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This paper is a study of the Gurung death rite practiced by the Ghyabrẽ shamans of Tapje village, located in the Gyasumdo region of Manang District in Nepal. Tapje village is high on the hillside above the Marsyandi river, as one of the Gurung villages which shares the Gyasumdo area with Tibetans who have migrated into the region from Kyirong and Nupri over the past century. Gurung householders, particularly those of the Ghale clan, occasionally invite Tibetan lamas to perform Buddhist rites, but they are fundamentally committed to the shamanic tradition, carried on by the Ghyabrẽ and Paju practitioners. The term "shaman" can easily be applied to both. Their ritual journeys to upperworld and underworld replicate the "classic" model of inner Asian Shamanism (Hitchcock 1976, Watters 1975),[1] the spirits of their ancient masters entering their bodies and leading them in their journeys.

I will introduce the death rite performed by the main Ghyabrẽ of Tapje village, describing first the central figure that has become prominent in the drama: it is a bird that is "possessed" by the spirit of the deceased. The importance of the bird has replaced what used to be central only two decades ago: the sacrifice of a sheep and the distribution of its meat as a social prestation.

Foreign researchers rarely encounter the Gurung drama of the possessed bird.[2] I first observed it by accident. I had been living in the Tibetan village of Tshap, located across the river below Tapje. Hearing that a Gurung funeral was about to take place I went to Tapje, uninvited, and climbed the ladder to the roof of a house where a large crowd had gathered. In the center, the Ghyabrẽ was slowing beating his drum. A bird, tied to a string and possessed by "the spirit of the decease," walked slowly among kin members of the patriline of the deceased. They were seated in a circle, each holding a plate of food. The bird jumped up on some of their laps, "recognizing" as it were, the kin members it loved best. The audience watched, spellbound. Even the Tibetans who had come up to Tapje to watch were totally captivated by what they saw, fully believing in the shamanic miracle that is missing from their own, Tibetan death rite.

In contrast to Tibetan dusting, in which the karmic past and psychic preparation during life largely determine the deceased's future, Gurung dusting is determined by relations of reciprocity among relatives. If the deceased's affinal relatives refuse to provide the white shroud that covers the corpse and also the effigy of the soul, the deceased "will not find the path" and becomes a wandering ghost. For Gurungs the "white cloth" is the symbol of relational destiny promoted in the shamanic system, in contrast to the merited destiny that is taught by the Tibetan Lamas. The model of alliance is that of

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[1]David Watters (1975:125) has noted many similarities between Siberian shamans and shamans found among the Kham-Magars, a people living in Nepal southwest of Dhaulagiri Peak, which he defines as carriers of the "classical" inner Asian Shamanic tradition."

[2]Messerschmidt (1976b) has found a rite of bird possession among southwestern Gurungs, but it is not elaborated in terms of the legendary chant of the Ghyabrẽ shaman's death rite, as explicated here.

the "kle" clan (Ghale) of the upper world inter-marrying with the "khro" clan (Lamichane) from the underworld.

Sending the Bird

Pignède (1966) and Messerschmidt (1976a) have previously described the "flow of prestations" between relatives during the funeral among Gurungs who live south of Gyasumdo, but they do not mention the drama of soul guidance up to the trail to the land of the dead that is so prominent among the northern Gurungs of this study. The main ritual sequence is called the *pai* rite. The following data on the legendary chant of the *pai* was provided by the old Gyabre of Tapje village who allowed his chant to be tape recorded, later giving his own interpretations.

The rite begins after the wife-receiving affines construct a soul effigy (*pla*): a cone shaped bamboo cage one meter high. The stick frame represents the bones of the deceased and the white cloth covering it is the outer flesh. After the soul is called into the effigy, relatives and friends gather on the roof of the house. The bird is seen in a cage. The Ghyabrẽ beats his drum, on which there is a carving of Kle-nyima, his tutelary bird deity. In front of him stands the "*pla*" effigy of the deceased. He begins the chant:

> The bird came down from above and settled in the land,
> like the blessing of rain, falling from the sky.
> Four birds come, each on one of the four paths.
>
> The bird of the *bdud* is black in the path going East.
> The bird of the *btsan* is red in the path going South.
> The bird of the *klu* and *sa-bdag* is yellow in the path going North.
> The bird of *lha* is white, in the path going West.
>
> The white bird shows the path.
> Its head is gold, its body is turquoise, its waist is silver,
> its tail is copper, its feet are iron.

This bird is central in this Ghyabrẽ's ritual discourse, and represents the tutelary deity of the divine *kle* ancestors, descending from the upper world of the gods. The tree that grows out of the sacred grove below Tapje village, connecting the three worlds of the cosmos, becomes the home of the bird. As the Ghyabrẽ chants, he brings the bird out of the cage and ties a long string to its neck, with the other end tied to the *pla* effigy so that the soul of the deceased can pass into the bird. The Ghyabrẽ's chant provides a legendary model (*pe*) for the loss of wealth that would result if harmony between the living and the dead is broken. The deceased is represented as one of the parents in the legend. It is the story of dying parents who are neglected by their son, who spends his time dancing and singing in the Rodi, the Gurung youth club. The dying parents curse their son into poverty. The chant continues,

> The Father warned: If we die and you do not do the rites to receive our blessing, you will become poor. You will become small as a needle, thin as paper and weak as water.

The chant goes on to say that the parents die and enter the underworld, Kro-nasa. They enter through golden and silver doors, and descend down nine ladders. On their way down they meet people going up. They are people of Kro-nasa, ascending to visit the human world above, for the legend occurs during the "first era" when everyone was able to cross over between worlds. The parents ask the Khro-nasa party to warn their son of the poverty that is in store for him. Unless he finds a way to transfer offerings down to them to gain their blessing, the deceased parents will seize their son's wealth. To

complete the process of re-harmonization, the Khro-nasa people are asked to give their own daughter to the son in marriage.

The parents then enter the "four colored lakes" of the underworld and wait for their son to send the offerings, while the Khro-nasa people go up into the human world. They find that the son is already hungry and sick from the curse. They promise to give their daughter in marriage. First, however, he must send offerings down to his parents to receive their blessing. This is accomplished earlier in the *pai* rite when the Ghyabrẽ shaman receives plates of food from relatives and friends of the family. As bits of food are put into a burnt offering, the Ghyabrẽ calls out the name of each donor. In the Ghyabrẽ's chant this action is thus portrayed:

> In the manner of a nobleman he gathered meat, rice, grains, like a king and offered it to his parents in Khro-nasa.

The Ghyabrẽ now travels in his mind to the underworld, as if he were the son in the legend going down to deliver the food. The deceased parents receive it and relinquish any claims on the wealth of their surviving kin. He returns with the bird which the soul of the deceased has entered. The bird represents a return gift of great wealth, given as if it were the inheritance received by the surviving kin, but also as if it had come from the marriage alliance with the daughter of the Khro-nasa underworld:

> The son returned to the human world with the wealth-bearing bird of gold, turquoise, silver, copper and iron. It was the blessing of the inheritance.
>
> Then he married the daughter of the Khro-nasa. Rain came down from above. Crops grew up from below into the human world. Animals increased. There was great wealth.
>
> The deceased parents could now find the path to the land of the gods.

It is at this time that the bird moves around the circle of relatives and jumps on their laps. The Ghyabrẽ continues the chant:

> You have died so please do not take the fortune of your family with you. If you are willing to leave the fortune here, please shake your body.

The bird shakes its body, a sign that reconciliation between the deceased and the living relatives has been achieved.[3] The Ghyabrẽ picks up the bird and, going around the circle, plucks out small bits of feathers from its body, giving a bit to each person. It is the "distribution" of the animal, which would have been given if it had been sacrificed. But it is not, and instead is released. The "sending of the bird" assures that the fortune of the patriline will not be taken by the deceased, and "releases" the soul to proceed to the land of the dead.

The chant thus far provides a mythical charter for restoring harmonious relations on three levels: 1) the ancestral cult of exchange between the living and the dead, assures that wealth remaining in the family will continue as an inheritance. 2) The marriage alliance between the Kle (Ghale) clan "from Above" and the Khro clan "from below" is the basis for <u>social</u> harmony in the community, symbolized by the giving of the white cloth by affinal relatives. 3) This alliance is in turn interlinked with the <u>natural</u> harmony between the different worlds of the cosmos, bringing rain and abundance. Cosmic

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[3]If the bird does not shake it can be encouraged to do so by pouring water over it, a common practice in Nepal used to gain acceptance from the animal and the spirits that the sacrifical offering has been accepted.

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Sending the Bird

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harmony and social interdependence are thus inextricably liked to one's after-death destiny. The entire scheme is made psychologically salient by the legend of the son's neglect of his parents, reflecting the sense of guilt towards the deceased as a theme that is prominent in the Gurung culture.

Guiding the soul to the land of the dead

The Ghyabrẽ's death rite now arrives at a new and final stage: the journey up the trail to Oblẽ dome and the land of the dead. The Ghyabrẽ dances slowly around the *pla* effigy, beating his drum and chanting his guiding instructions. First, he lures the soul away from its former home attachments:

> Don't stay here! Don't stay in the beer staorage room. You no longer have the right to remain at the hearth. Your place is different now. Only alive ones can stay here. You are dead now, go!

The chant is repeated by a chorus of local spirits at each stage of the journey, the first chorus being the spirits of the doorstep, then those of the porch, and so on. The Ghyabrẽ guides the soul up the trail toward Donague village. Again there is a chorus of local spirits of the stream, soil, rocks, that warn the soul not to remain there, that its home is further up the trail.

The chant continues on, naming the local villages of Temang, Dzangyuk, Kato, Tsheme, Talung. They arrive at Do Kyasa, a place of huge boulders, and come to the mid-way point: called the "Black Water," regarded as one of the doors to the underworld. Here the Ghyabrẽ has the soul "lie down on its stomach" and drink the water. It refuses. The Ghyabrẽ urges it again. Finally it drinks and suddenly realizes fully that it has died and that there is no turning back.

The Ghyabrẽ now offers a libation of grain to "spirits of the four directions and eight regions," requesting that they "release the way" for the deceased:

> When he walks, don't hit him on the leg with a stone!
> When he talks, don't cut off his tongue!

After passing through the meadows and cliffs of Drag Thang, they cross the Marsyandi River on a bridge, arriving at the base of a massive dome called "Oblẽ". Oblẽ dome is a gigantic rock dome near Pisang, a day's walk up the trail from Tapje village. At the top is the Gurung land of the dead, called "Sa yi Gompa" (earth temple), which in turn is connected by a series of nine ladders to the "sky Gompa" of the gods in the Gurung upperworld.

When the Ghyabrẽ shaman and the soul of the deceased arrive at the top of Oblẽ dome, they encounter a barking dog tied to a "hitching post" that is seen from the trail below, a classic shamanic image (Eliade 1964:203, 417). At the top they enter the "earth temple," and distribute food offerings to the ancestors who come to greet them.

Before the Ghyabrẽ returns back to Tapje village, he has two instructions. The first regards <u>further</u> destiny: the deceased can either remain in the land of the dead, or take another human rebirth, according to preference:

> Your place is now here, but you can take another birth if you choose. If you do take rebirth you should choose to be an important, wealthy, skillful, or religious person. But you do not have to return, you can stay here and remain with your ancestors.

There is no mention of good or bad deeds, or a weighing on karmic scales to determine destiny as found in the Tibetan system. Suffering and death are no longer necessary once the land of the dead is entered.

His second advice warns against premature return to the land of the living:

> Don't put your mind on your property or your relatives. They will die later and come here to meet you. Don't return home to see a show in your village. You are dead and must remain here.

Now the Ghyabrẽ adroitly avoids being followed back down the trail. He tricks the soul that he has delivered with a distraction. Pointing to a show going on he says, "look there at how those cats and snakes are playing together!" While the deceased turns to watch, the Ghyabrẽ turns himself into a vulture and flies down Oblẽ dome, returning to the Gurung village of Tapje. Then he and the community pick up the pla effigy and carry it out of the village, where it is thrown into the river.

In the above ritual sequence I have emphasized the prominence of the spirit-possessed bird as well as soul-guidance leading up toward the upperworld where the bird originated. What significance does the bird have for the Ghyabrẽ shaman? Snellgrove and Richardson (1968) have argued that Gurungs may well be the carriers in Nepal of the pre-Buddhist traditions once found in Tibet. In Gyasumdo the Ghyabrẽ shaman's legends and cosmology are indeed analogous to the Bon model of Tibetan kingship. The Ghyabrẽ repeatedly tells the legend of sky or "*mu*" origin of Ghale nobility as the land of the gods from which the earliest kings descended, similar to Bon legends of descent down the Tibetan "*dmu*" rope (Stein 1972: 48-9). The Ghyabrẽ's death rite reflects the hegemony of the Ghale nobility in Gyasumdo, focusing attention on the ancestral land "above," reached through Oblẽ dome, after removing the deceased from the underworld.[4]

The Ghyabrẽ's emphasis on spirit possession of the bird gives importance to descent from the land of the gods as a tutelary deity of the Ghale clan. However, the *symbolic* sacrifice of the bird at the end of the possession is a substitute for the previous custom of sacrificing a sheep. The father and grandfather of the Ghyabrẽ had used a sheep, sacrificing the animal by hurling it from the roof of the house, and distributing the meat among affines.[5]

The sift of empasis from sheep to bird in the Gurung death rite may be partly due to cost-cutting reforms that have occurred among ethnic groups in Nepal. Gurungs in Gysumdo, however, bitterly disagree among themselves regarding this reform. The Paju shamans argue that the Gurung death has been compromised, accusing Ghyabrẽ of being influenced by "the Tibetan Lamas."

Influence by the Tibetan Lamas is precisely the Ghyabrẽ's own interpretation of his change of mind. The Ghyabrẽ related to me his excrutiating experience of two decades previous. A great incarnational lama from Tibet, Chog Lingpa, has passed through this area while fleeing from the Chinese. The lama powerfully condemned all animal sacrifices that were still going on in the region, declaring that all those participating in the "red offering" would jeapardize their afterlife destiny. The Ghyabrẽ describes his own reform as a personal change of conviction after hearing the lama. The rite of animal sacrifice which he still performs each Spring is a collective rite that does not affect individual destiny, but he has accepted the lama's retributional logic with regard to his death rite. Hence he has substituted the bird which can be "released" into the air without being killed.

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[4]This emphasis differs from that of the Gurung Pajus shamans, who argue that Khronasa "below" is *also* a valid afterlife destiny. The Paju's underworld destiny is the model found in Pignède's (1966) study of southwestern Gurungs. Strickland (1983:231), however, also studying Gurungs south of the Annapurna range, notes that "the souls are taken by narrative chanting to the land of the souls of men....situated to the North of the mountains and across the Marsyandi River," clearly a reference to the Oblẽ Dome tradition.

[5]Sacrifice of a sheep appears to have been fundamental in the Tibetan Bon funeral. Marcell Lalou's french translation of the *Ritual Bon-po des funérailles royales* (1953) contains numerous elements similar to the first part of the Gurung *pai* rite described here. There are food offerings and services given by affinal relatives. There is a "soul canopy" called *thugs-gur* (soul-tent); there are "auspicious dances," just as among Gurungs, and there are weapons and food fiven "for the journey" that is guided by "sheep," and so on.

The Ghyabrẽ changed his death rite with the approval of the Ghale lords, but then found that other Gurungs were saying he had betrayed his own father's tradition. He now finds that the Tibetan Lamas in Gyasumdo continue to criticize him for having nothing in his Gurung death rite that has "merit making" significance. Gurung destiny has no *merited* fate: there are no ethical criteria that select those who would deserve better or worse destinies. Even Tibetan lay persons are quick to point out that the Gurung death rite "makes no distinction between sin (*sdig-pa*) and virtue (*dge-ba*)."

The Ghyabrẽ is highly aware of the Tibetan critique. He continues to emphasize the bird, but remains highly ambivalent. He sometimes notes that even though he does other animal sacrifices, his practice is gradually becoming "white," saying that he is becoming a *bon-kar* ("white Bon"), a process of reform analogous to what occurred in Tibet (Karmay 1972). As the Ghyabrẽ defends himself against the opposition of the Paju shamans in his own tradition, and also from the critique of the Tibetan lamas, his death rite becomes increasingly unbounded.

Its meaning continually emerges, however, in a highly reflexive Nepalese context in which all claims to ethical superiority are being questioned, whether Buddhist, Hindu, or claims emanating from the West. It is as if, alongside the spirit penetrations into the bird and into the Ghyabrẽ himself, inter-cultural penetrations are now occurring, involving a host of new voices. In the same village of Tapje one finds the school teacher reading the latest Bulletin from Amnesty International. The old Ghyabrẽ feels caught between this multitude of voices. "Perhaps," he told me one day, "each of these different death rites and viewpoints is partly right. The way to find the path would be through harmonious collaboration of them all."

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