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Spirit Possession and Ethnic Politics in Nepal's Northwest

Nancy E. Levine

Introduction

This paper has its source in one of the many paradoxes that lend both richness and dissonance to social life: the profound ambivalence which ethnic Tibetans in northwest Nepal display toward their cults of oracular possession. Discuss the oracles and their pronouncements with members of these societies and one is apt to hear expressions of deep-rooted skepticism and, occasionally, outright disbelief. People describe these cults as "foreign," that is, Nepali, not Tibetan in origin and describe themselves as profoundly disturbed by certain practices, most notably animal sacrifice. Yet in spite of the skepticism and distaste that many ethnic Tibetans show towards these cults, the oracles or *dhamis* attract large followings. Their public performances are very well attended, and ordinary villagers frequently consult them for diagnoses and treatment of otherwise inexplicable afflictions. The paradox does not end here. Local Nepalis also believe many of these gods to be foreign -- but of foreign Tibetan origin and perceive the cults of oracular possession to be underlain by Tibetan practices. For these people too oracular possession contravenes orthodox religion -- here Hinduism. Their response, however, is quite different, for Tibetan origins add to the *dhamis*' authority. Thus the practice of oracular possession in Humla juxtaposes quite variant notions about the cultures and religions of other ethnic groups. In this the various groups encounter one another, make quite different sense of the encounter and then proceed in opposing directions. In order to understand the divergent responses to what appears a syncretic religious tradition, one must examine ethnic politics and ethnic interactions in Nepal's northwest. The durability of these cults of oracular possession also must be understood in terms of social inequities in the region. For, as we shall see, oracular possession finds its strongest support among the poor and oppressed in every ethnic group. Wealthy high castes are more apt to seek the services of Brahmins, and wealthy ethnic Tibetans prefer to hire lamas to perform orthodox Tibetan Buddhist rituals. *Dhamis* stand at the service of the poor and powerless; it is the latter who have embraced this tradition and molded it to serve their purposes and to counter exploitation from the economic superiors.¹

Setting

Humla is the farthest northwestern district in Nepal, adjoining Tibet on the north and west. It is larger than any other district in the country, with the exception of Dolpo, but is very sparsely populated, with 3.6 persons per square kilometer, as opposed to 102.1 for the country as a whole (Nepal 1984). Despite this, there are too many people for the available arable land, and Humla has suffered severe

¹This research was carried out with the aid of grants from the National Science Foundation and the Population Council during the years 1973-75 and 1982-84. I would like to thank Netra B. Tumbahangfe and Tshewang B. Lama who collected the data on the Chetri and Bura villages surveyed, and Dhama Mangalya, Lama Tondrup Tshering, and Dangri Kandro for contributing to my knowledge of oracular possession in their villages.

food shortages for decades (see McDougal 1969: 39). This, coupled with distance from urban centers, has made Humla among the two or three least developed and poorest districts in the country. The population is divided into three ethnic groups. There are Nepali speaking Hindus, primarily of high caste. There also is a group known as Bura, also Nepali speaking, but who cite origins from and demonstrate cultural similarities with the Byansi of Darchula. Finally there are Tibetan speaking Buddhists, who believe their ancestors came from Tibet or Tibetan speaking communities elsewhere in Nepal. The 1981 census lists 2,947 Tibetan speakers out of a population of 20,303. This is an underestimate, perhaps by 60 percent. The Tibetan speakers divide themselves into five mostly endogamous ethnic groups who emphasize their cultural distinctness through markers of language, dress, ceremonial life, and the like. Most villages of Nepali-speaking Hindus are occupied by one high caste, with a few families of occupational castes -- Sarki, Kami and Damai. Bura divide themselves up into separate categories based on degree of Nepalization. There are Bura who follow Tibetan Buddhism, those with their own special Bura "lamas" and those whose religious practice is distinguishable only in ceremonial cycle from their Chetri neighbors. The different categories of Bura are largely endogamous.

The discussion of oracular possession here is drawn principally from one of the larger ethnic Tibetan groups in Humla and secondly from neighboring ethnic Tibetans, Bura and high caste Nepali villages. The group in question is known as Ladog, a community of several villages stretched across a spur of the Takh Himal, a mountain chain bordering Tibet.² Ladog is particularly interesting in this regard, because it lies at the midpoint in Humla's cultural geography. To its north and east live other Tibetan speaking groups and farther north lies Tibet; to the south and west are a mixture of high caste Hindu and Bura villages. The location of Ladog villages thus mirrors their position in Humla's mix of ethnic groups: oriented culturally toward Tibet, enmeshed in social relations with caste Nepalis, and involved in economic relations with both, while politically part of the Nepalese state. Villagers support themselves primarily through agriculture, through small-scale cattle herding, and by engaging in a complex trading cycle, which takes them to Tibet, the Nepalese midlands, and south to the Indian border.

These circumstances provided the background against which oracular possession is set in Ladog and for which it is so culturally problematic. This is not a problem of "great" and "little," orthodox and heterodox traditions, for Tibetan Buddhism has its own elaborate traditions of oracles. Instead it lies in the cultural associations of those traditions and their participants' ethnic (and also class) affiliation. The problem derives from the fact that Ladog and their ethnic Tibetan neighbors live in a Nepali world, yet separate themselves from it. Thus reactions to oracular possession swing between tolerance and rejection; the cults occasionally become the focus of religious reforms by Tibetan lamas and are, after a time, reinstated again. They are reinstated because these practices have a certain value, predominant among which is their ability to provide a ritual point of contact and communication with the non-Tibetan populations among whom ethnic Tibetans live.

The Complex of Oracular Possession

Dhamis play a central role in Ladog ceremonial life. Their possession forms a high point of virtually every Ladog ritual, from the elaborate Mani dance drama to minor agricultural festivals.

All such events, public or private, follow a similar progression. First offerings are prepared and the altar is set up; after this the invocation is recited by *dangri*, priests to the oracles. The invocation is modelled after Tibetan Buddhist ritual. Midway through the recitation, the gods are summoned from the heavens to the glaciers, from the glaciers to the hillsides, from the hills to the lakes and forests and finally to the place of worship. Similar descriptive imagery evokes the path of the gods from the middle- and under-world. With this accomplished, the dhami begins to yawn and to tremble, imperceptibly at

²This, as other ethnic group and village names used in the paper, is a pseudonym.

first and then more violently. At public possessions the ritual is accompanied by drumming by damai from neighboring Nepali villages, and the achievement of trance is signified by the dhامي dancing before the assembled worshippers.

At the outset of possession dhamis shake off their turban and loosen the lock of hair they keep uncut and which is wound with silver thread donated by worshippers (see Gaborieau 1976:225). In their trance dances, dhamis must control the movement of their hair, *lha-ru*, thought to offer the point of entry to the god. Each dhامي has his own characteristic style of dance, some more elegant or dramatic than others. One village dhامي would swing his head in such a way as to keep his long lock of hair flying in a continuously undulating arc around his body. During the trance dance, the dhامي performs various extraordinary feats. Some dhamis swallow ladles of boiling oil and then spit out the oil, still hot, on their audience; others insert red-hot iron implements from the fire into their mouths. Some dhamis drink enormous quantities of water (this is said to cause rain the following day), and still others try to bend iron rods or swords. I have witnessed these feats, they are quite genuine and show the dhامي's extraordinary strength in possession and his imperviousness to physical pain. Accounts of Tibetan oracles describe prophecy, the dhamis scoop up handfuls of barley and singe a few of the grains with the heat of their hands or cause them to sprout. Many people take this as proof of the dhامي's power and use the grain touched during possession in their storage pits for luck. Others, however, say that these grains have no magical properties, and a few suggest that the dhامي may engage in deception in producing singed and sprouted grains.

After the dance at public ceremonies and immediately upon possession at private seances, the dhامي gives a brief accounting of his origins.³ At this time, the dangris approach the god, now given human form in the body of the village's dhamis, to make requests for a bountiful harvest and for divine guidance about the phasing of agricultural work or annual trading journeys. Dangris often have to decipher the meanings of the dhamis' nearly unintelligible replies. Then individuals may approach with their private concerns: illnesses in their families, losses of domestic animals, repeated accidents, and the like. At this point, the god, speaking through the dhامي, might reveal the patient's prognosis or suggest a simple, mystical remedy to correct the problem. He also might suggest that the family schedule a private consultation, when these matters can receive his full attention.

Private consultations are far simpler and lack the panoply of ritual associated with public possessions; they also pose little expense for the family. Dangris are not called upon, which means that the dhامي himself must recite an abbreviated chant and invocation to summon his god.

Unlike religious practitioners elsewhere in Nepal who undergo trance, dhamis do not act as shamans, that is, as active intermediaries with the spiritual world. They do not embark on the "magical flights" associated with classical shamanistic traditions and do not journey to the world of the spirits nor battle evil forces or recapture lost souls. The operative notion here is mediumship, and dhamis in northwestern Nepal engage in possession solely to embody their gods and deliver prophecy. Dangris invoke the local incarnating deities; the deities then alight on, enter into, and occupy the body of the dhامي. It is the dhامي's long, matted rope of hair, bound and encircled by silver filaments donated by worshippers that is supposed to serve as the conduit for the god.

Heroic Feats and Faith

In Nepali-speaking villages especially, new dhamis are expected to demonstrate miracles or extraordinary feats in trance as proof of their authenticity. Each line of dhamis, moreover, is associated with a characteristic miracle -- such as those mentioned above and also such acts as the dhامي slitting

³This appears to be much briefer than the *pareli*, or god's "autobiographies" described by Campbell (1978) for Jumla dhamis. Here the content seems less important than the manner and act of speaking, by which the god announces his presence.

a goat's throat with his teeth and reciting Sanskrit texts in trance. Dhamis, however, are judged not only by such displays, but also by the accuracy of their predictions. The problem is that predictions inevitably fail, and when there are no miracles, criticisms of the dhامي intensify. This has not led the majority of people to reject oracular possession entirely, but rather to conclude that many of their dhamis are mediocre and a few are outright frauds. There are people, however, who argue that the entire institution is riddled with flaws and deceptions. My studies suggest that skepticism is more common and intense among Tibetan speakers. Such patterns of doubt and diversity of opinion are less commonly noted, but they may not be exceptional in other traditional societies.

After a dhامي or dangri's death, his son must travel to Lake Manasarowar to the north in Tibet. There they bring little *tsha tsha*, bas-relief figures made from the ashes of the deceased mixed with clay and cast them into the lake. The sons of dhamis also must bring the dhامي's long coil of hair, which is supposed to be cut off prior to the moment of his death. It is said that the spirit of the dhامي and dangri cannot be laid to rest until these acts are accomplished. The ghost follows the *tsha tsha* into the water and then proceeds to the palace of the gods deep in the center of the lake. This frees him from the process of reincarnation.

When the next dhامي appears, he -- for dhamis almost invariably are men -- also must travel to the lake. As proof of divine favor, he must plunge beneath the surface of the waters and enter into trance. People say that the dhامي then travels to the palace of the gods, deep beneath the center of the lake. Undergoing trance in an icy, high altitude lake is dangerous for purely practical reasons. Local people, however, say the greater danger lies with the disposition of the gods. If angry with the new dhامي, they will lead him halfway to the palace and then abandon him, so he will drown. As skeptics like to point out, most dhamis simply immerse themselves in the water and quickly reemerge. This, however, is sufficient to remove pollution acquired in mundane life and gives the dhامي the power to voice the words of the gods and deliver divine prophecies.

Cultural Dissonance

One of the most problematic aspects of oracular possession -- to lamas and laypeople alike -- are its perceived foreign sources. As people see it, many of the gods are Nepali in origin and the cults are imported from neighboring Nepali villages. People also note that several of the incarnating gods speak Nepali through their oracles and that the dominant idioms and proverbs referring to dhamis derive from the local Nepali dialect.

But the greatest problem of all is that certain of these gods require animal sacrifice at private and public events of possession. Tibetan Buddhism takes the strongest exception to the sacrifice of living animals; it is abhorred and absolutely proscribed, and people I spoke to seemed genuinely repulsed by it. Humla Tibetans also shrink from slaughtering animals for food and tend to assign this to their Nepali servants or, in the case of cows and yak (which are sacred to Hindus), to mentally defective people from their own community, mostly those suffering from cretinism due to iodine deficiency in early life.

The problem of animal sacrifice is not easily resolved. Most Tibetan villages in Humla have long-established shrines to Nepali "blood-eating" gods. The Nepali god most commonly found in these villages is Gura, who has a network of shrines throughout northwestern Nepal and incarnates in dhamis of every Humla ethnic group. Gura also is linked with the Maitra family of deities, who probably are the best known and most important deities in the west of Nepal and whose worship can be traced at least as far back as the early seventeenth century. Two of the four Ladog villages have shrines to Gura, and there are additional shrines in two of the small hamlets linked to these villages. A third village has a shrine to a minor Nepali blood-eating god.

Despite this, the cult of incarnating gods is deeply entrenched and as much supported as challenged within the belief system.

Cultural Rationales

When asked how they happen to have such shrines in their villages Ladog people tend to cite specific events in the past. In one village it is said that the shrine was established by a recent immigrant, who came from a high caste Nepali village and brought his local god with him. People in one of the hamlets say that they introduced Gura deliberately -- to protect their lands against the encroachments of Nepali villagers. The reasoning was that establishing the shrine to Gura would make him a protector of hamlet members and their property and that the land-grabbing Nepalis would show more respect to one of their own -- and one of their fiercest -- gods than to a milder Tibetan deity. Introducing a foreign god like Gura requires only taking a flag from an existing shrine and erecting it on the new site. The former high caste chieftains who once ruled Humla used the third village as their summer headquarters, and the Ladog people who followed them say they had no choice but to maintain the cult of the blood-eating god left behind.

Other factors are at work here. Although people describe themselves as reluctant worshippers of gods perceived as malevolent and foreign, most continue in this. Their explanation is their fear of divine displeasure and divine retribution. There are some, however, most notably Tibetan Buddhist lamas, who argue that there is a choice and that they are not entirely at the mercy of these gods.

Reactions and Reforms

Lamas are among the most vocal in casting doubt on cults of oracular possession by dhamis and stand in the vanguard of attempts to do away with it. They absolutely reject Nepali blood-eating gods, but they also are critical of dhamis who claim to incarnate high ranking Tibetan gods, the higher level *chöse-skyong* or *dharmapala*. According to Tibetan texts, such deities take no part in human affairs. Lamas also find the dangri chant and liturgy to be an impoverished, watered-down imitation of Tibetan Buddhist practice, interwoven with "Bon," that is, pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist, elements of popular belief and practice. Lamas, moreover, scoff at the special powers dhamis display and say that this could be accomplished by anyone with knowledge of the necessary Tibetan magical formulae. As a result, lamas tend to reject customary obligations for offerings to the gods and cite the lack of ill-effects as proof of their words. Dhamis and dangris do not do the reverse. That is, they acknowledge the superiority of orthodox, textual Tibetan Buddhist traditions -- but do not see this as invalidating their own practices.

There are other critics of oracular religion, as we can see quite clearly in the responses of two reluctant dangris.

Dhamis, it is said, are chosen by the gods. That is, the election of a dhامي follows episodes of possession and the demonstration of superhuman feats of strength and prophecy in trance. Dhamis are self-selected. The position of the dangri, priest to the oracle, is hereditary and follows from eldest son to eldest son in the male line. Because of this the office falls to people of very different character, some who find it congenial and some who do not. In the past generation, ladog villages have seen two men reject their succession to the office of dangri. The more recent case involved Tshering and occurred while I was in the field. The other occurred perhaps a dozen years previously.

Tshering had expressed reluctance about becoming a dangri as long as I had known him. He liked to describe himself as a modern man and voiced doubts about various folk magical practices, home medical remedies, and the like, while at the same time affirming his adherence to orthodox Tibetan Buddhism. As a child, Tshering had taught himself to read and write Nepali. In his early twenties he had served as a policeman in Mugu district. When his father died in the autumn of 1982, Tshering was faced with a predicament: what to do about the office of dangri. His first response was to announce that he would let the family tradition lapse. Privately, he spoke of his skepticism, his belief that dhamis were shamming possession and that gods could not come to men in this way. Tshering also was concerned that becoming a dangri would pose serious economic hardships for his family. Dangris are

obliged to spend most of the year in the village, to officiate at rituals of public possession. This means that they cannot engage in trade, which involves spending more than half the year away from home.

Predictably, villagers were enormously upset by Tshering's refusal. Not only were they now bereft of their finest dangri, they also had a major problem of succession on their hands. Their first response was to ignore the problem and act as though everything would proceed as usual. After a few weeks, local elders approached Tshering and asked when he intended to travel to Lake Manasarowar in Tibet to inter his father's remains and be installed as the next dangri. Tshering politely reiterated his lack of interest in the position. Next, at the closing festival of the agricultural year, the oracle cautioned Tshering on the necessity of promptly assuming his position. The issue was raised again toward the end of winter, at the annual Mani dance drama. This festival is held to usher in the spring and rout demons that have gathered in fields left fallow in the cold months. On the first day of the Mani, all the village dhamis and dangris assemble; the dhamis deliver prophecies about the coming agricultural year and hear individual requests for divine guidance. Tshering was expected, but failed to join them. After this, the pressure intensified. Village elders made another visit to Tshering's home and solemnly reminded him of the consequences of failing to meet his inherited responsibility. Because Tshering had political ambitions, their admonitions hit home. At the next collective possession, the oracle warned that dire events would befall Tshering's young family if he did not take up his dangri role. Then silver coins, which are associated with dhamis and sacred pledges, began appearing mysteriously in the barn beneath his house. Tshering finally acceded. The next summer he made the customary trip to Manasarowar, bringing along the little *tsha-tsha*, made from the ashes of his father mixed with clay.

Tshering is not the only man in recent years who resisted becoming a dangri. A dozen years earlier, Angyal, a man in a different Ladog village, also refused to succeed his father as dangri. Angyal cited similar reasons: his skepticism about dhami trances and his love of travel and the independent life of a trader. Angyal, however, managed to withstand village criticism and threats voiced by the dhami. Eventually it was decided to release him from his responsibility -- due to an event in his past. When a young man, Angyal eloped with another man's wife, and the two of them sought sanctuary at a nepali religious shrine. The problem was that the shrine of a foreign god and, even worse, a god worshipped with animal sacrifices. Many other Ladog couples have done the same thing, but Angyal was a dangri heir, and this was regarded as a particularly grievous insult to the Tibetan god his family served. Thus Angyal was released from his obligation, with the understanding that his eldest son, Tashi, would become dangri when he grew up.

The fact is that Angyal probably would have made a poor dangri anyway. This, at least, is what the events surrounding his trip to Manasarowar suggest. As is customary, Angyal was supposed to carry a flag and burn ritual lamps each night of his journey to the lake. Angyal found carrying the flag an inconvenience, so he tied it to the saddle of his pack horse. Not surprisingly, the flag slipped one day, and it was smashed into a cliff. Angyal reassembled what he could find of it and tied it to his horse again. Then, when he reached the rich pastures below the final pass into Tibet, the horse bolted. The flag fell off and was utterly lost, so Angyal fashioned a substitute. In Tibet he became so engrossed with trading that he decided not to go to Manasarowar after all and entrusted his father's remains with a Nepali-speaking man he barely knew. On his journey home with his fellow villagers, the horse died - a very bad sign. When next possessed, the dhami spoke of and attributed the death of the horse to Angyal's failed pilgrimage to Lake Manasarowar. Yet, Angyal notes, his misadventures with the flag were never mentioned. This he cites as further proof of the falsity of dhamis. His reasoning is that the dhami knew about his failure to visit the lake only because the villagers told him; but no one witnessed what happened with the flag, so the dhami remained uninformed.

A few Ladog villages, as I have said, maintain shrines to Nepali blood-eating gods, which villagers tend to view with disfavor. The general response to this dilemma has been to neglect the shrine. In one case, villagers stack hay on the blood-eating god's shrine in winter and leave crops to dry on it in summer. This god has never had a local dhami, and villagers must import a Nepali dhami for what they see as the necessary rite of possession and propitiation each year. In another village, decades have

elapsed between the death of one dhami and the appearance of his successor. By contrast, the dhamis of important, more Tibetan, gods ordinarily reappear within a few years.

Humla Tibetans have been more than negligent: they periodically rebel against and try to rid themselves of unwanted foreign gods. Such an attempt was made by a lama in the Ladog hamlet of Dzlang several decades ago. The lama burned the local Gura shrine to the ground and cut down and burned the sacred woods surrounding it. He also conducted the necessary Tibetan rituals for destroying evil spirits -- at the same time praying for their release to a new, less sinful rebirth. The lama did most of this alone, and ultimately it proved unsuccessful. A few years later, his family began experiencing a series of disasters. His wives suffered numerous miscarriages and, one after the other, they died. Horses and other domestic animals fell off cliffs to their deaths. Then similar disasters befell other people living in the hamlet. People laid the blame for these events at the feet of an unvanquished and much-angered Gura. The only possible solution seemed to be to bring Gura back again. In 1973 the dhami from Gura's primary shrine, Bihin, a village several days' walk to the south, was invited to supervise the reconstruction of the shrine and its reconsecration -- which required the sacrifice of baby goats.

Two ethnic Tibetan villages to the north of Ladog have managed to rid themselves of gods who demand animal sacrifice, thereby ending their reliance upon dhamis and dangris. The case I know best occurred almost half a century ago. While the main protagonists have died, the young people of the time still hold vivid recollections of these events. One of the fullest accounts I received was from a man particularly well-placed as an observer. He was the son of the lama who instigated the exorcism and the maternal grandson of the village dangri. This was a radical change, for dhamis seem to have been extraordinarily important here. Their services were called upon whenever people fell ill, at their marriages, at the birth of sons, and to set the date of any long journey. At all of these times people were obliged to provide sacrifices.

The main lama in these events, Sangye, was a great meditator who spent the last years of his life in a small hut overlooking Mount Saipal, the highest peak in the region. As a young man he had studied in a major center of monastic learning in western Tibet. When he returned home, he found himself repulsed by dhamis' frequent demands for animal sacrifices. As the story goes, Lama Sangye called upon a charismatic lama from the monastery where he had trained and assembled all the leading lamas in the region. Their first step was to hold a ritual to summon the local incarnating gods and entreat them to take dough offerings and butter lamps in place of living animals. The plea apparently failed, and, as the lamas found, they had little support for the laity. This began to change when they imposed a test on the dhamis and exposed their falsity. A person sympathetic to their cause feigned illness and summoned one of the dhamis. The man came and proved completely unaware of the ruse, for he attributed the illness to divine causes, engaged in his customary techniques of healing, and demanded the sacrifice of a cock. The lamas thus acquired a core of supporters. At the next festival the two village dhamis became possessed and announced that harm would come to everyone if animal sacrifice were to cease. Then a dhami physically assaulted one of the lamas. This angered villagers so much that they finally joined with the lamas in destroying the incarnating gods. The lamas held a week-long exorcism. Then lamas and laity proceeded to the dhamis' temple and burnt it and the forest surrounding it to the ground. Later the lamas reassembled to consecrate the site; soon after they built a large Buddhist temple and an adjoining, smaller temple with a huge mani wheel for prayer.

Why Nepalis find less Cultural Dissonance

While Tibetan speakers perceive the cults of gods like Gura as being foreign and of Nepali derivation, Nepali speakers say exactly the opposite. That is, they identify the very gods that ethnic Tibetans try to rid themselves of as having Tibetan origins. The myths Nepalis tell of Gura describe him as having originated in the northern plains of Tibet and being kin to the Tibetan protective deities. Villages to the south also worship a god named Lama, who, appositely, is supposed to have once been a Tibetan lama. When Lama incarnates in the body of his dhami, he describes the powers he obtained

through years of meditation and textual study in Tibet and his dislike of the caste system. In trance, Nepali dhamis of these gods speak words that are supposed to be Tibetan; their dhamis also use Tibetan ritual implements in their seances (see Campbell 1976:318-322).

And the fact of the matter is that oracular possession is no more conforms to the tenets of orthodox Hinduism than it does to orthodox Tibetan Buddhism. The reality is of diverse societies linked through a multiplex, syncretic tradition. This is why Tibetans see Gura as Nepali, and Nepalis see Gura as Tibetan, why one of the prototypical local gods of Tibetan provenance, the *yul lha* (the name means "place" or "village" god), are found in villages of high and low caste Hindus and Bura alike.

High caste Hindus, however, may be more comfortable worshipping gods of Tibetan origin, seeking the services of Tibetan lamas -- which they do occasionally -- and participating in a heterodox tradition and may find few contradictions in this. They seem to see Tibetan origins as proof of the strength and special powers of their gods and as little impediment to absorption within a variform pantheon within Hindu tradition -- including the tradition of animal sacrifice. Ultimately this may be because Nepalis have had the greater input into the regional system of oracular possession and have effectively dominated it. For ethnic Tibetans there is more cultural discordance, which is why villages tentatively adopt and then move to wholesale reactions against dhamis and appear to meet a felt need for expressions of social egalitarianism, dharmic ideals of hierarchy, patrilineal kinship purity, and concerns with sins and merit (Campbell 1976: 518). That is to say, the practice of Brahmanical Hinduism and oracular religion exemplify a logic of interlocking or complimentary differences (see Holmberg 1984). This is not true for Tibetan Buddhists, for whom dhamis replace an indigenous oracular tradition. They remain culturally incongruous, although meaningful in certain ways nonetheless.

Attempts to reform or eradicate cults of oracular possession have been the exception. Dhamis and dangris ordinarily serve their communities without interruption, despite the skepticism of some, the widespread dislike of foreign gods, and the serious ethical problems that animal sacrifice pose for everyone. For one thing, oracular possession is an exciting and vibrant tradition. For another, dhamis meet genuine religious needs. They offer -- to believers at least -- direct and tangible contact with the divine. They also provide an ecstatic, participatory, and egalitarian form of religious expression, which contrasts markedly with the cool, formalized practices and hierarchical relationships of Tibetan Buddhism, however ill-fitted in this cultural milieu.

These "functions," however, could be equally well served by Tibetan oracles. Why then do the people of Ladog, and many other Humla Tibetans still prefer the cults surrounding dhamis -- which, paradoxically, they perceive as foreign? The reason for this, I think, lies in ethnic politics. Tibetan speakers in Humla want to participate and integrate themselves more fully into the surrounding society. And these dhami cults effectively provide a bridge or point of linkage with other, neighboring ethnic groups. In fact, they may involve the least tension-fraught and most egalitarian form of inter-ethnic interaction available in the region. Another relevant fact is that the gods which incarnate in dhamis are explicitly seen as protectors of the poor and powerless; they punish wrongdoers and offer an incorruptible, unimpeachable model for justice. For this reason, they have a ready constituency among the weak and the needy.

In Humla, as throughout Nepal, ethnic identity has status implications and is tied to a system of caste-based ethnic stratification. Humla formerly was ruled by high caste Hindus, while modern Nepal remains a Hindu State. Relations between the different groups are far from egalitarian, and caste traditionally had the sanction of the legal system. In Humla, in both past and present, there were three primary points of contact between the different ethnic groups: in politics, economics and ritual. In the political sphere, ethnic Tibetans were enormously disadvantaged; the early rulers of the region and officials appointed after Humla's incorporation into the Nepalese state in 1789 invariably were members of the highest castes. Relationships organized around economic transactions have been complementary more than competitive, but they also have tended to be rather superficial. Ethnic Tibetans villagers specialize in trade and act as middlemen in a regional system of exchange. These traders make brief visits to the villages of Nepali speaking farmers, where they exchange the salt and wool they imported

from Tibet with the farmers' grain. By contrast, interactions in the ritual sphere have been intense, meaningful, and relatively egalitarian.

In religious practice, representatives of the two traditions can and do act together. Tibetan and Nepali dhamis sometimes travel together to Lake Manasarowar for their installations. The former occasionally join in public sessions of trance dancing at Nepali full-moon festivals. Nepali speakers of all castes come from villages as much as four days' walk away to witness an annual full-moon festival held at the principal Tibetan Buddhist shrine in the region. Wealthier Nepalis occasionally hire lamas to perform rituals in their homes; Nepali villagers living nearby Tibetan lamas who are trained physicians frequently seek their services.

In all these ethnic groups, some of the strongest supporters of cults of incarnating gods are the poor and the powerless. They seek out dhamis in public and private consultations and request protection against injustice and retribution for the wrongs done them. The gods often are the only recourse for such people, who can no more pursue formal court procedures than they can rely on local leaders. Both are expensive, the modern court system most of all, and neither is impartial. Courts are staffed by civil servants from Kathmandu who tend to be unsympathetic to poor, illiterate people of no standing in their own communities. Local leaders in Humla have a long history of taking advantage of those poorer and less powerful than themselves. The gods, by contrast, are impartial and incorruptible and people believe that they seek revenge against those who slight them and those who prey on their worshippers. The retribution that gods devise may involve illness, death -- of animals and humans -- or such kind of inexplicable misfortune. People say that fear of such retributions curbs excesses of power.

Theoretically, lamas could provide equivalent protection and perform ceremonies designed to overpower a person's enemies. They are, however, unlikely to do this for the poor. One reason is that poor people have trouble paying for expensive Buddhist rituals. Another reason is that lamas prefer to offend the rich and the powerful, however unjust their behavior, for it is precisely these people who employ lamas and act as their primary patrons. I do not know if poor people in Nepali villages have comparable problems in gaining access to Brahmins, and while untouchables are barred from using the services of Brahmins, they have their own priests. People of all kinds always find a fair hearing from dhamis, however,. Dhamis must serve everyone, rich and poor, high status and low. As one Ladog lama said to me, the gods make their dhamis poor on purpose, so that they will accept any call for as little payment as a few measures of grain and a simple meal. Among Nepalis, large numbers of dhamis come from the low castes.⁴ In Ladog, dhamis often were slaves in the past and after slavery was abolished in 1926, dhamis often came from the population of the disadvantaged ex-slaves and their descendants. It is likely that lower caste people and slaves used oracular possession to defend themselves and others in comparable positions against transgressions of local morality.

Ladog and other ethnic Tibetans in Humla must find a special value in these Nepali-influenced traditions of oracular possession. If they did not, they could easily abandon their dhamis for the Tibetan oracles. Many men spend several months a year trading in Tibet and did so in the past, before religious expression was limited. Humla, moreover, has its own Tibetan oracle, or *lhapa*, a Tibetan refugee who came here in the 1960's, has made one village his home, and occasionally serves local people. *Lhapa* provide services quite similar to those of dhamis. The difference lies not so much in function, but in the panoply of symbols associated with the institution, the trappings and idioms with which it is conducted. This may be compared with the variation in church services of different religious denominations in our own society: all accomplish similar ritual transactions, but in different ways -- with the differences seen as having great significance. If Ladog have chosen to keep their Nepalized oracles, it is because they provide an interface with the surrounding Nepali society and because the

⁴Although in Jumla, they are not out of proportion to their numbers in the population (Campbell 1976).

provide a means for people who tend to be most neglected in formalized, orthodox traditions to find communion with and secure the protection of their gods.

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