

Contesting Power, Negotiating Influence:
Rai Shamans and New Religious
Movements in Eastern Nepal

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Walking through the village of Simpani in Khotang District of Eastern Nepal, our friend pointed to a small, broken altar in the courtyard of one of the first houses we passed. 'It was destroyed by Christians several years ago', he explained. We entered the courtyard and asked the house-owner, an elderly lady sitting on the veranda, to tell us about the broken altar. At first she was reluctant to speak to us – after all, as Western foreigners we might have been Christian missionaries. Bit by bit she revealed that she had also been beaten by her Christian relatives, who live in Dharan, a small town at the foot of the hills in Eastern Nepal, and one of the centres of Christian missionary work in Nepal. After having understood that as anthropologists, we were interested in the local religions and had nothing to do with the Christian mission, and encouraged by our friend Chatur Bhakta Rai, she entrusted us with the full story.

It was eight or nine years ago when she suddenly had started to tremble rhythmically, especially when she heard the beat of a drum. This symptom is generally recognised among the Rai and Limbu – and other Kirat groups such as the Sunuwar and Yakkha – as a sign of a deceased shaman's spirit, referred to as the guru, taking possession of a living person and calling him or her to become a shaman. She travelled to the Terai, the southern lowlands of Nepal, to the place from which her Limbu guru had been calling her. She stayed there for 17 days, and it was expected that during this time, the *muddhum*, the orally transmitted recitations of her guru's knowledge, would come to her mind. Among the Kirat, the ritual texts, the oral tradition, and the knowledge of the shamans – referred to as the *muddhum* or by similar terms in the respective local languages – is generally said to be learned in dreams or visions from the guru.¹ But the *muddhum* did not come to her. So she returned to her home in Simpani and started to build an altar in her courtyard, a little house with all sorts of collected paraphernalia in it. Once the altar was finished, the *muddhum* came to her, and she started to perform rituals as a shaman.

¹ For more details on the *muddhum* see Gaenszle 1991, 2002.

About three years later she received a visit from her Christian relatives living in Dharan, who gave her money and forced her to buy a Bible. But within a short time her Limbu guru visited her in a dream and warned her not to convert to Christianity and give up her own culture. The dream continued with a very fierce man with long sharp teeth. She did not know who he was, but surmised it to be an ancestor or spirit. He commanded her to return the money and the book at once. He added that if she did not adhere to her ancient culture he would gobble her up. She was so impressed by this dream that she gave back the Bible and the money, and subsequently was beaten up by her relatives. She never converted to Christianity; however, as she was afraid of her relatives she also never dared to rebuild the altar and work again as a shaman, even though she still starts trembling regularly. After she had finished her story she gave some thought to the idea that now might actually be the right time to rebuild the altar. She could not give a definite answer to the question of whether she was still afraid of her Christian relatives. It seemed, however, that the dream spirit with the long sharp teeth had impressed her far more than the physical threat of her relatives.

Leaving her with her thoughts, we walked on to the other side of the hill, and after a few hours reached Chiurikharka village. Climbing up through the houses clustered along the steep hill we heard cymbals and singing from afar, and soon saw a tarpaulin of rainbow colours stretched across the courtyard of one of the houses. 'Let's see what's going on there', we said and immediately sensed our companion's discomfort; obviously there was something going on that he disapproved of. He explained that this was a group of followers of Om Nanda and that as the president of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha,² which strongly advocated the ancient, traditional type of Rai shamans and priests, it would be ill-advised for him to get involved with this new type of religious Kirat movement. However, after giving it a second thought, he agreed to help us satisfy our curiosity and we stepped into the courtyard. The scene that presented itself to us was entirely different from anything we had seen of Rai religious practices till then. A group of two dozen people – women, men, young and old – were sitting in a circle around an altar strewn with flowers, candles, and fruit. Many of the believers wore white garments, and while balancing a book on their heads were listening ecstatically to a young man preaching words of love and peace with eyes closed. Our presence was studiously ignored; nothing could disturb the believers in their devotion, and none of the bystanders were willing to answer questions. Our friend gave us a sign to leave and, while climbing further up into the village, he told us the story of an old Dumai Rai who had once been an Om Nanda follower, but had returned to the shamanic beliefs.

While still a young boy, his father had returned from serving in the Indian army and performed one of the most respected rituals in the life of a Dumai Rai, the so-called *chamdām*. Many years of preparatory rituals and a great amount of wealth are required for a *chamdām*, but once accomplished, the performer receives a new

² The cultural, social and political organisation of the Kirat Rai.



Figure 8.1 Om Nanda priest and devotees praying with books on their heads. Ciurikharka village, May 2011

ritual name that will be remembered in every subsequent ritual in his lineage. The ritual is performed at the central fireplace in his house, like most rituals of the Dumai Rai, and after that it is considered a special ritual hearth, very few of which still exist today. Our man was also closely linked to the ancestral spirits through his wife, who occupied a special ritual position. She was a *masumi*, a ritual dancer who accompanies a specific type of shaman in his rituals, and the shaman she was dancing for happened to be her brother. Another of her brothers had chosen to leave the village and settled in Dharan, where he had come into contact with the followers of Om Nanda. Over the years, the *masumi*'s brother came to be known as 'the Pillar of Om Nanda in Dharan', and his influence had also reached the remote village. The whole family converted to the Om Nanda movement and gave up the ancient religion. The former *masumi* stopped dancing, and the couple even destroyed the *chamdām* fireplace and replaced it with a modern oven. At this point in time our protagonist was the village president and a very rich man who owned as many as 40 cows. But before long odd things started happening.

He suddenly began speaking in a woozy manner and to talk to himself. His condition worsened over a period of several months and the villagers suspected that the main reason was the destruction of the *chamdām* fireplace: the ancestors were angry at him and were taking revenge. After three years he reached the peak of his madness, following the loss of all of his cows. They had been taken to the forest by a herdsman, and should have stayed there with him for a number of weeks. But the herdsman had been murdered and lay dead in the forest for nine

days before he was found. The cows had all gone missing or had died of thirst. The man's madness became uncontrollable and one of his sons living in Korea ordered a helicopter to fly his father out of the village to a mental hospital in Kathmandu. After several weeks he returned to the village, completely recovered and once again his old self. Upon arrival back home the first thing he did was to re-establish the ancestral fireplace. No one ever tried to convert him to any other religion again, and for many years now he lives in peace of mind, following the old shamanic traditions of his ancestors. When we met him during one of the following days at the market of Baksila, nothing in his cheerful demeanour recaptured the days of his madness.

The two cases described above give an idea of the most evident and powerful fields of conflict that have opened up in the religious realm of the Rai in Eastern Nepal over the last two decades. But apart from the two new religious movements in the region, i.e. (Baptist) Christianity and Om Nanda, there are other religious protagonists and movements that have also left their traces, some have been present for centuries, while creating few – if any – conflicts at the present time, as for instance Hinduism and Buddhism.

Religious Movements and Worldviews among the Rai

The aim of this section is to briefly outline the religious movements and their protagonists currently active among the Rai. This will provide us with the background when we later proceed to analyse the fields of conflict that open up, especially in relation to the ancient, traditional religious worldview of the Rai.

Traditional Rai Beliefs

Traditionally, the religious worldview of the Rai is an animistic one. An essential part of it is played by the ancestors who exist in a parallel world, albeit in the same geography as the living.

They comprise any deceased or former member of the community, ranging from the grandmother who passed away last week to the founders of the world, Paruhang and Sumnima. In the universe of the ancestors, some are believed to possess special powers, and some to have turned into evil spirits. The Rai basically perform rituals for their ancestors, and an important phrase in their recitations consists of the assertion that 'we are doing it just as you ancestors did'. Rituals are performed by specialists, some of whom may be characterised by the term 'shamans' (going into trance, travelling to the other world, and healing the sick by fighting with the evil forces and bringing back lost souls), others as village priests (giving seasonal offerings to the ancestors or the deities of nature, and performing community and life cycle rituals). Traditionally, the Rai shamans and village priests are not organised in a systematic or institutionalised structure. For instance



Figure 8.2 The Dumai Rai shaman Sher Bahadur making offerings to the ancestors in the context of the Bhume ritual. Sabru village, May 2011

the Dumai Rai, our main research focus, have neither temples nor architectural monuments. The shamans and priests essentially function as individuals, each trying to achieve renown and power by their single-handed ritual performances, and thus trying to attract new clients or newly installed deities that the community puts under their charge. It is also not uncommon for shamans to fight one another in the otherworld by casting spells and blockers that diminish the other's power. Among the individual shamans, we may find strong competitiveness which results in each shaman being a single entity of religious and ritual power, cautiously guarding his or her knowledge and skills.³

³ For a more comprehensive understanding of Rai culture and shamanism see for example McDougal, 1979; Gaenszle, 1991, 2002; Hardman, 2000; Schlemmer, 2004; Nicoletti, 2006.

Hindu Influences

Up until 2006, Nepal was a Hindu state by its constitution. Many religious laws were also imposed on people who did not follow Hindu tradition, including the Rai. The prohibition of killing a cow or eating beef, for example, changed the nature of local rituals, which in former times had also included the offering of cow meat. A general influence from Hinduism can be found among the Rai inasmuch as many local deities are associated with Hindu gods and goddesses, and most people know the major outlines of Hindu mythology and can recount anecdotes from the *Mahabharata* or Vedic literature. Even in remote villages, many Rai celebrate Hindu festivals such as Dasain and Tihar, while some of the local dances, as the Maruni, for example, are linked to syncretic forms of Shiva worship. Regarding religion, there seem to be very few conflicts at present between immigrant Hindu believers and the traditional Rai, and no attempts at conversion are recorded.



Figure 8.3 Group of Dumi Rai men performing the Hindu-influenced Maruni dance. The man on the left is wearing a Shiva mask, others are dressed as women. Daskate village, December 2008

According to Chatur Bhakta Rai, it must have been around the 1970s when the role model of the Hindu *sadhu* reached the Dumi Rai. The ‘Sadhu Dharma’, not being very specific in its affiliation to any clearly defined Hindu ‘sect’ or orientation, for some time attracted a small number of followers. In the perception of the other villagers, this new Sadhu Dharma consisted mainly of singing Krishna and Rama songs, while some of the followers also refrained from eating meat.

Most of them returned to their old beliefs after some years, once the initial wave of enthusiasm was over. Among other Rai groups, and especially among the Limbu, the influence of the *sadhu* as a role model was much stronger and eventually developed into a new form of religious leadership which will be described below.

Buddhist Influences

Until recently, the influence of Buddhism among the Rai was quite inconsequential. Buddhism was encountered on a daily basis only in the northern region, where contact with the Sherpa community was more intense, chiefly as the religion of another community. Ever since the state of Nepal was secularised in 2006, some Nepali communities have claimed that they actually had always been Buddhist but had been forced to declare themselves Hindu in the Hindu state of Nepal. These include the Gurung and Tamang, considerable numbers of whom can also be found living in the Rai region. Many new, small Buddhist *gompas* (shrines) have been built by these communities. All three communities – Sherpa, Gurung and Tamang – also have a shamanic tradition; and Buddhism and shamanism or animism have coexisted in these communities for centuries. This might be a reason why it seems that no fields of conflict are emerging between the Buddhist communities of these other ethnic groups and the world views and practices of the Rai shamanic culture. It is also remarkable that Buddhist ideas, rituals and festivals do not seem to have influenced Rai culture to any great extent as of yet.

Christian Influences

In Khotang District, our main research area, Christianity only arrived substantially in the 1980s. The first (Baptist) Christian missionary in the district was a Sampang Rai from Khartamcha, a British Army home-comer. To this day the Sampang area continues to be not only the main region from which Christian missions sets out to remote villages, but also where Christianity is most fervently practised. For about 20 years the Dumi Christian community has assembled in the central market village of Baksila in a house overlooking the school, and today the building is their central Baptist church.

According to one of its members, the Baksila Baptist church currently embraces 40 households, from which 32 individual persons have received baptism. The Dumi branch of the Church is linked to the main Baptist church in Dharan – as are all Baptist churches in the district – and missionising and expansion are clearly on its agenda, with a new branch envisioned for the Koyee Rai of Sungdel area. Among the Dumi Rai, no trained pastor has assumed leadership so far. This means that missionising is still at its very initial stage, preparing the ground for the ‘professionals’ to take over in the next generation. But in other Rai areas the tone and style of the missionary



Figure 8.4 The Baptist church building of the Sampang Rai village of Chiprun. A megaphone above its main entrance door is used to loudly broadcast the church services onto the entire village area. June 2012

work has taken a more fundamentalist turn, and other Christian denominations are also slowly starting to enter the region, as we shall see later.

New Charismatic Kirat Leaders

Among the Rai and Limbu, a few outstanding religious leaders have arisen during the twentieth century who, in their teaching and behaviour, mainly represent a mixture of the Hindu Sadhu Dharma, the Christian charismatic churches, and old Kirat beliefs. According to Gaenszle (2007), the movement goes back to Nardhoj Lingden, alias Phalgunanda, who was born in 1885. He had been a remarkable child, who had shown signs of receiving a shamanistic calling, and who – rather hazardously – had entered the British Army. Because of his devotion to the (Hindu) goddess Bhagwati and his general behaviour, he was soon regarded as a Tantric healer. After leaving the army in the 1920s, he set out on a series of intensive ascetic pilgrimages in India and returned to his native village in the 1930s, where he gathered an increasing number of followers. He became known as a powerful Tantric, and was also regarded as a reformer of religious and political ideas especially due to his rationalist and educational approach. The rediscovery of the Kirat script was especially influential. Education and teaching the ‘right’ lifestyle – which included not eating meat and not drinking alcohol – were some

of the most important aims on his agenda. Phalgunanda died in 1949, after having prophesied that he would soon be reborn.

After Phalgunanda’s death, a little boy in the family came to the attention of the followers because his behaviour very much resembled that of Phalgunanda during his own childhood. And at the age of seven, Shyam Bahadur Lingden, later known as Aatma Nanda, was declared to be the reincarnation of Phalgunanda. Aatma Nanda became a religious leader, but unlike his uncle, was not an ascetic; he married and had several children. According to Gaenszle (2007), he gathered a considerable following among the Limbu and Rai, was even visited by King Gyanendra, and was the chairman of the ‘First International Conference on the Kiranti Religion’ in 2000, which was attended by over 1,000 people. Even today, Aatma Nanda has a large following, especially among the middle-aged Limbu generation.

The younger generation, especially the Rai youth, seems to be attracted to another religious leader who claims to be a reincarnation of Phalgunanda: Bhakta Bahadur Rai alias Om Nanda, a Bantawa Rai from Udayapur District. At the beginning, Om Nanda was also a follower of Aatma Nanda, but soon split off from the original movement and built up his own following. Today his movement is called the Heavenly Path and, unlike that of Aatma Nanda, operates very much on an international level, attracting followers in Hong Kong, Japan, the USA and many other countries. His popularity with the younger generation is also due to his presence on the Internet.

As Gaenszle (2007) has pointed out, the central message of Phalgunanda, Aatma Nanda, and Om Nanda does not differ greatly in its content: leading a pure life (no meat, no alcohol, no lies and other acts of renunciation), and embracing Kirat identity. To put it in the words of the Heavenly Path website (UK): ‘His Holiness, Swami Baal Tapaswi Sat Guru Om Nanda, the Supreme Master Godangel, is the founder of Heavenly Path/ Nirvana Path; the Philosopher of Lovism; the founder of Art of Happiness; a reviver of fading indigenous culture and tradition; an advocator of World peace, Humanity and Human Rights.’⁴

Conflicts between the Ancient World View of the Rai and New Religious Movements

In view of the above summary, it is obvious that not only in the urban centres of Kathmandu and Dharan but also in the remote villages of Nepal/Eastern Nepal, the people are constantly being courted by a great number of religious movements. The local reactions to this process are rooted in certain characteristics of the traditional Rai worldview and religion, in which one’s own well-being is defined by a balanced relationship with the ancestors. To secure this relationship and to please one’s predecessors is the duty of traditional religious specialists; it is the core of the indigenous religious concept as such, and the main function

⁴ <http://heavenlypath.info/eng/smg/smg-bio.html> [accessed 5 July 2012].

of all ritual activities. Since the shamans and village priests are not organised in institutionalised structures, but function as single units, the individual client always has a great number of choices when it comes to fulfilling these obligations towards the ancestral world. In everyday life, many Rai families regularly 'use' a certain specific shaman, but they also attend rituals by others, or pragmatically embrace ritual practices from other religions that might sort out their problems. From the client's point of view, the different religions or religious practitioners are not usually measured against one another as such; rather, the outcome or success of a certain treatment or ritual performance defines its usefulness.

This profound tolerance toward other religious practices makes the Rai especially vulnerable to outside influence. If somebody knocks at the door and offers to solve a certain problem he is let in, no matter what his religious background. The religious exclusivity encountered in many of the new influencing bodies, in particular the fundamentalist branch of Baptist Christianity, was traditionally unknown in the Kirat context. However, in fundamentalist Christianity the mission paradigm is especially strong because the conversion of non-Christians directly adds to the religious merit of the missionary: the more people you convert, the greater your personal credit on doomsday.

Inevitably the arrival of these new religious ideas has had a large influence on Rai religiosity, not only in terms not only of generating fields of conflict, but also of reflecting on and restructuring the traditional belief system in order to make it fit for resistance. In the following we shall discuss some of the main arguments and strategies that have emerged in the most obvious fields of conflict, with special focus on the most violent players, notably the Christian mission.

Violence: Physical, Psychological, Social

As the two cases described above have shown, there are several types of violence that are enacted by various religious agents. We may categorise as physical, psychological and social violence. In addition to living human beings, we have to include 'the ancestors' in the row of agents in order to do justice to the indigenous Rai belief system, and we must also include 'the Christian God' as a potential punisher of sins.

Among the religious movements present in Eastern Nepal, the Christian denominations are the least tolerant toward other belief systems. The basic assumption that non-Christians are not 'worthy' humans as such – as literally stated to us by several Baptist pastors elsewhere⁵ – quickly leads to hidden or open aggression from Christians towards their non-Christian fellow villagers. Especially among the youth, which one may say can easily be incited to extremes, this aggression is sometimes physically enacted. Several cases were reported to

⁵ Predominately in Northeast India, our second research area (cf. Oppitz et. al., 2008).

us throughout the Rai area in which groups of youths had destroyed the gods and goddesses of their forefathers – manifesting in stones, trees and caves – in order to prove that they are powerless. Cases of religiously motivated physical violence against fellow human beings, as in the story recounted above, fortunately seem to be the exception, even if it is difficult to discern the motivations of domestic physical violence in general.

The many forms of psychological and social violence usually first starting within the family are more widespread and more effective than physical violence. In the case of Christian missions, we were told that single converted family members were forbidden from talking and socialising any longer with their non-Christian family members, or had chosen to do so by themselves. The greatest missionising effect is achieved when those family members are converted who have been closely linked with the performance of traditional rituals. Among the conversion cases reported to us, the majority included near kin or important assistants of powerful shamans. As an example we describe this touching case: since some years the son of a very famous shaman felt the call of his father's guru. However, if he became a shaman himself his father would soon die, according to popular belief. As he didn't want his father to die, he agreed to be baptised in order to rid himself of the guru's call. He soon became unhappy with the new religion, but the Christians threatened him that if he returned to his old beliefs he would be trapped eternally in a fire and all his subsequent generations would be born dumb. Now he lives in constant fear.

The fact that social 'pressure' can be a form of true violence becomes obvious in the following case. One evening we came across a Chamling Rai village near the famous pilgrimage site of Haleshi and asked for shelter at one of the houses along the path. It turned out to be a Christian household and the family told us that most of the village had converted to an old-testamentary denomination from Darjeeling. After discussing our interests in the traditional culture and the *sakela* dance for a while, a young man secretly divulged to us that until recently he had been one of the main *sakela* dance leaders in the village. In traditional Rai communities, *sakela* dance leaders are people of some account. But he had been forced to stop practising by the community because, given that now that most of them were Christians, it was forbidden to dance at all. This development filled him with great sadness and it had now come to the point where he had either to leave his village and family, or obey the 'new rules' and give up his dancing passion. From his account we gathered that Christians had become the majority in the village and had taken over control and now forced the remaining traditional believers to either give in or leave.

However, as we have seen in the aforementioned cases, the ancestors, the most powerful members of the traditional belief system, are not defenceless against intruding religions. We have to acknowledge that their method of psychological violence is neither a new invention nor ineffective. When the ancestors are not amused they take drastic action and can make you seriously ill or insane. It should be noted that the ancestors always react by inflicting illness, misfortune, or natural

disaster when their authority is questioned: not only when a traditional believer attempts to convert to another faith, but also when he or she fails to perform the traditional rituals correctly, goes against the traditional code of conduct and honour, or turns down the call of a shaman's spirit. As one of our friends put it, the ancestors are constantly dissatisfied and have to be cared for all the time. Threatening the living with illness may, thus, be regarded as a common form of perpetrating psychological violence within traditional Rai religion. The challenge for the shamans is then to heal the illness by negotiating with the ancestors, spirits and witches. Precisely this power of healing influences a person's choice for, or against, a certain religious belief.

The Power of Healing

One of the primary duties of the traditional Rai shamans is to heal illness. Minor illnesses are addressed with a short ritual performance, mostly consisting of a divination with a few rice grains, a pulse diagnosis, some recitations, and, perhaps, the 'sucking out' of the negative power. More serious or complicated cases are dealt with in a so-called *cinta*, a night-long ritual in which the shaman visits the house of the sick person along with at least two drummers. The household has to prepare some of the required paraphernalia, including a sufficient amount of local alcohol (*raksi*), which is needed for offerings, for the shaman, and also for all the kin and neighbours, who may attend the ritual throughout the night. From dusk till dawn, the shaman recites and dances to the rhythms of the drum, mentally travelling through the other world. If the ritual is not successful, the same shaman may be called for a second round, or another shaman may be invited. Most shamans have a clear understanding of what they can – and cannot – cure, and are not too proud to say that they could not help a patient and that he needs another type of cure. We were even told of cases in which the shamans themselves suggested a patient should visit the Christians – perhaps they could help? The shamans define themselves through their power of healing, and anyone who fails accepts defeat.

This is often the moment in which new religious movements put the foot in the door. The Christian communities in particular actively scout out ill persons and promise cures through prayer. So far, the villagers say, the Christians have attempted to cure illness by the power of prayer alone. Contrary to what has been witnessed in other parts of Nepal, unfair methods such as applying Western-type medication and then claiming it was the prayer or God/Jesus that had healed the patient, were not encountered in our narrower research area. But we did receive several reports that Christian communities pressured ill persons and their family members to first receive baptism, for otherwise the prayers would not work – accompanied by a warning of no return as in the above case.

Thus, the contest for followers is often fought over the power of healing. But whereas the shamans just give their best as healers, because this is their self-definition, for the Christian missionaries the power of healing is a means to

another end: conversion. For the client, health stands is a central concern, but even if the illness is very threatening local people often evince a great deal of scepticism towards the Christian system of 'payment in advance', reversing the conditions by declaring that they will receive baptism if the prayers prove to be effective.

The Power of Money

Money, and the promise of it, plays an important role in people's decisions for or against a new religion. Especially in the case of Christianity, money is a crucial factor in conversion. A few years back a poster found its way to the Rai villages that sums up the hopes of the local people most concisely. It shows a neoclassical villa with a huge verandah and a golden entrance gate, surrounded by blossoming bushes and a lake in the background. In front of the gate is a Cadillac and underneath it one can read: 'With God everything is possible'. The notion that in the Western world everybody is rich and Christian has resulted in the logic that if you become a Christian, you will get rich. Real money plays a part in convincing people to convert. A few years back, word spread among the Dumi Rai that anyone who succeeded in converting 20 people will receive three times the monthly wage of a government school teacher. Only recently an active member of the local cultural organisation of the Dumi Rai decided to leave the organisation, to convert to Christianity, and apply for the post of pastor that had fallen vacant. In answer to why he had converted, he openly explained that Christianity would bring a lot of money to the Dumi Rai and he wanted to have his share.⁶ So far no large sums have been invested by the mother church in the Dumi region, but funds for sustaining the church building or for sending members to special education camps in Dharan are occasionally given.

Similarly, but from a very different angle, the new charismatic Kirat leaders likewise have money as a factor to support their argument. In the case of Phalgunanda, his underlying motive for analysing the reasons why the local people seemed to drift into poverty was a real concern on his part to empower the indigenous people so as to keep their wealth together. He was one of the first to recognise that because the local people had sold all their land to immigrants, they were losing the main source their livelihood, and in his view only good education would help people understand these connections. Om Nanda constitutes a role model as regard money in another sense: his international followers have endowed him with so much that he can afford to fly round the world and travel about Nepal with an escort of seven jeeps and a horde of bodyguards. He is the embodiment of the alliance of wealth and religious belief.

That the communities of the new religions do in fact seem to be blessed with increased wealth, while money seems constantly to slip through the fingers of the traditional believers, is largely related to a third factor which, depending on how

⁶ He did not, however, get the pastor's post.

one looks at it, constitutes a power, or a real weakness of the traditional Rai belief system: alcohol.

The Power of Alcohol

Alcohol plays a crucial role in traditional Rai culture. A light millet or rice beer, *jhand*, is consumed at social get-togethers and rituals – often on a daily basis and even in childhood years. The actual drink associated with ritual and respect is, however, distilled rice or millet ‘brandy’, *raksi*. Traditionally, *raksi* is served in small, lidded, wooden vessels as a gesture of honour to guests visiting the household. The guest is expected to empty the vessel and accept as many refills as offered. Up until a few years ago, turning down an offer of *raksi* was regarded as impolite, if not offensive. *Raksi* is used in large amounts in rituals as an offering to the ancestors and spirits, in honour of the shaman, who drinks a considerable amount, especially during the nightly *cinta* rituals, and to honour the guests attending the ritual. From the perspective of the traditional Rai belief system, alcohol is a potent and powerful means of communicating with the ancestors. In the hey-day of the Maoist revolution,⁷ the production and consumption of alcohol was officially forbidden, but regardless of that, continued in secret. For a major public ritual that we attended in Baksila in 2003, in which *raksi* was absolutely mandatory as an offering to the ancestors, the village leaders even took the risk of negotiating with the Maoist leaders so to allow at least a few bottles for the purpose – and succeeded.

Alcoholism is certainly a problem in Rai culture for it prevents people from working, leads to unrest and misery in families, and causes expensive medical bills. In addition, the more *raksi* that is produced the less staple food there is for the cooking pot or to be taken to the market to support the household budget. So the *raksi* culture consumes a major part of the natural productive wealth of the region, and hinders people in gaining wealth. This is where the new religions have a strong argument for conversion by simply forbidding alcohol or declaring it a sin.

All of the new, up-and-coming religious movements in the Rai area are ‘non-alcohol’ religions. In the case of charismatic leaders like Phalgunanda, Om Nanda and Aatma Nanda, alcohol is just one of many things from which the adepts are supposed to refrain. They do not eat meat, for instance, which is a major challenge in Rai culture where meat is part of the ritual offerings. Influenced by the Hindu ascetic tradition, many acts of renunciation and abstention are an inherent part of the path to personal bliss. However, while the pursuit of this ascetic lifestyle is considered to be a matter of personal choice and character, the Christians take another approach: they simply promise that the problem of alcoholism will be solved as soon as you convert, since at that point alcohol is then forbidden. But

⁷ In Dumi Rai region between 2002 and 2004, reaching its peak in the general assembly of the Moabadi fighters in Baksila in 2003.

the reason why the Christian churches forbid alcohol is not merely a humanitarian one: they are well aware that the traditional religions rely heavily on alcohol in their rituals and that without *raksi*, a ritual cannot be performed properly: get rid of the alcohol and you get rid of the pagan rituals.

The Christian mission in the region spread the notion that Christians don’t drink in general. Coming as we do from a Christian cultural background, we are often looked at with great amazement if we accept a cup of *raksi*. Due to general lack of modern education, the villagers have no possibility of realising that the denominations of Christianity that have imposed themselves in the region are often fundamentalist minority groups and do not represent the general Christian-influenced culture that exists in most parts of the Western world. However, the fact that the new religions address alcohol as a problem also made the traditional Rai believers reconsider their attitudes. Nowadays, in many traditional households, it is quite possible to decline *raksi* as a drink of honour without causing any social upset.

The Answers of the Shamans

Having discussed some of the most prevalent arguments and strategies in the current religious conflicts, we can – at this point – observe that the emergence of new religious movements among the Rai has also led to counter-reactions aimed at strengthening the traditional belief system. It is interesting to note, however, that these counter-reactions do not originate from the shamans themselves. To this day, traditional shamans and village priests have always followed a very open and tolerant religious practice and tried to attract clients based on the quality of their performance. No attempts to organise their religion into a church-like structure, or new forms of advertising for clients have been observed. The counter-reactions seem to emerge from the community of possible clients. Two interlinked phenomena that we observed in the last few years might serve as examples of this new strength in the traditional Rai belief system, in which the shamans and village priests themselves seem to act as receptive and serving players: in the last five or six years, new sacred places have been established or ‘discovered’ throughout the Rai region that are related to a sowing and harvest ritual (*ubhauri* – *udhauri*) and to the worship of the land. Among the Dumi Rai, these rituals are called *bhume puja*; *bhume* being a deity of the land and soil that manifests in small stones. During a nightly *cinta*, a shaman has to evaluate whether there are such *bhume* stones in a given locality and whether they are ready to be revealed. Once found, the stones are placed in a *bhume than*, a specially designated place. After this, they are showed to the community once a year, accompanied by a large ritual festival that includes the dancing of the *sakela* dance mentioned above. Over the last few years there has been a tremendous mushrooming of new *bhume thans*, not only among the Dumi, but also among other Rai groups. It is not usually the case that a shaman indicates that a new *bhume* is ready, but rather the community asks a shaman whether

he or she would be willing to test a particular locality, and if so, to assume the responsibility for the annual rituals. Since the festival accompanying the *bhume puja* includes a lot of *sakela* dancing, the rituals are also sometimes called *sakela* rituals, and in some regions the stones themselves are referred to as such.

In the urban areas, especially in Kathmandu, the *bhume* stones have become secondary, and the *sakela* dance has become one of the central determining elements of the ritual. Nowadays, the political and cultural umbrella organisation of the Rai, the Kirat Rai Yayokkha, and many of its local sub-organisations, organise several big festivals over the year and throughout the country that mainly consist of *sakela* dancing, accompanied by some ritual celebrations performed by especially appointed shamans. In the speeches that are given by the community leaders on these occasions, a strong emphasis is placed on the fact that being Rai means following traditional Rai culture and religion. This means that the most powerful Rai organisations in Nepal strongly support the traditional Rai belief system, and actively equate it with the quintessence of Rai identity. This shows that, currently, shamans and village priests still have a large and strong hold in Rai society. Without actively having to make any further comment on the new religious movements that are encroaching on the region, they just continue to do the things they were summoned to do by their ancestral spirits, with all their heart and to the best of their ability

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Chapter 9

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Himalayan Encounters with Human and Other-Than-Human Opponents

Davide Torri

I am Paldan Lhamo, I am Paldan Lhamo.
Listen. Since the beginning of the world
I have done good for all six classes of living beings.
But I was born in the world of evil spirits.
For my father was born a daemon
And my mother a tsan.
And I was born a lha, a god,
Called Paldan Lhamo.
My parents lived on eating corpses.
Every day they ate people, horses, donkeys and wild yaks.
From my parents' meals
The evil spirit Adag drank oceans of blood (...)
(Rösing, 2006: 246)

Shamanism, Animism or a Dialectic of Violence

A discourse on violence animates and permeates shamanic worldviews, ideology and practices. Life in the cosmos is inherently violent. It is true that cooperation is equally important to the system, but destruction is constantly at hand. Violence, as well, is not just a possibility, but a structural component of the whole process. Entangled in the great game of life, human and other-than-human persons act sometimes as prey, sometimes as predators: as occurs with other commodities violence is exchanged to help the smooth functioning of social relations.

According to a neo-animist perspective,¹ in fact, there are obviously more agents in the world than the one we usually think of as such. As Graham Harvey frankly says:

¹ I define neo-animism as the recent developments brought in the field of Religious Studies by the contributions of several scholars, namely Irving A. Hallowell (1960), Nurit

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Power, Repression and Suffering
in Indigenous Religious Conflicts

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