

## Chapter 19

# SPIRIT POSSESSION IN THE HIMALAYAS

### I. Introduction

- A. Spirit possession, one of the continuities in world religions, a common feature in the religious life of the Himalayan region
- B. A vehicle by which normal individuals and, most commonly, cultural specialists communicate with divinities
- C. A common idiom whereby individuals objectify illnesses and the community orchestrates a collective, healing response
- D. Practitioners closely associated with use of a vast array of amulets that they empower and give to laymen
- E. Specialists often associated with symbols and rituals expressive of ethnic group identities
- F. Sometimes elements of these traditions conflict with Brahmanical or Buddhist norms and are supported by non-elite groups

### II. Roles Associated with Spirit Possession in the Himalayas:

#### A. The Afflicted-Possessed

- 1. Ordinary individuals who are possessed by demons or evil local deities
- 2. A culturally-defined and approved means for the resolution of inner conflicts, especially in melding personal desires with conflicting cultural norms

#### B. Shaman/Exorcists

- 1. Shamanism similar cross-regionally: with the aid of a tutelary deity, individuals make "spirit flights" and/or become possessed to diagnose diseases and prescribe cures
- 2. Their role is often to objectify a patient's illness in terms of foreign substances or divine/demonic affliction
- 3. A prestigious role, especially for low status individuals who are virtually excluded from important religious positions in caste societies
- 4. Teacher-pupil transmission of techniques/teachings is central and may cross ethnic group lines

## C. Mediums/Oracles

1. Individuals associated with fixed shrines at which they enter into trance states
  - a. At prominent temples
  - b. In Jumla, at Khotan shrines
2. Activities
  - a. prognostication
  - b. subduing demons, witches, ghosts
  - c. preaching devotion to patron deities and the importance of ethical behavior
3. Often the mediumship role will remain in family lineages
4. Examples:
  - a. oracle *lamas* of Ladakh
  - b. *dhamis* of NW Nepal who are possessed by the "*Masta* Deities"
  - c. *dya wamha* of the Newars
  - d. Newar masked dancers
  - e. *lhawa* of the Sherpas
  - f. Tamang *lambu*
  - g. Lepcha *pano*



Rai *Jhankri*