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Transcendence and Magical Power in Tamang Shamanic Soundings

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the imagery of mind and body and of transcendence in the shamanic practices of the western Tamang of highland Nepal. Tamang distinguish between bodies and minds, and shamanic cures work to revive bodily life-force and reconstitute fragmented consciousness. Through transcendent journeys, the erection of life-force trees, and the capture of lost shadow souls, shamans or *bombo* symbolically enact for clients and other participants a transformation from abjectivity to agency that replicates their own personal transformations. The activation and ingestion of magical power (*wang*) plays a key symbolic role in these transformations, and this power is analyzed as the alienated capacity of people to regenerate themselves as active agents in the world. (Key words: shamanism, Tamang, Nepal, curing)

In 1976, John Hitchcock and Rex Jones edited a volume entitled *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas*, which for the first time brought together what had been disparate ethnographic studies of shamanism and spirit possession in Nepal. For many of us in the mid-1970s—I was in the field at the time this volume appeared—it became a primary comparative guide in our forays into making sense of shamanic practices in Nepal. Contributors to the volume produced an important ethnographic record of an array of shamanic practices reflecting both the diversity and unity of Nepal ritual life. For the most part, the volume was unapologetically ethnographic, which makes it, in this age of “theoreticist theory” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:161), refreshing to re-read. In his introduction, John concentrated on the curative or therapeutic dimensions of shamanic practice, which was the dominant anthropological mode for engaging these ritual forms at the time, but it was also clear that John understood shamanic practice as being artful. Although proceeding in the language of psychotherapy, he resisted reducing shamanic practice to this template. His fascination and appreciation is very evident in his ethnographic essay on Bhujel practices where substantial sections consist of the translation of the words chanted by a shaman. It is almost as if the analytical language of the time was insufficient to account for the richness and differences of the voices of Bhujel themselves. Through his translation, John thus allows the shaman to speak for himself. One senses that John was acutely aware of the tension between the words and imaginary worlds of these chants and the explanatory models of anthropologists as he tacked back and forth between our ana-

lytical languages and theirs. John—both in his writings and his films—had a deep appreciation for the existential reality of suffering in life in the mountains of Nepal, and he also appreciated the forms in which it was expressed.

In his spirit I offer this brief ethnographic essay on Tamang curing, concentrating on its art and its curative power. I want primarily to translate the imaginative worlds in which Tamang produce themselves as social individuals and suggest that the enactments may well effect real processes in human bodies and minds. I focus here on an elemental dimension of Tamang shamanic practice: transcendence and how transcendence itself works symbolically in Tamang curing. It is difficult to create a “common” language of psyche that crosses these differences, but as Louis Dumont put it, “the first step to that end consists in recognizing differences” (Dumont 1970:241). In this brief essay, I try to show in a very preliminary way how, through Tamang ideas of transcendence and power, we can better understand curative process as a productive or generative process.

Journeys of transcendence

Journeys to realms inaccessible to others distinguish shamanic practices from possession practices. Unlike spirit possession where beings irrupt into the social world through human bodies, shamanic movements are outward from human bodies and minds into universes known and unknown.¹

¹For systematic discussion of comparative issues surrounding spirit possession and shamanism see Atkinson 1992; Reinhard 1976; Rouget 1985.

Spatial travel is an elemental act in the shamanic repertoire of the western Tamang of highland Nepal.² In household soundings—whether curative or calendrical—shamans, known in Tamang as *bombo*, move in orations out through known geographic space to secret territories (*beyhul*) and to dream-like, revelatory consciousness called “going to the divinities” (*lari ngvipa*). In these movements they acquire power when they come to the territories of particular divinities. Moreover, in meditative incantation, they arrive again at secret territories where they summon the *wang* or magical power of high mountain lakes. Upon ingestion, this power causes them to shake and shudder with an internal energy. Pilgrimages—another form of shamanic practice—are homologous to household rituals: *bombo* accompanied by villagers move directly outward from villages over earthly territory to the places of powerful divinities (*lai ne*) where, like in household rituals, they pass into revelatory consciousness and convey blessings.

Transcendent vision/transcendent power

Bombo are associated with the imagery of flight and the attainment of a metaposition. On pilgrimage they wear either the feathers of the highland impeyan pheasant or the lowland peacock as headdresses in a fashion miming the crowns on the heads of these colorful birds. These feathers are, moreover, always placed on the altar in household soundings. Impeyan pheasants inhabit alpine meadows and forests between earth and heavens and peacocks lowland, subtropical forests. Unlike birds capable of full, continuous flight, both these birds move along the earth yet are capable of making short flights (between earth and sky). Like these mediatory birds, *bombo* move between earth and sky. When they move, especially on pilgrimage, they move in a dancing step where they hold their upper bodies erect. From a distance and when surrounded by parties of villagers they appear to glide over the surface of the earth as they move along. *Bombo* are also associated with the great hornbill and place beaks of these birds on their altars. Hornbills, in contrast to peafowl, are capable of full flight and soar high through the treetops of subtropical forests. Their beaks represent the fierce mythical bird *khyung* (linked by Tamang to Hindu Garuda) whom *bombo* can in some ritual contexts become. One *bombo* sent this fierce bird out as an advance party in his searches for lost shadow-souls and, in another exorcistic suspension, became one with this bird while dancing fiercely with a dog’s skull in his mouth. Finally, in orations like the following, *bombo* employ imagery of flight when they call spirit allies before taking off to the divinities:

²Shamanisms in Nepal that relate to those addressed here have received systematic attention in a number of recent monographs (Desjarlais 1994; Höfer 1994; Maskarinec 1995; Sagant 1996; Sales 1991).

In the midst of the sunrays,
A costumed bombo I am not.
In the midst of the moon rays,
I have dressed.
When all breathing, moving beings sleep,
When the sun sleeps, I dress [as a] bombo.
Come take my bombo’s body.
Come take a golden horse.
Come take a silver horse.
By the sky trail, let’s fly.³

Bombo rise above the earth and into other-worlds accessible only to them, achieving a transcendent sight.

Shamanic soundings include long recitations of place names and divine sites (*rhikap*). The styles and lists vary among *bombo* and ritual contexts. The place names and divinities recited, however, always move out from the altar proper, through the divinities of house and village then along known geographic space both “below” toward India, “over” to adjacent Himalayan valleys east and west, and “above” to Tibet. Their minds, they report, go together with their chants on these journeys. In a trip to the divinities to find the shadow-soul (*bla*) of the mother of a household, Shekyu Bombo, for instance, working out from the house in which he was practicing, cited approximately one hundred thirty places on the trails rising up and out of the village toward Tibet eventually arriving at *Ui Same*, the sacred mythic site of Tamang origins.

Tamang sacrificial specialists (*lambu*) also recite places, but their listings are markedly different from those of *bombo*. Höfer reported one sacrificer’s observation that sacrificial practice is different from that of shamanic *bombo*: “[Place recitation] is like a pilgrimage, one pays a visit . . . to the divinity; [but] once I the *lambu* [sacrificer] have reached this destination my work is over, whereas the bombo’s is just to start” (Höfer 1994:29). As they move in their recitations their heart-minds (*sem*) “meditate” (*gomba*) on these beings, and, “carrying” them, they shake in their presence. In these chants and meditations, *bombo* apperceptively transcend known geographic space: villages, hills, temples, bazaars, stupas, divine sites, cliff faces, mountains, caves, lakes, and any remarkable geographic features. *Bombo* take their trips subsequently to the very limits of the known cosmos: “below” to *dilli* (Delhi), *bombe* (Bombay), and *amrika* (America), and finally up into Tibet beyond the high Himalayas. Most of these places, except the most distant, are known to villagers either from trading, herding, searching for employment, or going on pilgrimages. This initial transcendence creates an overview attainable by anyone who travels or who listens to the recitations. This initial transcendence is supplemented by a meta-transcendence liter-

³Portions of the shamanic recitations and interviews produced here first appear in Holmberg (1989).

ally to a consciousness beyond transparent formulation in speech or oration.

Bombo take themselves through gates into secret territories (*beyhul*) envisioned as the highest reaches of the Himalayas and the places of divinities, ancestral shamanic spirits, and power.⁴ “Going to divinity” is an omnibus realization of alternate vision described as an unveiling, opening, or clarifying. *Bombo* find lost shadow-souls in this state, check the condition of life-force trees, and see divinatory signs. They pass through the gates of the divinities with the words, “Open the iron lock, iron goddess. Open the silver lock, silver goddess. Open the copper lock, copper goddess. Open the quartz lock, quartz goddess. Open the gold lock, gold goddess.” The *bombo* then sits with eyes closed and reveals (*mipsal phepa*). *Bombo* described their experiences to me in these terms:

DH: Do you see the revelation yourself?

Bombo: Yes and no. It is faint, poorly lit. If you see a cow it means *sapta lu* [the client is bothered by a being call *lu*]. If you see the ritually colored rice or a white quartz rock it means you have encountered the curse of another. . . . [*Bombo* recounts a long list of other interpretive signs.] You sit there with your eyes closed and it comes as a dream it is just like when Buddhist lamas close their eyes. You sit there and think; you see sort of like a dream.

DH: Do you go by yourself?

Bombo: When they come down you do not see [female furies - *khandangmo*] with your eyes. You shudder. They come down grasping. After meditating, they go in front of us. Just like someone in the village goes ahead and leads the trail—in that fashion the *khandangmo* [furies] go in front. You go like that to the heavens. When you arrive there it is like a flash of daylight. It is very bright just like sunshine. Then like night it becomes black. Dark like night. Sometimes dark and sometimes black and then real light like day. It can be like that back and forth. Then you sit and think/meditate.

DH: When you do the revelation below why does it

⁴The rhetorical imagery here is complex, for the *bombo* invokes divinities in movements upwards geographically across high peaks and promontories but simultaneously brings the divinities into the altar. Thus, in the recitations that occur when going into the divine, I have heard *bombo* call out that they are going into the altar to reveal. The altar itself, however, is a microcosm of regional geographic space.

come at [the time you recite] *daksin kaali* [divine site in Kathmandu]?

Bombo: There is a great divinity there. Below all the divinities [lists names of pilgrimage sites in India], all the earth is revealed and taken [in the chant]. From there, all the places to the west are revealed and taken in the place-recitation [*rhikap*]. All the earth is revealed. From here all the earth is revealed, from there all the earth is revealed and [the chant is] taken. After you reach *daksin kaali*, you lift up and take [the chant]. . . . There the eyes are closed briefly and you see what happens. After that you come back up to the village; all the villages are put in order [in the chant]. Then you go right on up, up, up to *Ui same kimaradata beyhul* [on Tibetan plateau]. You go to intermediate space [*barkap*]. *Beyhul* [secret territories] is a divine realm; it is the place of the bombos. It is like [the Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Kathmandu: Baudhanath and Swayambhunath]. You can see as if [in the light of a burning] butter lamp in these places. . . . When you get up there having lit the butter lamp [on the shamanic altar], you recount all the hills, you meditate on all the hills.

When the *bombo* goes to the divinities, the audience faces an enigma. They can follow the *bombo* as he travels the trails of the earth, but when he goes to the divinities they are left behind. They only see the *bombo* sitting with eyes closed, drum still and occasionally shuddering, sighing, or whistling for as long as five or ten minutes. Höfer reports that in a neighboring area the *bombo* “collapses” (Höfer 1994:210). He succinctly notes, confirming my own observations, “What makes *lari ñiba* [going to the divinities] unique is precisely the *bombo*’s absence. ‘Lying there like dead,’ his performance is reduced to performing an absence” (Höfer 1994:193).

These visions are beyond the capacity of audiences to experience directly, and they know them, like dreams, only in retelling. *Bombo* later report their visions in separate, formal divinatory recitations. One *bombo* described the process from experience to retelling as a fitting together:

As we reach *Ui Same* [in Tibet], it comes to us in our innards. When we chant it [tell the results], it comes fitted together [implication is that it is fragmented in experience.] When we reach there with eyes shut, when we look it comes faintly [as at dawn and dusk]. . . . Mind and chant reach the divine realms. The mind flashes there like a fire in the forest.

Although it is couched in qualifiers when recounted, this divinatory vision is authoritative and implies courses of action. *Bombo* report that individuals or households are harmed

by particular evils, are the victims of curses, or that their relations with divinities have somehow been broken. In revelation, then, *bombo* make the human condition subject to external agents and thus malleable. Transcendent vision produces an orientation toward the world where things are not necessarily the way they appear and do not necessarily have to remain the way they are: they are transformable. Shamanic divination then becomes the focus of discussion among those who hear the divinations and become the framework for planning future ritual action.

In conjunction with the attainment of visions of the transformative possibility of the human condition, *bombo* eat and embody *wang* or magical power during soundings. *Bombo* summon *wang* or magical power primarily from glacial lakes in the secret territories of high Himalayas. This *wang* appears as glimmerings on the *bombo*'s drum. *Bombo* scatter rice grains on their drums, pour some on their heads, ingest some of this rice, and scatter the remaining rice onto the altar, especially into the vessels of water representing these high mountain lakes. *Bombo* shudder and shake (*chekpa*) when they eat this power. In shamanic ritual symbology, the inner strength of *bombo*—upon which they depend in their dangerous practice—is produced in the act of the ingestion of *wang*. In other words, *wang* is an essence that exists in Tamang construction outside of human productive capacity. I hope to demonstrate that this transcendent power reifies and alienates the capacity of *bombo* to regenerate themselves as active agents who have overcome the assaults and seizures which have reduced them to helpless, inactive, dependent, and crazed subjects.

From abject subject to agentive person

Chakke Bombo recounted a severe attack by ancestral spirits whose appeasement could be achieved only when he pledged to adopt the shamanic vocation:

At about the time I was sixteen, I went crazy. I knew nothing. I just walked around crazy. . . . I ate fire. I fell in the fire. . . . [After twenty years of torment by and temporary appeasement of ancestral spirits,] I was sick [for five months]. I died. They [entire village] were planting that day and everyone stopped work. They said, 'Now we shall have to get the cremation shroud.' . . . My breath came again. I did not even know this myself. . . . [By the sixth month] I became a little better. My body was withered. I was black as soot. . . . When I slept, I shook violently out from the middle of my chest. I rolled back and forth. I did not even know. I could not raise myself up. I shit there lying on a blanket—others had to throw it out. . . . The curse of another [hit me] and I was tied up by ancestral spirits.

Chakke Bombo had been grasped, seized, caught, captured by *lente*—the spirits of deceased *bombo*—who reside in the

secret territories. Chakke Bombo, as he described his condition was reduced to abject subjectivity without the life-force or will to act. He was completely overwhelmed not only by seizure of ancestral *bombo* but attack by hordes of other malevolent forces.

While I resided with Tamang, *lente* attacked another young man who looked wild and who sat on a porch for days staring in an unfocused and wild way but speechless. Villagers reported him as out of control, wandering from place to place, shaking and shuddering uncontrollably, eating fire, flying wildly from place to place, and placing himself in mortal danger.

Tempering seizure and converting abjectivity to agency is a long and often arduous process of establishing control. In Chakke Bombo's case it took him almost twenty years. Rejuvenation depends on generating the capacity to shake and shudder under the force of an internal power or strength. This strength is first fed to the fledgling *bombo* by master *bombo* who invoke power and feed it to them. Once *bombo* have acquired the control to practice on their own, they can summon this power for themselves and transfer it to others.

Once this power is generated, the *bombo* acquires the capacity to control. The imagery of his or her condition changes from that of being grasped, seized, or captured to that of "carrying" divinities and spirits "piggy-back" (*khurpa*) and "playfully bouncing" them about as one would a small child (*tengba*). The principle verbs used to describe their contact with the divine convey the idea of control and mastery over what was once overwhelming seizure. Internal energy, furthermore, allows *bombo* to invite evils who are consuming the very flesh of his clients into his or her own body with the invitation: "Eat my flesh, suck my blood, crunch my bones." Phokso Bombo described internal power in these terms:

DH: Where does the *bombo*'s power come from? Why does the *bombo* shake and shudder?

Bombo: If an evil spirit comes, it can make you shake. If a divinity comes, it can make you shake. *Sherap* (mental clarity/intensity) comes from *wang* (power); *wang* comes from *sherap*. If you have no *wang*, *sherap* can not come. If no *wang* comes, if no *sherap* comes you do not shake much. If you do not have *wang*, you become tired. If you have no *wang*, those things come and really shake you, if you have *wang* you cast them off easily. [Without *wang*] they grab you tight-complete. If you have *wang*, when you are grabbed the forces are made equal and you make them meet; the forces are equal, they do not overcome you. . . . Then you shake them along evenly and slowly.

Through the generation of power, *bombo* establish something akin to what Bruce Kapferer, in his study of Sri Lankan sorcery, has called "the agency of consciousness" (Kapferer

1997:44) or a capacity to project outward and into the world to effect one's circumstance. For Tamang *bombo*, such outward directionality—what Kapferer calls “intentionality” (Kapferer 1997:264)—depends on a visceral force imagined as produced by the ingestion of *wang*. This internal force fights off assault from outside and allows the reaggregation of a fragmented consciousness, which in Tamang rhetorics of affliction accompany abjectivity. The course of a *bombo*'s life is, then, a process of attaining self-command, a transformation from crazed seizure to controlled mastery, from a state of abjectivity to one of agency.

Calling of shadow-souls and resuscitating life force

In the performative acts of curative soundings, *bombo* dramatize their own mastery and serve as paragons with which the afflicted can gain perspective and mastery over their abject persons. Further, the specific practices of curative soundings follow a logic homologous to that of the self-transformations in the lives of *bombo*. The enactments reconstitute fragmented, fearful, and uncertain emotive consciousness and reactivate bodily life force of the afflicted. The recapture of lost-shadow souls (*bla*) and the revitalization of life-force (*so*) are two of the more important goals of the curative soundings.

Tamang distinguish between body (*lih*) and heart-mind (*sem*). The latter is the combined seat of emotions and consciousness, summarily considered here as emotive consciousness. These correspond in turn to two objectifications which can be acted upon ritually: *so* or life-force which is associated with body (*lih*) and *bla* or shadow-souls which are associated with emotive consciousness (*sem*). Life-force grows up through the body like a tree. When life force expires, the individual dies. On the contrary, *bla* or shadow-souls continue after death as directed emotive-consciousness until the completion of death rites when they go into rebirth in a new life-form. Living humans have nine shadow-souls or *bla*. During sleep, all but one of these shadow-souls can travel out of the nine orifices of the body and, in these movements, produce dream consciousness.⁵ Shadow-souls can become lost or captured in these movements. They can also be lost in instances of fright. Shadow-soul loss produces general conditions of paralyzing anxiety, helpless confusion, and trembling as well as specific diseases. When these shadow-souls get separated from the body the heart-mind or emotive consciousness (*sem*) is disrupted. Where life-force stands for the strength and integrity of physicality, shadow-souls objectify the potential for the fragmentation of selves in asociality, indeterminacy, terror, or capture.

One *bombo* listed the following places where he searches out lost shadow-souls, a listing consistent with orations I recorded in actual soundings:

⁵The relation of the *bla* to the human body is like the relation of the *bombo* to society.

In a domain of the homeless,
 In a domain of confusion,
 In a domain of distress,
 In a domain of rumorous gossip,
 In a domain of cannibals,
 In a domain of closed mouths,
 In a domain of licentious sex.

Above a great rock,
 Above a great tree,
 Above a great cliff,
 Above a great rent in the earth,
 Above a crevasse,
 In a low flying cloud,
 In a whirling wind,
 In a great thunderbolt,
 In a great lightening flash,
 In the midsky,
 In the puddles of a marsh.

In the domain of the living,
 In the domain of the dead,
 In the hand of an evil *lama*,
 In the hand of an evil *bombo*,
 With the Newar shades,
 With the Gurung shades,
 With the headless shades,
 With the *bir*,
 With *Shyingmon-brabon*,
 With *Kharta*.

In place where bulls are snorting/charging,
 In a place where wild boars menacingly threaten,
 In a place where dogs are spinning and fighting,
 In a place where chickens sneak off.

In a banana grove,
 In a high pasture.

As these places suggest, emotive consciousness is disrupted and fragmented in realms of antisociality (gossip, silence or shunning, licentious sex, cannibalism, homelessness), in an absence of fixity (in clefts, in midspace, in puddles, marshes, mist), in places of fright (fighting bulls, threatening wild boars, fighting dogs, sneaking chickens), or in the capture of evil ghosts or sorcerers. One could argue that the ritual process of calling constitutes for the patient a transcendent vision of the sources of their fragmented emotive consciousness and of concomitant fear and confusion. The ritual action of refixing the *bla* enacts the reconstitution of self as a centered emotive consciousness (*sem*).

The resuscitation of life-force or *so* accompanies this re-centering in acts of transcendence. *Bombo*—as part of the omnibus “going to divinity”—travel to a mythic mountain where a tree grows for every adult human. These trees

are human altars. If a tree becomes damaged, the internal life-forces (*so*) of a person is weakened. All soundings conclude with the raising up of life-force and the conveyance of the blessing of long-life. A sapling—most often of the resilient chestnut tree—is held directly over the patient following the line of the backbone in an image of internal strength. The *bombo* then conveys a blessing of long-life—a variant of *wang*—along with a host of other essences summoned from the divinities. The *bombo* “sees” the true conditions of those afflicted and revitalizes them.

In this brief recounting of two ritual actions (among the many actions of soundings), we can see how shamanic spatial transcendence transforms the individual into an active agent in the world. I have concentrated on the production of the individual and I have focused on the afflicted individual and a *bombo* in the sounding. Soundings, however, are socially more extensive. At a minimum, co-residents of patrilineal, patrilineal extended households are in attendance as well as neighboring agnatic kin and principle affinal kin of the head of the household. Central to the divinities invoked during soundings are the protective divinities of patrilineal (and by extension patrilineal households), and it is from these divinities that powerful blessings emanate. More often than not soundings constitute ritual events which attract numerous spectators from neighboring households and the entire village who themselves come with offerings to the *bombo* so that their conditions will be divined along with those of the principle participants. Thus, enactments in soundings not only reproduce or regenerate individuals as social persons but reproduce society itself. The power to gain mastery over assault is likewise ultimately a combination of an internal power of self production with an external power of social production. Both productive processes are symbolically distilled in the idea of *wang* or magical power which is, as I have suggested elsewhere, intimately tied to the productive capacity of humans (Holmberg 2000).

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