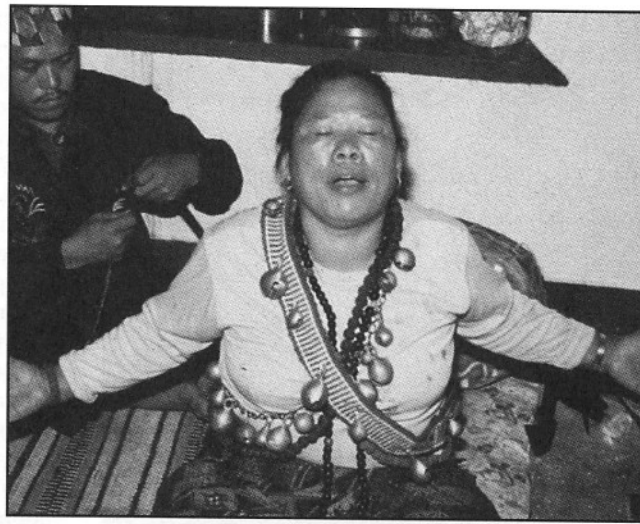


During a man chinni, Aama gets a chicken to pick up and remove the "rainbow bridge" strings connecting the patient to the putla effigy.



Aama Bombo invokes her spirits.

The Man Chinni Exorcism Rite of Tamang Shamans

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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*¹ 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.² 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."³ 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*.⁴

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.⁵ 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

