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Linda L. Iltis
University of Washington

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In 1974, John T. Hitchcock published “A Shaman’s Song and some Implications for Himalayan Research,” and included a brief summary of a lengthy shaman’s song that he had recorded during the course of his field research among the Magars in Nepal’s Bhuji Valley. He compared the patterns of ambiguity found in the song with the ambiguities in the shaman’s social status and those associated with wife-givers and wife-receivers in the “system of . . . generalized exchange” among Magar patrilines. In 1976, John published a more complete translation and analysis of a version of the song text, followed by further analysis in two unpublished conference papers (1978a, 1978b). When John offered me the opportunity to translate and analyze the Nepali transcriptions of a song version performed by a different shaman, Mān Dev Kumāi, I fell in love with the colorful and vibrant nature of the characters. While John chose to explore the dynamic parallels with social structure and the shaman’s status, I have chosen to explore the roles of female characters and female symbolism, and to provide a slightly abridged translation of a full song text. The Nine Witch Sister song is about the First Shaman, Rāma, and the nature and origins of sickness and suffering. While the song is about shamans and witch-evil, it appears to be influenced by the broader Hindu and Buddhist worldview which Magars also encounter and embrace in other ritual contexts. In this story, characters with classical Hindu names—Mānu, Rāma, Parmēśvar, and Sītā—interact with other characters having local Magar names, bridging this story with other classical Hindu narratives such as the Rāmāyaṇa or Mahābhārata, but this song’s characters are not necessarily identified as one and the same as the classical narrative figures.

In order to determine what kinds of female symbolism and roles occur in the song, and to better understand the Jhānkri’s viewpoint, we will explore and compare female normative roles and symbolism with the ethnographic context of Magar society as reported by John Hitchcock. This exploration and comparison will in turn suggest whether and in what way, the female element contributes to the uniqueness of the Jhānkri’s viewpoint.

Because themes other than the story of the witches occur in this song, and because most of these themes deal with “origins,” it appears that Naujā Guntäni serves more purposes than that of simply counteracting witch-evil. The song seems especially to serve the important purpose of validating the nature of, and explaining the role of, the Jhānkri himself (Hitchcock 1976: 181). Interestingly, the theme of the nine witch sisters, a “female” theme, is associated with these origin themes. In combination with them, it not only provides an integral aspect of the Jhānkri performance tradition, but also supplies material essential for defining the Jhānkri himself.

Greg Maskarinec notes that “recitals treat names borrowed from Hindu stories very casually” (1995:79). For in-depth discussion of the possible connections of the Magar Nine Witch Sister song with Bon, Buddhist, and Naxi myths, see Ellingson (1972), Watters (1975:166, n.54), Greve (1989), Sales (1994), and Oppitz (1998). One can also see distant similarities of this story with the popular Newari version of the Buddhist Avidaña legend of Simhalasīrthaśabha, the trader (see also Lewis 1993), who goes to Tibet (or Sri Lanka in the Sanskrit version) and inadvertently marries and brings back a witch who is finally “domesticated.”

1 Several versions of the song referred to here were collected in 1962 & 1967 by John T. Hitchcock; including one performed by Deo Rām. An abridged translation and analysis of this version appeared in Hitchcock 1976: 183-189. My translation here of Mān Dev Kumāi’s version is based on John’s Nepali transcription field notes, which he made available to me in 1978.


3 I am indebted to John for encouraging my studies of women and religion in Nepal. Though I have visited some of John Hitchcock’s fieldwork sites, I do not profess to be an expert on Magar culture. Ter Ellingson (2000) and I both worked with a Tamang Bon po shaman in Kathmandu Valley, and my recent research on Tantric Buddhist women healers was with a Newar Dya Māju in the Kathmandu Valley (2002).
Even though most themes and characters in the song are unexpectedly introduced, only to be unexpectedly dropped in a dream-like logical pattern, the female elements transcend this fragmentary progression to give the song structural unity over and above its literal meaning. Because female characters and elements occur in sequence throughout, they create a binding structural force for the entire song. Without this binding force, the episodes of the song would appear completely isolated and discontinuous; with it, the song is a unified whole. We will explore this use of female elements in a dream-like logical pattern, the female elements transcending the male characters and elements occur in sequence throughout the presentation of them.

\textit{Naujā Gunāmī - The Song of The Nine Witch Sisters}

\textit{A shaman song from Nepal – recorded by J. T. Hitchcock}

\textit{Narrative Translation by Linda Ilitis}

After Great-Grandfather and the Great Spirits of the forest flew away with everything on the earth, the earth became barren in the First Age, or \textit{sati yuga}.\textsuperscript{5} One day, in the middle of the third yuga, at noon, the earth surface, \textit{jal thal} [mixture of earth and water-marsh?] and underground, \textit{sātānāma}, were created. The creators, Dhan Dhanawati, Dhan Karmawati, Dhandā Belawati, were from underground, \textit{sātānāma}. The creators Dhandha Parmeswar, Dhandha Nārāyaṇa, Dhandha Goshiyā were from earth surface, \textit{pātānāma}.\textsuperscript{6}

In the month of \textit{Magh}, when Mahādev and his two sisters Karmawati and Belawati were begging, Parmeswar went to them in search of a bride for a father's sister's son.\textsuperscript{7} Mahādev created for him a precious parentless daughter, Anākhēni, who, being a mother's brother's daughter was a perfect match.\textsuperscript{8}

With her husband, Anākhēni descended to the underground. But in her new home, Anākhēni became sluggish and unhappy. There it was always dark; nothing was ever accomplished; and her father-in-law just lay by the fireplace, doing nothing but complaining. Her mother-in-law (paternal aunt) slept restless, her red bead necklace flopping this way and that as she tossed and turned in the night. In despair, Anākhēni fled to her original home (\textit{mainiti}), where Parmeswar lay sleeping, and wept bitterly at his side. Her yellow tears flowed heavily like a river until they formed a small lake.

Parmeswar, who was in the habit of sleeping twelve years and waking twelve years, yawned with delicious sleep and woke up. Awakening to find Anākhēni sitting on the straw mat and miserably crying on the pillow, he offered her the wealth and riches of his house.\textsuperscript{9}

Take butter, take cows, take buffalo, and take sheep, goats, chickens and doves. Take copper utensils, anything that glitters gold, take it with you!

She said,

No that wealth is not good, these are not wealth. Things are not good; these are not goods.

"Please take half my rice seedlings if your harvest is poor!" he said.

But then, from under the golden ladder, Anākhēni lifted up the golden \textit{jābe tārī}\textsuperscript{10} (container) covered with coins and carried it to the middle of the threshold. Parmeswar suddenly shrunk back like a half-dead flower. "Oh no Chori, wait!" In despair he pleaded with his daughter, saying: "This \textit{jābe tārī} is the ruby of the home, . . . Beware! The curse of the mother’s womb and the father’s seed might befall you!" Apparently disregarding Parmeswar, Anākhēni looking to the left removed nine suns, and looking to the right removed nine moons; and she took nine hundred thousand stars from the \textit{jābe tārī}. She placed the suns in her right pocket and

\textsuperscript{5} Satī yuga probably refers to \textit{Satya Yuga}, or the golden age in Hindu cosmology. Four \textit{yugas} make up a complete cycle, which then repeats itself through time. Each \textit{yuga} represents a "progressive decline" in worldly conditions and duration until the fourth (shortest) or \textit{Kali Yuga}, which involves the destruction of the world only to be re-created in the following cycle (Basham 1954: 321).

\textsuperscript{6} This may be translated: Dhan Dhanawati, D. Karmawati, and D. Belawati were from underground (\textit{Sītā nāma}), and D. Parmeswar, D. Narayana, and D. Goshiya, were from earth surface, (\textit{pātā nāma}) (Hitchcock notes, IA.).

\textsuperscript{7} The "bride" who is sought by Parmeswar is not for himself but for another man. It may be inferred that Mahādev and Parmeswar are related to one another as lineage brothers, and in a marriage system of "generalized exchange" (Hitchcock 1974: 151-152), are both in the position of "wife-givers." Parmeswar not having any children of his own goes to his lineage brother Mahādev for a marriageable girl.

\textsuperscript{8} In Magar society, cross-cousin marriage with mother's brother's daughter is a preferred arrangement (Hitchcock 1966: 63-64). Here, an everyday normative custom is applied to non-human beings.

\textsuperscript{9} It is common for a married woman (in Magar society) to receive large gifts from her natal home, which then become and remain her own property (Hitchcock 1966: 44).

\textsuperscript{10} The meaning of \textit{jābe tārī} is somewhat obscure. The description of it in the text indicates that it is probably a kind of valuable container (or necklace?) (Hitchcock notes: 2). According to R. Turner (1931:214b), \textit{jabi} (a possible variant form of \textit{jābe}) is a sack, and \textit{tare} (variant) means having a string or wire band (ibid.:280 n.1). MacDonald (1976:331 note 29) mentions that the word \textit{jabi} probably refers to "the sack worn by the human \textit{jāhnikri} while he officiates. This sack, slung over the right shoulder, hangs at the left of the waist. it is often decorated with cowries, wild boars teeth . . . etc." Another explanation of \textit{jābe tārī} was given to me by a Newar woman from Bandipur, Nepal. She claimed that a \textit{jābe tārī} is a pipal tree worshiped by witches. By placing this tree in her cupped palms a witch was then able to fly to far away distant lands like Kāi (in India) and back again (Jamuna Shrestha, personal communication).
moons in her left pocket, and tied up the stars in a yogi's bundle. She took the constellation and folded it and put it in the bundle. She took one step, then two, and bowed to her father, bowed to her mother, Parmeswar, bowed to her older brother Nārāyaṇ, and taking a third step as she left, Parmeswar gave his final advice, "Wait Chori! You are taking the ruby of our house! Take my advice! Obey me! Don't let shame befall you on the road! Never bow your head in shame! Belāwati and Karmāwati will light lamps and burn incense, doing kriya for you."

Given the advice she went. Given the wisdom she left.

While on the road, Anākheni suddenly felt her right side getting overheated and her left side beginning to freeze. Her throat became like snow. "What kind of things and wealth did my merchant father give me?" she wondered. She opened her pockets and bundle, whereupon the nine suns, the nine moons, the nine hundred thousand stars, and even the constellation, ascended to the heavens to Indra. She cried, "My father Danda Parmeswar gives advice that pinches me in the neck and makes my heart hurt." Under the dawai pipal tree, under the lahana pipal tree she began to weep bitterly. And her tears made the barren place lush with vegetation. Everything became clear.

There is nothing which can be called night.
There is nothing which can be called day.
There was no time that could be called night.
There was no time that could be called day.
Night was full of light, and day was full of light.
By the heat of nine suns, the heat of nine moons, the water became hot, and earth began to melt.

"Let's go to our western home on the Bheri Karn?li River," said Parmeswar. Even ants began to float away, because everything melted, even quartz melted into the water because of the heat. Danda Parmeswar was ashamed and very troubled. The leaves couldn't last, the grass couldn't grow. All green vegetation became a barren place. Then Parmeswar said:

Wherever it became a barren place let jungle foliage and green things grow there! Let's go to the western home and erect an iron pillar! Let's go to the eastern home and erect a bell-metal pillar! Let's go to the southern home and set up a brass pillar, and in the north let's set up a copper pillar!

Then a black female spider began weaving a web. From east to west and north to south she spread her web. A black female termite moved and patted the mud. Parmeswar moved the sun, looking side to side, struggling to make progress. Finally of the nine suns, moons and nine hundred stars, Parmeswar moved away eight suns, eight moons and eight hundred thousand stars, and the barren places became lush again. He left one sun, one moon, and one hundred thousand stars. "It was a barren place, but I'll make it a jungly place," thought Parmeswar. Manyu Srijit went. Short grass grew, longer grass grew, and everything grew. The barren place was made green.

Parmeswar then asked: "Of what shall I create man?"
First, he tried to make man out of gold, but the forests turned yellow and man couldn't speak. Second, he tried to make man out of silver, but the field and forest turned white and man still couldn't speak. Third, Parmeswar tried making man out of bell metal, and still field and forest turned white, and man couldn't speak. When Parmeswar tried to make man out of copper, field and forest turned red, and the copper was too weak. The copper then became copper mine wealth instead. When Parmeswar tried making man out of brass, he was unsuccessful because the metal smith could flatten him. Then Parmeswar tried making man out of iron, but the field and forest turned black, and the iron man laughed, saying: "I am in the king's palace, in the subjects' homes, in the rich man's house, in the poor man's house, the digging spade and anything sharp." Parmeswar tried making man out of clay, but he was too brittle. Parmeswar found nothing with which to create man that was sufficiently permanent and durable.

Then Parmeswar remembered:

That chicken! That very chicken, which by the heat of the nine suns and the nine moons was burned! Fire burnt her large feathers and downy feathers, and she went to the underground, to the Pool of Tears and hid herself!

Parmeswar and Mahādev went in search of the chicken, and found her in the underground near the Pool of Tears. The chicken swore at them, saying:

I lost everything because of the heat of the nine suns and the nine moons! I lost not only my downy feathers, but: my legs, my claws, my head, my eyes, my beak, my tongue, my crop, my windpipe, my intestines, my gizzard, my spleen, and my heart!

Since she had lost all these, Parmeswar and Mahādev suggested replacement parts for her: "Put soft copper for a head, red beads for eyes, iron for a beak, pipal leaf for a tongue, wheat and barley straw for a windpipe, cloth rags for a crop, cotton string for intestines, grass seed for a giz-

11 The word for spider given here is magari, which is a variant form of makhuri, or makhura. Since both makhuri, and kali (its modifying adjective) indicate female (with the "i" ending) it may be inferred that magari is a female spider. Makhuri is also a name given to some women (as a nick-name, or teasing-gesture) but not to men (Krishna & Bishnu Pradhan, personal communication).

12 This could mean "Manjušri went," which among Newars in Kathmandu Valley is short for "Manjušri went north to Tibet [in the spring]," and means "Springtime came."
zard, a pine cone for a heart, soft copper for a spleen, fern stems for legs, iron for her claws, and soft cotton all around for feathers. Thus remade, the chicken flew out of the Pool of Tears with a whirl of wings, and Parmeswar and Mahadev caught her and took her back above ground to Patanama.

Then Parmeswar was still thinking: “I haven’t created man yet!” He started mixing the female chicken’s dung with white ashes and red clay. He put the mixture into the bottom of a hole for ten months. When he opened the hole, Manu [man] came forth. But Manu was restless, and started scrambling and scratching here and there, so Parmeswar brought forth two companions for Manu: mother’s brother and sister’s daughter (mama and bhiinji). By striking a tone on a bell-metal utensil, Parmeswar put life into Manu. Thus man was created. Putting on and off their shirts, and putting on and off their skirts, man became like ants.

While in the garden of Sitā the apsāra goddess,13 Manu cut down a cucumber vine. Sitā was so angered that she cursed and spit upon Manu. She is still angry today. She set the stars against Manu. From the womb of an elephant, from the womb of a horse, from the womb of a sheep, from the womb of a goat, and from nine sources of stars, she set untimely death against man.

Manu became afflicted with natural disasters, water turning black, bridges collapsing under foot into the river, trees falling, landslides falling, rocks falling down from cliffs, tigers coming to eat him, bears coming to eat him, chills, cramps, pains in the legs, coughing, cold feet, side pains, heart pains, and the possibility of death at any time irrespective of age. Manu then began to wonder what might be the cause of all his afflictions, and who might know or have heard what to do?

Manu called on the learned four-faced god Brahma, who, bringing black and white creepers and black and white yak tails, and the nectar of immortality from the Gangā and Jamunā Rivers, was able to remove pain and death, and able to temporarily drive out the sickness-causing forces from the patients’ bodies. The Nine Graha [powerful planetary/astrological deities] thought, “The four-faced one has come! Now he will eat us!” So they climbed a tree and stayed there. But when death and the nine stars brought sickness again, the four-faced one was called a second time, and again and again, however, he was unsuccessful in his attempts to overcome the sickness-causing forces.

Next, Manu called on the self-created Kālu Jaisi from Tagabacchi village, Bharsha Paṇḍit, and Māītā Dhāmi. Bharsha Paṇḍit examined his Banaras and local astrological calendars; Kālu Jaisi divined and drew lines to indicate the levels of the earth and heavens; and Māītā Dhāmi set a nine-way trap, following which he began to call the dhāmi spirit into himself. The dhāmi helping spirit couldn’t say what Manu was suffering from. He said nothing because he couldn’t say the suffering was caused by Māśān, the dangerous ghost of an un-cremated dead person, and he didn’t know why Manu was suffering from untimely death and the nine stars. He ran away speechless.

Finally, Manu called the shaman named Rāmā. Rāmā was self-taught, self-created, and he was “the one who knew and had heard”. With his copper drum and lead drumstick, he stood on the threshold of the door. With a creeper he struck “twak!” and “twak” down. Rāmā set a nine-way trap for the nine stars. Lighting a lamp, burning incense, sitting on a gold stool and gold blanket, he called his dhāmi spirit into himself. The spirit then began to speak, telling of the deceit of Māśān, and saying that untimely death and the nine stars befell Manu because of the spell of the Nine Witch Sisters. The witches began speaking directly, saying: “Now that you [Manu] have come to know the cause of your troubles as the Nine Witch Sisters, you shall begin to see our own malicious entertainment!” A violent argument with the witches followed, after which Rāmā ran away to his [wife] Jhumā Jhānkrelī,14 speechless.

Jhumā, wondering why Rāmā was so upset and speechless, asked him to eat his meal. Rāmā replied that it was the argument with the Nine Witch Sisters, which upset him. After telling Rāmā to finish his meal, she offered him an idea and wisdom, saying:

When the eclipse of the sun is occurring, when the eclipse of the moon is occurring, turn the chain of your necklace inside out and back and forth. Then go to the western home in Dāray Gaurā, and dig up and bring the Bhampa kachur [charm]. Use the Bhampa kachur with the teacher’s necklace.15

Rāmā had his axe sharpened and tempered so that it was blue like a Munāl pheasant, blue like a peacocks feather, and then he began to make his drum. He went to a place with a cliff and a waterfall below. He cut the sadhan geri tree and carried it down the cliff. Cutting a ring from the sadhan geri tree, he placed the ring in the bottom of a hole in the underground for a fortnight. Three days after bringing it out, he shaved the wood and had the metal smith strike nine nails into it. Then, descending to the black underworld, he struck down a ghorāl wild goat with a wounded leg that died with the head in the north and feet in the south; the great skin was there. He brought back the skin. He bound and shaped the drum with creepers, and laced it with buckle-skin lacing. Finally, he attached two bamboo sticks on the inside for handles. Following the making of his drum, Rāmā assembled his costume, consisting of several kinds of skins and blue pheasant feathers.

Once all was assembled, Rāmā to dance, turning the soles

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13 This apsāra, Sitā, is unlike traditional Hindu descriptions of apsāra.

14 The title Jhānkrelī may mean the wife of the Jhānkri, or a female Jhānkri.

15 Bhampa kachur could be related to the Tibetan word bumpa vessel with water containing a deity.
of his feet now this way, now that. Then, biting his Bhampa kachur charm three times, he blew from east to west, north to south, and toward the sky and toward the underground. At that moment, the Nine Witch Sisters felt sharp, pinching pains in their sides. The eldest one was pierced by Rama’s secret spells. The witches, realizing that this was the work of his feet now this way, now that. Then, biting his "Uncle" Rama,

Figure 1. Representation of the Nine Witch Sisters, based on the physical description of the witch sisters in the text.

Quickly the Nine Witch Sisters let down their hair, combed it, and made buns on the left sides of their heads. They put on sandalwood-paste tikka beauty marks, black skirts and white shawls, tied up their bundles, and left with Rama on the most auspicious day for the journey.

The Nine Witch Sisters and Rama went on a long journey all around the country. They went here and there and up and down. Each time they stopped, they sang the melancholy songs (lahai bara),16 played their bowed lutes (sārangi, nyaryang, and karyang), and danced the western line dance.17 They made rope swings (ping) and wooden Ferris wheels (roti ping), drank rice beer (chang), ate puffed rice, and smoked tobacco from a coconut and bamboo water pipe and a palm pipe passed in a circle.

Rama lured the witches to the foreign land of the horse-faced people with long ears. “Let’s go up, oh Nānī, let’s go up! To the country of horse-faced people, in the country of long ears, there are people with long ears, and horse-faced people.” The witches asked, “Is this true? What is this Uncle?”

Rama said, “It’s the place where they eat you up in the foreign country.” “In the foreign country, in the foreign place it is your ears, Uncle. We are in your hands.”

There, Rama made the water disappear, and the witches nearly died of thirst. The witches danced and sang their sorrowful songs while pressing their heels into the ground, and finally were able to create a swamp and to drink. They made a dipper out of sangena leaves, and stood and drank. Uncle Rama then said to them, “Drink with your heads bowed down.” He thought, “Now I’ll sink down.” Singing sorrowful songs they stood and drank.

Rama said,

Let’s go down, Nānī, to Salai Thinkeri and the village called Chirka. Let’s go to Tarāp, Nānī. Let’s go to Bādan Phatka. Let’s go to the village called Kolā; and to the village called Dima, let’s go Nānī.

Let’s go to the Kakai khola; to the village called Khānī, let’s go Nānī. Let’s go to Chili Pahār, let’s go down, Nānī, to Lawan Bantāri. Let’s go to Bhujai Bhārā; let’s go down Nānī to Bhotān Beri. Let’s go to Yalkot; to Masan Ghāt let’s go.

Let’s go up Nānī; let’s go to Tārākot. Let’s go across, Nānī; to the village called Gumbā. Let’s go across, Nānī, let’s go to Tubā. Let’s go up Nānī, let’s go to Sati Tāra. Let’s go to Lāmā Dera; let’s go up Nānī. Let’s go to Khersyang Kutta; let’s go to Saune Pānī, at the place where the seven roads

16 These songs may refer to songs referred to by Hitchcock called mangal, which “the shaman says are western witches’ songs” (Hitchcock 1976:194, note 17).

17 According to Hitchcock (Ibid.:194, note 16), “The shaman believes this is a witches’ dance from the west”.

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come together. Let’s go to Chilai Pâñî, to Batai Pâñî let’s go. Let’s go up to Thangne Chautara.”

Those gunâni (witches), those janâni (sisters), and that very Uncle Râmâchan
came to visit the other Râmâ. They came traveling from around the country. At Thangne Chautara they took out chang and puffed rice to eat. They made the swing; they made the ping; they played on the swing; they played on the ping. They played the bina, the sârangi and the karyang and danced the western dance. After staying seven to fifteen days in Thangne Chautara they went to visit Râmâ there.

Let’s go up, Nânî, to the back part; let’s go up to Huile Phale Dhungo, to Devîko Deorâli. Let’s go down to the foot of Jungala; let’s go, Nânî, to Ghori Kashaya. Let’s go down, Nânî, down to Laukatera.

Let’s go to the foot of Purbang; let’s go to Kâlâ Paira (black landslide). Let’s go up, Nânî, to Salai Kundala, and to Satai Kundala; let’s go to Râta Mâta. Let’s go up, Nânî, to Pâni Dhalai, to Bhujyâl Chautara. To the other side Nânî, let’s go to Pupâl Daha to Bârâ Daha.

With Dhangâ Janañî, with Dhandâ Gunâni, with Naujâ Janâni, and with Naujâ Gunâni, in the lake they believed there is a Râmâ. They made offerings with cut cloth, with handfuls of unbroken rice, for Bâhrâ Tâl. They began to bow their heads in worship, and then Râmâ said,

Let’s go down, Nânî, to the foot of Pupâl. Let’s go down, Nânî, to Jethi Singa; let’s go down, Nânî, to Maili Singa.

Râmâ and the witches continued on their journey until Râmâ broke open a mountain and sank into the rock for three days. When he reappeared, he was transformed into a wandering religious mendicant. He asked the Nine Witch Sisters directions for the road. “Oh mothers, which is the right road? Which way should I go?” The Witch Sisters asked, “Which way did you come? Where are you going?” “I’m coming from the south going; north.” By then, the youngest witch, Piraimâlâ, recognized him in his disguise with his red eyes and the Hindu hair lock. “Oh, Sisters, Dhand Gunâni, his eyes are so red, his tupi hair lock has also become erect like a pole! It is certainly Uncle Râmâ! That is his face, isn’t it?”

Râmâ said, “Let’s go down, Nânî; let’s go to Kânchi Singa. Let’s go up to Lamjung Thakur. With cut cloth (ahaja) and with unbroken rice they offered to Tîpa Râmâ (a jhânakri). They bowed their heads. Râmâ continued:

Let’s go down, Nânî, to Nauai Nau Tâla, to Okhale Chautara. Let’s go down the steep descent, Nânî, to Tharo Charo. Let’s go to Ghora Kanye; let’s go down, Nânî, to Hale Basyauni. Let’s go down to Dule Bhâjâ. In the Sâtai Phârka Ban (forest) let’s go to the otherside, Nânî. At the place at Maikot, where two roads cross; let’s go up to Gaiye Kharka (cow pasture); let’s go to Rîja Kharka. Let’s go to Bâhalekot. Let’s go down, Nânî, to the village called Dârâ. Let’s go to other side, Nânî – to the village called Phusar. Let’s go to this side, Nânî – to the village of Maikot. Let’s go to that side, to the village called Ramma. To Arjyal, let’s go up, Nânî, to Lâlai Patana. Let’s go to the side, Nânî, to the village called Hukam. Let’s go to this side, to the village of Mayang. Let’s go to Omâ River, to Omâ cliff. Let’s go to this side, Nânî, to the village of Bîrking, to the village of Pâmî. Let’s go to side to, Bâchi, to Tâkâ, to Sârä, down to Gahîrî Khâñî, to Kolâ, and down to Rangibî. Down to the village of Nâkî, let’s go flying, Nânî; to Juîbhâng, let’s go down to Sajur, to Sher. To the other side, let’s go up, Nânî, to Khawang, let’s go up, Nânî, to Kâkhari, and let’s go up, Nânî, to Lukum. Let’s go down to Mâthâ, let’s go down to Lawâng, and let’s go down to Juruwâng.

Let’s go to the other side to Dharmashâla; let’s go to the other side to Thâwâng. Let’s go down to the village of Dhyângra; let’s go down to Mâgây Kharka, down to Rigîtirangi, and let’s go this side to Mâlai Gera. Down to Tâlai Khola, up to Binsay, down to Ghular, down to Wûbâ, down to Surwâng, down to Bhujwâng, up to Chalwâng, and this side to Kharuj. To the other side, let’s go to the Phuli Ban (forest); to this side, to the village called Serma, let’s go. Down to Wobâ Bheri, down to Bhayis Khawâ, let’s go to the Terai of Madesh.

Then the Naujâ Gunâni, Naujâ Janâni said to that Uncle Râmâ: “Let’s go to the Terai plain, let’s eat good things, let’s put on nice things.”

They took out the gourd of chang, they took out the puffed rice and said: “Let’s go to the distant plain.” Taking chang and puffed rice, they played the nyaryang, the sârangi, and the karyang. They smoked with the coconut hukka, and palm

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18 Râmâchan is an alternate, possibly honorific version of Râmâ. In other Kham-Magar versions of this song he may be Rammâ Puran Can, Puran Tsan, or Rammâ Purâcan, (see Sales 1991, Oppitz 1981, Watters 1975, Maskarinec 1995).
pipe chilum. Hand to hand they passed it in a circle. "Let’s go to the plain. Let’s make a swing, and make a ping, eat fine food, wear fine things, dance the western dance, sing the sad songs. Let’s go to the foreign distant plains wearing black gunia (skirts) and white shawls."

They began dancing, and said, "Let’s go to the city bazaar." Dancing some more they said, "Let’s go to the Terai plain."

Then Rāmā said: "Now let’s go up, Nānī, the steep hill to Jalpa Lekh, to Jalpa Deorāli, to Silā Khāgare, to Bārah Bukeni."

They came visiting Rāmās, they came visiting foreign countries.

Let’s go visit, Nānī, to the village called Dhāng Dhung. Let’s go to this side to Mīrāl; let’s go to this side to Khoriyā. Let’s go down to the village called Dantay; let’s go down to the village called Bhotān Bheri.

They came visiting Rāmās, they came visiting foreign countries.

Let’s go to that side to Chande Bheri; let’s go to this side to the village of Darjun. Let’s go to this side to Rukumkot; let’s go to Bhārāi Māṅgra in Terai, oh Dhandā Janāṁī, Dhandā Gunāṁī.

They came visiting Rāmās, they came visiting foreign countries.

Continuing on their journey, they arrived at Rāmā’s birthplace, below Tālī Bhotai, below Haba Saba in Katu Chaur. The Witch Sisters asked to stay in various places in Rāmā’s house, but Rāmā refused, saying that they might cast their envious evil eye, and the house god would get angry.

Let us stay here in your storeroom, Rāmā.

No! In the storeroom there may be my ancestors and the kul devata. Oh Bhānjī Thākurnī, I can’t give you a place. My devata won’t be able to hear my power.

Oh Rāmā, give us a place in the center of the threshold.

In the center of the threshold my Jhumā Jhāṅkrelṁ prepares thirty-six different kinds of food, out of thirty-two kinds of things. Envious eyes, Nānī, will spoil the food. I can’t let you live in such a place!

Give us a place on your veranda, Uncle Rāmā.

That’s where the chickens are, that’s where the doves are. That’s where the hen’s chicks are. My devata won’t bear it. I won’t let you stay under the first floor.

Give us your drainage gutter to stay in.

The wealth of the dog and the wealth of the chickens are there. I can’t give that place to stay!

Give us the courtyard, oh Rāmā.

The Rāmīs come there, the beggars come, the guests come, the maiti khalak (my maternal family) ancestors come, the daughter and sons-in-law come, friends come, and extended blood relatives come too. My devata won’t put up with it, and the village won’t put up with it.

Oh Rāmā, let us stay in your neighborhood.

In my neighborhood there are neighbors, the headman, good people, gentle people. My devata won’t put up with it.

The witches asked to stay in various places in the village, but again Rāmā refused, saying that the good neighbors and village friends and relatives might get harmed if this were permitted. Rāmā suggested that they go together down to the crossroads of six roads, and then to the birthplace of the Nine Witch Sisters.

On the way, they stopped at Sirbudāhā, where they made a narrow bridge out of soft cotton for crossing the water. They all took a break at Giddha (vulture) cliff, danced, sang, drank beer, and ate puffed rice on the nearby cliff before finally attempting to cross the bridge. When the Nine Witch Sisters tried to cross the bridge over the water, Rāmā called out “Bhānjī Thākurnī!” The bridge broke, and eight of the Witch Sisters fell into the pool of water and were covered up.

But Piraimālā, the youngest sister, transformed herself into a butterfly and flew into Rāmā’s headdress. Seeing her, Rāmā said, “I will kill you as well!” Piraimālā in despair pleaded with Rāmā, and reminded him that only if her envious eye should fall on someone would he, Rāmā, be called as a shaman. If she were dead, then he would never again be called, and would thus be out of a job. But if she could be allowed to live, she would agree that whenever he, Rāmā, asked her to leave, she would leave. Also, she said:

As a result, you’ll have precious bangles, gold in your ear, a cow to milk, a plowing bullock, the nine gifts that are put before the shaman, nine measures of sesame, nine measures of rice, and nine bundles of clothes.

So Rāmā spared her.

The eight other sisters became Kalikā Devī, Mālikā Devī, Jālikā Devī, Jaṅre Devī, Sundaulā Devī, Mahākalī, Dakshinā Devī, and Pārbati Devī. But when Rāmā was returning from his shaman’s work one night, the eight sis-
ters hid in the forest above and below the road where Rāmā was walking. Transformed into chickens, they flew at Rāmā just as he was passing by, sent his soul wandering, and tried to eat him. When Rāmā regained consciousness he returned home; and with the help of his dhāmi helping-spirit power and pure water, he searched for and retrieved his wandering soul.

Finally, Rāmā and Piraimālā returned to Manaychaur, the birthplace of the Nine Witch Sisters, where Piraimālā, throwing off her black skirt and white shawl, dressed herself in a flaxen skirt and blouse instead.

This, Mān Dev Kumai swears by the perfect Garuda eagle, by his teacher’s power, and by his own devotion.

The Antistructure of Ambiguity

The entire song consists of a long sequence of episodes of varying length and complexity. Each episode could be considered a complete story in itself. Nevertheless, they seem to fall into groups, each centering on a problem and its solution. Taking these groups as a basis, we can divide the song into six major sections:

1) Destruction and re-creation of the world: After the brief mention of the world’s earlier destruction by “Great-grandfather” and its restoration, the creator Parmeśwar and the “parentless daughter” Anākheni are introduced. Parmeśwar arranges Anākheni’s marriage, the source of her unhappiness, which ultimately causes her to flee, create the lake of tears, and to destroy the world. Parmeśwar restores the world through the help of the female spider and termite.

2) Creation of man: Parmeśwar, unable to create man, seeks help from a female chicken. The chicken had been badly burned by the world-destroying fires unleashed by Anākheni, and had fled for refuge to her lake of tears. Parmeśwar provides materials to heal the chicken, and she in turn provides dung to create man.

3) Disruption, sickness, and death: Mānu, the first man, goes to Sītā’s garden and destroys her cucumber vine. Sītā takes revenge by unleashing nine stars (planetary deities) who become the nine witches, and bring sickness and premature death to mankind.

4) Rāmā and the witch sisters: After other ritual healers and astrologers fail, Mānu calls on Rāmā, the First Jhānlkri. Rāmā is left powerless and speechless by his first encounter with the witches, but receives help and wisdom from his wife Jhumā.

5) The long journey through sickness and healing to landscape, space and place: Rāmā lures the witches on a long difficult journey up and down in the Himalayan mountains to the pilgrimage sites of ancestral lineage Jhānlkri, and to the birthplace of the witches and the birthplace and home of the First Shaman, Rāmā.

6) Working out a compromise: After the long journey and many adventures, Rāmā achieves partial victory by causing eight witches to fall into a body of water, and finally arrives at a working compromise with the youngest witch, Piraimālā.

To begin systematic exploration of the song’s female symbolism, we can give this list of female characters, roles, and themes:

Female Characters: Belāwatī, Karmāwatī, Pārbatī, Anākhenī, Sītā; the nine witch sisters, Piraimālā (the youngest witch sister); a butterfly (Piraimālā), eight chickens (the other sisters), one chicken, a black spider, a black termite; Jhumā (Jhānlkri).

Female Characteristics and Roles: creator, created, destroyer, destroyed, bringer of untimely death, powerful, possessor and giver of wisdom, possessor of the “envious eye”, sedentary, traveler, charming and beautiful, unhappy, angry, and vengeful; orphan, “parentless daughter”, niece, older and younger blood sisters, daughter, mother, mother-in-law, paternal aunt, sister’s daughter; matchmaker, entertainer, musician, dancer, singer, wife, runaway bride, outcast, yogi, witch, lover, female Jhānlkri; nine sources of stars, devī (goddess), apsārī; spider (weaver of web), termite (earth mover), butterfly, chicken (creator and antagonist).

Themes Associated with Female Characters: power, destruction, and restoration; movement between levels of the world (underground, above ground, sky), going on a journey, fleeing, flight, water, body of water, lake of tears, creation of water and destruction by water.

We find that it is difficult to order the above material in a meaningful way, because of the diversity and ambiguity of the many separate female characters, female roles and female themes (see also Hitchcock, 1978a). All of the above-mentioned themes appear with different female characters. However, it is difficult to establish clear-cut categories or a hierarchy within which the female characters might be placed and thus distinguished from one another. The names given to these characters suggest three possible types of female beings:

1) Non-human earthly beings—chicken, spider, termite, and butterfly are all names for animals. 2) Goddess-like beings—Anākhenī, Belāwatī, Karmāwatī, Sītā the apsārī are all names for unearthly or otherworldly beings. 3) Human beings—Jhumā, Anākhenī, Sītā, Naujā Janāni (nine sisters), and Bhānjī Thākurnī are all possible names or appellations for women in Nepal, and hence are suggestive of humans.

However, when we examine the individual actions of each of these female characters, we find that the distinctions between human and god, god and animal, and human and animal are not at all clear, and is in most cases entirely blurred.

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20 The complex of eight protective goddesses, Ashta Mātrika is widespread in Nepal, especially in Kathmandu Valley. The names of specific goddesses vary by tradition.

21 Although it is at least several days travel distance from Dhaulagiri region, Manaychaur could refer to Manichuda (a mountain northeast of the Kathmandu Valley near the town of Sānkhhu) where Bon po shamans from around the Kathmandu Valley region and beyond make a pilgrimage and assemble annually at a tank on the mountaintop.
We find (goddess-like) Belawati assuming several roles of
human women, such as mother-in-law, matchmaker, paternal
aunt, and sister, yet called a creator as well. Jhumā, the
loyal wife of Rāmā, also given the title of Jhānkrenī (female
form of Jhānkrī), offers special wisdom to her hus­
band before his journey with the nine witches takes place. A
female chicken turns out to be of central importance for the
creation of man, and Parmeswar drops everything in order
to go in search of this essential female character.

The nine witch sisters are an extreme case of ambiguity
in that they are portrayed by Rāmā at various times as hu­
man-like, animal-like, and god-like. They are referred to as
“nine witch sisters” or “nine sisters,” and Rāmā usually calls
them using the familiar human female forms of niece
(Bahanī), little girl or daughter (Nānī), and younger sisters
(Bahini). Just as these names refer to human beings, many
of the actions associated with the nine witches correspond
to human behavior. However, other forms of behavior and
types of actions associated with the witches are both un­
earthly and animal-like. The witches are capable of creat­
ing water through the act of dancing. They are also capable
of assuming different forms, such as chickens and butterflys,
and are thus able to fly at Rāmā. Rāmā also describes
the witches as having “arms like the claws of a tiger,” “eyes
like hawks’ and doves’ eyes”, along with other non-human
characteristics. Thus, attempting to deal with the female
characters of the song individually, we find ambiguities that
tend to problematize rather than clarify the song’s meaning.

On the other hand, if we examine the song in its entirety,
we find more continuity and less confusion. The continuity
is brought about through the resolution of conflict and the
apparent progression from a negative to a more positive situa­
tion. Because of this conflict-resolution format, one might
try to analyze the song in terms of polar separate and op­
posing forces, a mode of analysis perhaps corresponding to
In the Jhānkrī song, however, no explicitly stated polar
categories, in the form of strong value concepts such as
“good” and “evil,” occur. What are found in the song are
numerous general indications in grammar and word choice,
which suggest that certain characters and events are unde­
sirable and/or desirable. For example, derogatory terminol­
gy such as “pākhe” meaning “crude villager” is used to
describe the creator of the nine witch sisters (Turner 1938:373). Anākhenī is referred to as having a “precious”
(moti-dhara) physical form, and Rāma is described as “the
one who knows, the one who may have heard”. These and
similar references indicate a general standard of positive/negative orientation and evaluation in the context of which
male and female characters and their actions can be judged.

We might visualize this general standard in terms of an axis
whose positive and negative directions are known but whose
extreme polar limits are left unmarked. Thus there are gen­
eral positive and negative potentials, which interact to cre­
ate the song’s conflict-resolution structure. Female charac­
ters act within this ambiguous scale of potentials to create
and resolve conflicts throughout the song.

This interpretation resembles the “ambiguous bi-poten­
tiality” suggested by Hitchcock; a concept which maintains
that “polarities” are not separate and in opposition, but are
conjoined as a “total embodiment into a single entity”
(Hitchcock 1978a: 1-2). Hitchcock’s concept of “ambiguous
bi-potentiality,” which was derived from using the so­
cial context of the song as his analytic point of departure,
seems to closely correspond to our findings in starting from
the central conflict expressed in the words of the song it­
self. In fact, when we examine the symbols, events, and
characters in the song, we see that they are not only “bi-
potential,” rather they are often multi-potential in that
they may appear to be oriented along the “axis” at several points.
Since the female characters, symbols and events associated
with them are portrayed in so many different ways in the
song, classification of these various female elements into
one or another arbitrarily established polar category, such as
“good/evil” or “creator/destroyer”, seems to disguise
rather than enhance the multi-potentiality of these female
elements which results from their intensive ambiguity.

Inconsistency and Continuity
Because of this ambiguity, the female elements take on a
complex aspect. The characters are extremely difficult to
know, and their actions and descriptions are difficult to judge
or predict. For example, Anākhenī is, on the one hand con­
sidered to be “parentless” and on the other hand considered
to be a daughter (of Parmeswar and Pārbati), and a niece of
Belawati). Belawati is not only a paternal aunt (of Anākhenī)
but also the matchmaker of Anākhenī’s cross-cousin mar­riage, and in the position of Anākhenī’s mother-in-law. She
might thus be regarded as both “wife-giver” and “wife­
receiver” of the same girl, Anākhenī.

Despite the ambiguous quality of this complexity, cer­
tain recurring and continuing themes associated with female
elements give the song structural unity. Although it is un­
likely that each successive female character is a “transfor­
mation” of the immediately preceding female character, there
are certain events associated with different female charac­
ters that seem to be thematically or structurally related.
Movement between upper and lower levels seems to appear
with several of the female characters. The nine witch sisters
on their journey with Rāmā go up to some villages and down
to others. A special transformation of this theme takes the
form of movement between underground and above ground.
Anākhenī is created in the above ground level, descends to
underground when married, and later returns to above ground.
The chicken (which is burned) also flies to the un­
derground lake and then flies back out again to the earth
surface. Belawati (sister of Parmeswar) because of
Anākhenī’s cross-cousin marriage, is presented as
Anākhenī’s paternal aunt in the above ground and
Anākhenī’s mother-in-law in the underground.
Another theme, which is strongly associated with the female characters in the song, is that of destruction and re-creation. Anàkhenê, by releasing the nine suns and nine moons brings about considerable destruction on the earth caused by melting, and the chicken, caused by burning. With the help of Parmeswar the chicken re-constructs herself and acts as the supplier of an essential ingredient for the creation of man. Anàkhenê creates a lake of tears from her crying, which makes the barren place lush with vegetation. The witches create potable water by dancing. The spider and termite assist Parmeswar in the re-construction of the earth after the destruction caused by Anàkhenê. Sitã in her anger toward man brings on destructive forces (utilizing the nine sources of stars) such as landslides, floods, man-eating animals, illness, untimely death and the nine witch sisters. Jhumâ Jhânkrelni gives wisdom and advice to Râma that helps him in counteracting the nine witches. Finally eight of the nine witches who are seemingly destroyed by drowning in the water below the broken bridge re-create themselves first in the form of goddesses (devîs) and then in the forms of chickens and a butterfly that fly at Râma.

Flight and fleeing movement seem to be themes featured in connection with female characters and their descriptions. Because flight in this song is an action by which the female being escapes to safety; it is thematically similar to fleeing for refuge. Anàkhenê, in despair over her married life, flees to her maitî (natal home). The suns, moons, and stars, which she releases, rise up into the sky. The chicken who is burned flies to the pool of tears and hides; and after being re-created, flies out of the pool of tears with a whir of wings. When transformed into chickens, the witches fly at Râma and try to eat him. As described by Râma, the nine witch sisters possess many flight-associated qualities, such as: a head like a swallow’s head, ears which produce the sound of a scratching chicken feather, eyes like hawks’ and doves’ eyes, a nose like a thunderstone (object believed to have fallen from the sky (see Tucci 1973: 34), a chest like a pigeons breast, hips like hornet’s hips, and even possibly soles of feet and heels like chicken eggs. Finally, the youngest witch, Piraimâlã, when transformed into a butterfly, flies up into the feathers of Râma’s headdress.

The theme of females possessing degrees of power also seems to pervade the song. Belâwañi has socially-derided (weaker) power which is manifest in her position as a wife-receiver and a wife-giver (of Anàkhenê) and a matchmaker. Anàkhenê possesses stronger elementally-derived power with which she defies her creator, by taking the jâbe tãrî, from which she releases the suns moons and stars. Sitã possesses the greatest power in her abilities to manipulate the nine sources of stars and to create the nine witch sisters. The nine witch sisters are actually power derived by Sitã. When we see the number of afflictions which they bring to bear on man, we might say that they also possess a considerable amount of power. They prove to be no easy match for Râma; and are only briefly “covered up” by Râma in the bridge incident, only to return in the forms of devîs and then chickens to send his soul wandering.

The pool of water or lake is one of the themes, which takes on different transformations throughout the song in terms of its relationship to the female characters involved. In the first episode of the song, Anàkhenê, upon returning to Parmeswar from her husband’s home, cries so hard from sadness that her tears are channeled away and form a lake. Later the chicken, who is burned by the heat of the nine suns and nine moons, flies to the underground pool of tears to seek refuge and hides. Here the pool seems to be associated with destruction, and then with refuge from it.

On the journey, Râma attempts to kill the witches by making their drinking water disappear, only to be disappointed when the witches dance and create a pond of water from which they quench their thirst. At the end of the song, eight of the nine witches are tricked by Râma into crossing the bridge of cotton thread (which breaks), and are cast below into the small lake and covered up. Thus a progression seems to emerge, leading from creation of the pool (of tears), by a female, through sadness, to seeking refuge or protection (near the pool), to temporary destruction of females by the pool.

Ambiguity or Multi-potentiality?
The two most striking themes in the song are implicit rather than explicit. Both the female multi-potentiality (as mentioned above) and the active role of females serve as unifying forces throughout the song. The multi-potentiality on the one hand is enriching, as is shown by all that the female characters are and do. On the other hand it creates intensive ambiguity. This ambiguity is perhaps most evident in the fundamental issue of whether the female characters are good or evil, in view of how the polarity and conflict-resolution works.

The female characters also have strongly active roles. Whether acting creatively or destructively, for good, or for evil, they are continually active and play a major part of the central activities. They may create, destroy, help to re-create the world, create trouble for man, give wisdom for helping to combat illness, and untimely death, fly, and even fight with a Jhânkri Râma, which ends only in (at best) a cooperative detente. The meaning and implications of the female active roles and multi-potentiality will become clear when we examine female roles and symbolism in the ethnographic context (as presented in Hitchcock 1966).

However, at this point in our investigation we can at least clarify one important aspect of the ambiguity associated with female characters in the song. This aspect concerns two features that dominate the song as a whole and its separate episodes: the conflict-resolution format with its implied positive-negative bipolarity, on the one hand, and the frequent expression of the conflict in terms of the interactions
of male and female characters, on the other. The combination of these two features in the song would suggest that the key to its female symbolism might lie in an analytic derivation of a Lévi-Straussian series of binary oppositions: for example, female : male = underground : above ground = destruction : sickness : curing, etc. Stated more simply, it might appear that the female element represents a negative and destructive force, and the male, a positive and creative one. Such a solution would be simple and clear. In fact, the solution is wrong because ambiguity, rather than clarity, is the song’s most central and necessary feature.

For example, although Parmešwar is one of the creators of the world, he is the chief instigator of Anākheni’s unhappy marriage, and she creates her own solution by fleeing and creating the pool of tears. In this interaction, the male character is clearly the negative influence. In the next set of interactions, although the characters remain the same, the polarities are reversed Anākheni unleashes destructive forces, and Parmešwar restores the world. However, he is aided by a female spider and termite, so female characters share in both positive and negative sides of the destruction-restoration conflict. In the next episode, the relationship of female characters to the positive-negative polarity becomes even more complex: the chicken is both injured by Anākheni’s fires, and flees for refuge to Anākheni’s lake of tears. Parmešwar heals the chicken through his power; but when he is powerless to create man, she provides the solution by furnishing the necessary material. Here the problem-solution polarity seems to be one of helplessness versus effectiveness—and again, not only are males and females found on both sides, but the same characters alternately occupy both poles.

The female apsarī Sītā was the creator and preserver of a garden which was damaged by Mānu, the first man. Sītā then turns to destructive activity, releasing the forces of sickness and death against man. The culminating episode of the song begins with the destructive power of the witches, against which Rāma and several other males, including a brahman priest, are helpless. Only Rāma’s wife Jhumā is able to provide the wisdom needed to produce efficacious results. Rāma then becomes an active agent, employing the external accessories (drum, etc.) and rituals of a Jhānkrī to coerce the witch sisters. Together, they embark on a series of journeys, adventures, and competitions in which each achieves temporary and partial victories. Finally, one of the witch sisters reveals to Rāma the real meaning of the conflicts, polarities, and ambiguities: she and he are interdependent; the polarities are complementary rather than ultimately opposed. The healer must have a sickness to cure (and, of course, disease must have health to attack). To use a technological analogy, an electric motor turns because its polarity constantly alternates between positive and negative, attraction and repulsion. Likewise, constantly changing positive and negative polarities animate the processes of creation and destruction, life and death, lived by male and female. Without this alternation and ambiguity, nothing can happen. Rāma validates this insight by entering into a new, more intimate relationship with Piraimālā. In this version of the song, he accompanies her to her birthplace where she changes her costume, while in other versions he marries her.

From the Jhānkrī’s critical viewpoint, ambiguity, instead of being resolved, becomes the central message—there are no simple answers. The Jhānkrī as a healer is dependent on sickness, and as a male he is dependent on the female. Female elements are necessary for his self-definition.

Narrative and Ethnography

Although the performer of this version belongs to the Matwālā Chetri caste, the vast majority of practicing Jhānkrī and population of this area is Magar (Hitchcock 1967: 152-3). We may wish to consider some of the themes discussed here in light of Magar social relations and religious beliefs as presented in Hitchcock’s 1966 ethnography.

Like many ethnic groups throughout the middle hill regions of Nepal, the Magars have been influenced by traditional Hinduism. Since the Magars do observe Hindu rituals and worship Hindu deities, one might expect everyday roles and functions of women to reflect, at least in part, “traditional” Hindu views. We find that, indeed, “the focus of authority and decision-making is the active elderly male,[and that] . . . wives are expected to defer to husbands” (Hitchcock 1966: 41-2). However, Hitchcock also notes that the Magar family “may be characterized . . . as an amended and relaxed version of the traditional landowning Hindu family of the north Indian plains” (42). While traditional Hindu society adheres more rigidly to an extended family system, the Magars consider each husband and wife as a separate household. Everyday activity is generally shared between sexes “with a minimum of avoidance” (Ibid.).

In fact, it seems that women in Magar society play a much more independently active role with respect to men than would be permitted to women in more “traditional” upper-caste Hindu social settings. Magar women do a significant portion of the labor required for subsistence, and hence assume a vital role in the household economy. Not only are they responsible for the household chores of cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing; they also assist in weeding gardens, carrying wood, water, and manure, gathering fodder, caring for and milking the animals, hulling rice, and grinding and processing food (45). Women in Magar society have access to various kinds of wealth and property. When a woman marries, she receives from her natal home a gift of money

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22 Hitchcock (1978a) observed that “these Chetri, who call themselves Nauthar,” used to trade butter and potatoes for Tibetan salt in Tichurong near Dolpo (a treacherous high-altitude 5-6 day journey).
or land over which she has exclusive rights. Moreover, a
wife is entitled to half of her household's total wealth until
her death (44-5), even though, in Magar as in traditional
Hindu society, a woman is expected to defer to her father-
in-law, she has the right to speak openly with him about any
important matters which may concern her (44). Because
premarital courtship is permitted, and marriages are arranged
by parents in consultation with children, a Magar woman
frequently knows and/or has a choice of her husband-to-be.
Thus, in many ways, women in Magar society are quite in-
dependent and active. In spite of a "patriarchal bias," which
is reinforced even today by restrictive inheritance laws in
Nepal, the men and women of Magar society are interde-
pendent on a relatively equal plane, and the roles which both
sexes assume reflect this interdependence (36-41; 90).

Unity through Multi-potentiality
Both the gendered norms of "traditional" or classical Hin-
duism and the everyday village life of Magar society con-
test sharply with the treatment of gender relations in the
Jhānkri song. We must admit that our comparison with
Hitchcock's presentation of the related Magar social con-
text has been brief and indirect; and, furthermore, that com-
parison of a single song by a single performer with a set of
religious-cultural norms extending over a wide span of space
and time, and with a fieldworker's observations of a local
contemporary lifestyle in a brief historical frame, is certainly
bound to yield more contrasts than similarities. Yet, confin-
ing our attempt at comparison to the aspect of gender-assoc-
ied symbols and functions, an important aspect in both
contexts, we find contrasts which must be significant in a
society whose members are simultaneously Magar, Hindu,
and adherents and patrons of the Jhānkri. Such contrasts
help to define the gendered uniqueness of the identity of
Jhānkri in his own cultural setting.

In Magar society, women appear to enjoy a wider range
of potential opportunities and freedom from restrictions than
the Magars' acceptance of Hinduism would seem to allow.
In this sense, their position is multi-potential and ambigu-
ous, as in the shaman song. However, it also appears that
Magar women are ultimately more subservient to male dom-
nination than any of the female beings of this shaman's song.
Furthermore, the range of female potentialities and actions in
a Magar village does not compare simply with the ac-
tions in the shaman song; although a village may contain
suspected witches, (possibly?) female Jhānkris, it may even
contain recognized goddesses, but not ones who unleash
world-destroying forces, or female spiders, termites, and
chickens who make possible the creation of worlds and hu-
man beings. In the song, the range of collective female po-
tentiality is infinitely greater than what seems to be the case
in the "ordinary" world.

Thus, the uniqueness of the Jhānkri and his viewpoint in
his own Magar-Hindu sociocultural context is strongly un-
derlined by his expression in song of female ambiguity and
multipotentiality. We should emphasize again at this point
that this song, called "The Nine Witch Sisters," is an ac-
count of the origin of the First Jhānkri, and so constitutes a
basic part of the Jhānkri's own self-definition. We might
therefore ask how this self-definition, including its use of
female elements, helps to define the place of the Jhānkri in
a wider, comparative religious context.

Rāma appears in this song as the resolver of a conflict
that is the culmination of a series of previous conflicts and
resolutions. He resolves the conflict between sickness and
health by personally entering into direct contact and struggle
with extrahuman and destructive forces, a typically "shaman-
istic" activity. When he accepts Pirāmālā's statement of his
own interdependence with the forces he is struggling
with, and when he enters a closer and more cooperative re-
relationship with her, he implicitly accepts the ambiguity of
positive-negative polarities, and explicitly accepts the dy-
namic interdependence of his own gendered role with that
of his opponents. Throughout the song, the opposition of
polarities has been expressed in terms of interactions be-
tween males and females. Thus, it may be that the "her-
maphroditism" often described by writers on shamanism
represents a symbolic expression of an acceptance of ambi-
guity and of the dynamic interdependence of polarities.
Rather than taking combinations of male and female sym-
bolism at their surface value and drawing superficial psy-
chological conclusions, other "shaman" traditions should
be examined to see if they have additional gendered mean-
ings for their adherents.

In this tradition, at least, the "shaman's" identity is de-
ined by defining its relationship to female elements. More-
over, the witch herself is the one who suggests the resolu-
tion, who defines the Jhānkri's position, role, and viewpoint
in terms of his relationship to herself. With respect to fe-
male beings, the Jhānkri's viewpoint is special and unique
because it is defined by the female being—which is witch?

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21 Hitchcock (1976:172) mentions that although women sha-
mans are rare, they are not unknown, and he reports having seen
one performing among Pun Magars in Ulleri Nepal. Anne de Sales
(1991) reports a strong presence of women jhānkris among the
Kham-Magar.


