove" that the sorcerer or the *laagu* has been transferred into the chicken's body and heart, Aama performs what many say is a minor miracle. Holding the chicken upside down by its feet, Aama somehow gets the chicken to pick up in its beak the strings on the patient's head and deposit them on the *putla*, in the center of the basket. By having the chicken remove the strings, which severs the bridge connecting the patient to the *putla*, Aama demonstrates that the sorcerer's *man* or *laagu* has accepted the chicken's heart as a surrogate container. "How else could the chicken pick up the strings?" everyone says.

As soon as the chicken finishes removing the strings and releasing them upon the *putla*, the bird is immediately sacrificed by one of Aama's male assistants.<sup>13</sup> Its severed head is put into the basket, and its blood is drained on the *putla* and basket. Deprived of its living residence, the *laagu* leaves the dying chicken in order to eat the blood deposited on the *putla*. The basket and its contents are then quickly taken away, often to a crossroads (*dobato*), where they are left to be trampled, scattered, and eaten by animals.<sup>14</sup>

Once the *putla* and offerings have been disposed of, one last step remains—the sharing of the *prasad* (holy meal) consisting of the chicken among the folks attending the ritual. It is generally believed that the spirits and deities who require blood sacrifices normally only desire the blood, and that they have no interest in the meat (Slusser 1982). In Gajendra's rituals, which generally lasted all night, the chicken became breakfast at dawn. No matter how small the portion, it was looked forward to by all who stayed until the early morning to watch the *puja*.

In the *man chinni* rituals conducted by Aama, she lets people do whatever they want with the chicken. Sometimes, the meat of the sacrificed animal may be shared and eaten as *prasad* by all present except for the patient and the shaman who conducted the rite. After some *man chinni*, the family takes the chicken home to fix and eat as *prasad*. At other *man chinni*, the family may tell the shaman to throw away the entire chicken at the crossroads, along with everything else in the basket, saying they feel that the ani-



*Defeated, a possessing spirit begs for mercy.*

mal is thoroughly polluted. However, Aama says that, although the shaman and the patient are prohibited from eating it, she does not consider the chicken to be polluted, as the pollution is transferred to the *putla*.

Once the shaman has made the blood sacrifice and thereby kept his word to the attacking spirits, the spirits are obligated to keep their vow to the shaman. Under threat of punishment or death by the shaman's deities and helping spirits, the spirits are ordered to return to their "proper places." In order to ensure that the malevolent spirits remain there and that they don't cause the patient any more difficulty, the shaman may draw seven lines of white rice between the crossroads and the path leading back to the patient's house, to block the way. Sometimes, Aama will hammer bamboo stakes in the ground, in front of the patient's front door as a second line of defense, to obstruct entrance, in case the spirits get that close.

#### *The Compassionate Bird of Healing*

From the perspective of Tamang shamans and their patients, nothing is more important to a successful *man chinni* than the sacrifice of the chicken, as it is the chicken's heart that tricks the possessing spirit into abandoning the patient. When I'd ask Gajendra, "Why the chicken?" he'd say that it had been that way since the Golden Age, or Truth Era, and he would recite a *sherab* (Ta: wisdom story) about the origin of chicken sacrifice, one that he often sang at his *man chinni*. It relates that the rooster was asked by the gods to leave heaven, go to earth, and obtain fire from men, and it was ordered not to eat anything nor to crow while there. However, the humans would not give the fire to the

chicken unless it accepted food and crowed. This placed the rooster in an untenable, no-win situation, as he was unable to fulfill the deities' demands unless he also disobeyed them. Hoping that the gods might be forgiving, he ate the food that was offered, crowed, and then carried the fire to heaven. Although the deities condemned the rooster to suffer on earth for his disobedience, they gave him the opportunity to return to heaven from time to time by offering himself as a noble sacrifice, used to help rid humankind of its ills (see Kaji-Lama 1998).

One time, after relating this *sherab*, Gajendra spit into his hands and rubbed them together, collecting through the friction some of the dirt that had gathered on them while he had been tending his fields. He asked me to do the same with my hands and afterwards to smell them. "Doesn't it smell like chicken shit?" he asked, with a big smile on his face. "See, humans are made of chicken shit. That is why sorcerers confuse chickens for humans and accept their hearts and blood instead."<sup>15</sup>

There is another *sherab* describing the close connection between shamans, sorcerers, and chickens. In this story, it is said that the first shaman had nine sisters, all of whom were sorcerers. One day, when he was working on the center pole of his house, which reached to the border of heaven, his sisters became envious of him and gave him the evil eye (*aankha laagyo*), and he fell to the ground and died. The god of the shamans decreed that the dead shaman should be buried sitting up.<sup>16</sup> Feigning sadness, his sisters were forced to accept this demand. In this manner, the shaman was resurrected.

During his ecstatic death state, the shaman was instructed by the gods to take ten pieces of bread and offer one to each of his nine sisters, keeping the tenth for himself. After the sisters voraciously consumed their pieces, they attempted to take his share. When they grabbed for it, he threw it up into the air and all his sisters but one perished in the ferocious battle over the remaining piece of bread. Only the youngest sister survived, and she was exhausted and weak. Just as her shaman brother prepared to kill her, she pleaded with him, "Wait, you need me. Yes, I am ferocious and have an inexhaustible lust for blood, and I may eventually devour all of humankind. But without me, you will not have any work."

Following the gods' advice, the shaman offered to spare her life if she would be willing to accept the blood sacrifice of a nine-horned animal as a substitute for human blood. "A nine-horned animal must be huge," she reasoned greedily. "Even a buffalo has only two horns. I've never seen a

nine-horned animal. There can't be many. Soon I will consume all of them, and then I can have my fill of humans thereafter."

"Accepted," she said. So, she and her brother sealed the deal by calling all of the deities as witnesses and making a sacred vow seven times, ensuring that it could never be broken. As soon as the vow was made, she demanded the sacrifice of one of the nine-horned animals, eager to experience the taste of its blood. The deities gave her a chicken, whose comb has nine horns.<sup>17</sup>

Taken together, the two *sherab* explain how chickens came to be used in blood sacrifices, and why the chicken's head must be left at the crossroads for the sorcerers. The nine-horned head serves as a reminder of the bargain struck at the beginning of time between the first shaman and his sister, the sorcerer. By reciting and reenacting the reality recorded in the *sherab*, the shaman is empowered through alignment with the principles founded at the beginning of time, during the Golden Age. Indeed, as told in the *sherab*, without sorcerers there would be no need for shamans. However, since the beginning, shamans have been given the means to defeat sorcerers, not with any finality, but in a way that can be repeated, time after time, whenever needed.

As decreed in the first *sherab*, the chicken's fate is that it can only return to heaven by compassionately agreeing to sacrifice its life in order to remove human ills. Each chicken's acceptance of its fate is indicated by its shaking before being sacrificed. Such compassion is often thought to be the mark of a Buddha, and thus it fulfills its destiny as a holy animal. Without sorcerers, their victims, and the shamans, the chicken would be mere food, butchered for mundane purposes instead of being sacrificed for higher purposes. Without the sacrifice of the chicken, sorcerers could not be contained, shamans would lose their patients, and evil would triumph over good, and death over life. Thus, the Compassionate Bird of Healing plays an essential part in maintaining the world balance between good and evil, illness and health, and shaman and sorcerer.

### Notes

1. All foreign terms are in Nepali unless otherwise indicated (e.g., *Ta*: indicates Tamang). Nepali is the *lingua franca* in the Kathmandu Valley, and it is the language spoken at the Tamang shamanic rituals I've attended.
2. The Tamang are thought by some scholars to have originated in eastern Tibet and migrated to Nepal in large numbers around the mid-seventh century. Currently numbering about two million, they are one of the largest Tibetan ethnic and linguistic groups in Nepal, and they represent a substantial part of the population in the Kathmandu Valley (Varenkamp 1996).
3. *Man* or *sems* is a complex term, with numerous connotations. One dictionary defines it as "soul or spirit" (Jaschke 1972). According to other scholars, *man* is the "seat of consciousness" (Holmberg 1989, Tucci 1980) and the "imagination" (Desjarlais

1992). *Man* is the source of emotions, desires, values, likes, and dislikes, and it gives rise to sorrow, pain, and happiness. *Man* also refers to consciousness that controls the body and wills one's actions, such as speech. *Man* is what makes someone a "good person" or not. Often, Aama identifies a person as having a "pure heart" (*chakho man*), as opposed to a deceitful or selfish, impure heart (*jutho man*).

4. Some anthropologists refer to this ritual as a *chinta*. In my experience, the terms *chinta* and *man chinni* are sometimes used interchangeably by shamans. Miller (1997) defines *chinta* as a shamanic healing "seance," but the term actually connotes practicing meditation and contemplation, as well as doing an exorcism. According to Aama, *chinta* is a type of practice that occurs in a sacred space (*asan*) where the shaman sits and invokes deities and spirits. Thus, to clarify the distinction between *chinta* and *chinni*, Aama says a shaman does *chinta* (i.e., sits) at his *asan* and calls spirits in order to perform a *man chinni*.
5. I use the term *laagu* in a general sense, as used by the shamans I work with. Technically, *laagu* are properly defined as ghosts—disembodied spirits of the dead, the souls of people unable to leave the earth, because they died by accident or they did not have an effective burial. However, *laagu* is also used loosely by shamans during their divinations as a generic term for any malevolent spirits that cause illnesses. These other spirits may be nonhuman spirits that inhabit particular environments, such as graveyards, forests, ravines, and garbage dumps. Because sorcery always involves the use of malevolent spirits, it is also diagnosed as a *laagu* illness.
6. Natural karmic-type illnesses can take the form of serious debilitating conditions, ranging from raging fevers to chronic kidney problems, or they may be nothing more than cases of the flu or sinus infections.
7. For a discussion of the Tamang shaman's ritual gear, see Peters (1999).
8. Physical punishment may play a formidable role in Tibetan shamanism. For an extreme example, see my article on the healing rituals of Lhamo Dolkar (Peters 1997b).
9. It is also illegal to accuse anyone of witchcraft in Nepal (Macdonald 1976).
10. The shaman's possession trance is noticeably different during minor daytime rites than it is in *man chinni* and other major healing rituals. In the minor rites, Aama Bombo seems to flow in and out of light trance, stopping to chat with those present at the treatment and then effortlessly re-embodiment her spirits. In contrast, during major rites, it may take Aama ten minutes or so of intensive drumming and concentrated effort to call the spirits to embody her. Moreover, after her body shakes (*kammu*) and she sneezes, indicating the presence of spirit, she remains entranced for twenty minutes or so, until she uses hand gestures (*mudra*) to dispatch the spirits from her body.
11. Such swearing is completely atypical for a woman in Nepali culture, although not for a man. By speaking in a manner antithetical to social values, the *bokshi* reveals her status as a representative of evil.
12. Different shamans have different methods for making *putla*. Gajendra would draw his on the floor with various colored ochres. However, most shamans make *putla* from sticky rice. Lamas traditionally make their *putla* from barley flour (*Ta/Tib: tsampa*). Their function, in any case, is similar. Depending on specific ritual objectives, they attract soul, spirit, spirit-illness, or divinity into themselves (Mumford 1990; Peters 1995, 1998).
13. There is a cultural prohibition against women butchering animals. Thus, males are needed to do this in every *man chinni*.
14. The *putla* and sacrifices are often left at crossroads, because these are assumed to be favorite haunts of bad spirits and sorcerers. In Nepal, crossroads are thought to be dangerous places, especially at night, and there are many tales of sorcerers and their bad spirits waiting there to attack the unsuspecting.
15. The idea that humankind is made of chicken feces is also expressed in the Tamang anthropogeny *sherab* (Peters 1978).
16. In a shaman's funeral, the body is burnt or buried sitting up, and it is carried in this position to the cemetery (*ghat*).
17. See Hitchcock's (1976) brief discussion of another version of this legend, as well as the shaman's funeral in western Nepal among the Magar shamans.

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