



## Ethnographic Perspectives on Differentiating Shamans from other Ritual Intercessors

Shamanism has captivated the imagination of Western scholars since the seventeenth century. The literature on the subject is varied and voluminous; however, several intractable problems beset the field of “shamanic studies.” One of these is a disagreement over the nature of the phenomenon in question. This has led some anthropologists to conclude that reliable criteria for “diagnosing” shamanism cross-culturally do not exist. Drawing upon ethnographic data on the thriving and dynamic shamanistic tradition in Nepal, this paper explores the reasons why seemingly insoluble problems exist in this area of study and demonstrates how, through careful ethnographic scrutiny and ethnological analysis within and between cultures, it is possible to generate dependable criteria for setting shamans apart from other types of ritual intercessors.

KEYWORDS: shamanism—Eliade—altered states of consciousness—Nepal—Siberia

SHAMANISM has attracted considerable attention from Western scholars in a variety of fields since at least the seventeenth century (see FLAHERTY 1992; NARBY and HUXLEY 2001). As the historian Ronald HUTTON (2001, vii) has pointed out, shamanism was first documented in Siberia as a practice centered upon a person who could communicate with paranormal beings and use the powers of those beings for the benefit of clients. Western audiences were both fascinated and perplexed by this extraordinary, unfamiliar, and seemingly bizarre phenomenon (HUTTON 2001, vii).

Although there is a vast body of literature on shamans and shamanism, intractable problems beset the field of “shamanic studies.” One of these is a disagreement over the nature of the phenomenon in question. In other words, “What exactly is shamanism?” For this reason certain anthropologists have asserted that shamanism is an “insipid” category (GEERTZ 1966, 39; SPENCER 1968, 396) or “an artifact of anthropological history, and an illusion” (HOLMBERG 1983, 41; 1984, 697; 1989, 144–45). Others have stated categorically that “there are no reliable criteria for diagnosing shamanism cross-culturally” (KLEIN et al., 2002; KLEIN and STANSFIELD-MAZZI 2004; KLEIN et al., 2005). These comments are indicative of the problematic and contentious nature of the scholarly discourse on shamanism.

Current debates regarding shamans and shamanism have been profoundly influenced by Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion who, despite numerous criticisms of his work (see FRANCFORT et al., 2001; KEHOE 1997 and 2000), continues to be regarded by many writers as the foremost authority in the field. Indeed, as KEHOE (2000, 41) has pointed out, “Eliade ... has been cited in hundreds of studies on ‘shamanism’” (for example, HULKRANTZ 1991, 9; KNECHT 2003, 2; SIIKALA 1992a, 22–25; WINKELMAN 2000, 71–75; 2002, 1873).

Treating the repertoire of Siberian magico-religious specialists as the quintessential examples of shamanism, ELIADE (1961, 155; 1964, 227–28) presented his findings in his book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964).<sup>1</sup> Eliade (1964, xv, 41, 502–504) considered shamanism as the “ultimate expression of an innate and timeless human religiosity centered on the ecstatic trance or “archaic technique of ecstasy.” Furthermore, he inferred that the origins of shamanism extend back in time to the hunting-gathering cultures of the Upper Paleolithic period (25,000–30,000 years BP). Eliade was certain that Siberia, which lay beyond the boundaries of “civilization,” and thus free from the encroachment of the

outside world, was the remote location where humankind's once widespread ancient religious complex had survived into historic times (ELIADE 1964, xv, xix, 2, 500, 502–504).

In Eliade's vision, the shaman was an adept who, while in a state of "ecstasy" could ascend to Heaven (soul journey) and descend to the netherworld. He thus acquired his magical powers over paranormal beings, the ability to cure the sick, and how to function as a "psychopomp" (one who ushers the souls of the dead to their final destination). Travel within a multi-tiered cosmos and communion with a celestial Supreme Being, according to ELIADE (1964, 507), was the "original underlying ideology of shamanism." Later on, this complex degenerated when people developed the idea of multiple, lesser gods who came down to possess humans (ELIADE 1964, 505–506). For Eliade, therefore, the shaman's ecstatic soul journey and interactions with a Supreme Being were the definitive and indispensable features of genuine shamanism.

In contrast, magico-religious specialists who embody spirits, serve as their mouthpiece, and cure the sick, Eliade maintained, are not genuine shamans. As he put it:

... familiar relations with "Spirits" that result in their "embodiment" or in the shaman... being "possessed" by "spirits" are innovations, most of them recent, to be ascribed to the general change in the religious complex.

(ELIADE 1964, 506)

However, the problem here is that nowhere does Eliade present convincing evidence for his assertion that spirit possession was a recent historical development and represented a degeneration of the ancient and pristine soul journeying shamanism based on a communion with a Supreme Being.

A diametrically opposite perspective on the subject is presented by the anthropologist and African specialist Ioan LEWIS (1971, 55; 2003, 34), who maintains that spirit possession and mastery over spirits are the very essence of shamanism. LEWIS (1984, 9) considers shamanism to be an "ecstatic religion," and views the shaman as an inspired prophet, healer, and "a charismatic religious figure, with the power to control spirits, usually by incarnating them." The soul journey/spirit possession dichotomy has created various theoretical quandaries that have for decades vexed anthropologists and scholars in other fields.

#### NEPAL AND NEPALESE SHAMANISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Nepal is a small landlocked South Asian country nestled in the Himalayas.<sup>2</sup> It borders India to the south, east, and west, and Tibet (China) to the north. Centuries of migrations by different groups from India and Tibet have contributed to the country's complex demographic and cultural mosaic. Nepal is home to approximately twenty-five million culturally and linguistically diverse peoples (see



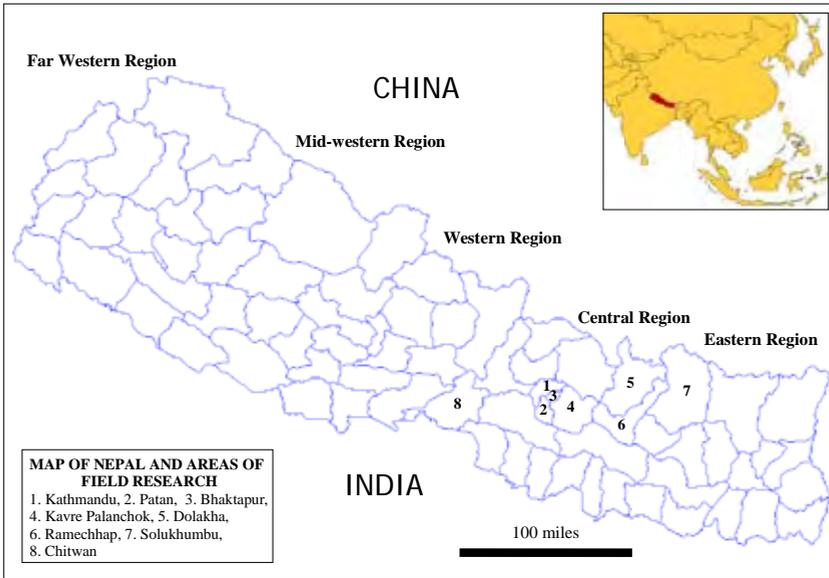
FIGURE 1. A *jhākeri* in full ritual garb.  
(All photographs by author)

ROSE and SCHOLZ 1980; CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS 2002). The majority of Nepalese subsist by farming and animal husbandry, or agropastoralism.

Historically, the country was consolidated into a state-level polity under the rule of a monarch during the second half of the eighteenth century, with Kathmandu as the center of political power (CHAUHAN 1989; ROSE and FISHER 1970). The monarchy ended in 2007, with the establishment of a Federal Democratic Republic, following a long and bloody civil war (HUTT 2004; RIAZ and BASU 2007).

Nepal is the only officially declared Hindu state in the world. Approximately eighty percent of the population practice Hinduism and ten percent practice Tibetan Buddhism. The remaining ten percent includes Muslims, Christians, and groups that adhere to indigenous religious beliefs and practices, although heavily influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism (BISTA 1987; LAWOTI 2005).

Nepal has a thriving shamanistic tradition that is rich and dynamic. During my fieldwork I compiled video footage of numerous night-long healing ceremonies and other ritual activities, as well as interviewing shamans belonging to different ethnolinguistic groups and Hindu castes. These included Chhetri, Gurung, Jirel, Rāi, and Sherpa shamans in western, central, and eastern Nepal (see map on page 217). For comparative purposes, following MASKARINEC's (1989; 1995, 97–113) approach, I also collected data on other types of ritual intercessors, such as *dhāmis* (mediums)



and *mātās* (mother goddesses) (SIDKY 2008, 25–40, 96–97). While analyzing this material it became apparent that the Nepalese ethnographic data might offer a solution to the conceptual morass in the field of shamanic studies without the necessity of discarding shamanism as an intractable analytical concept and an illusion.

The Nepali term for shaman is *jhākri*. Predominantly males, these individuals are part-time practitioners (FIGURE 1). Their calling to the vocation is involuntary and entails a harrowing transformative initiatory crisis (SIDKY 2008, 57–78). These ritual intercessors operate as healers, officiants in life cycle observances, clan-god rituals, and mortuary rites, as well as acting as mediators between humans, animal spirits, and the god of hunting (MESSERSCHMIDT 1976; NICOLETTI 2004; RIBOLI 2000, 1, 25, 178–90).

The anthropologist Alexander MACDONALD (1975 and 1976) was a pioneer in the study of Nepalese shamanism. He termed the *jhākri* “an interpreter of the world.” The *jhākri*, as he put it,

... is a person who falls into a trance, during which time voices speak through his person, thereby enabling him to diagnose illnesses and sometimes cure them, give advice for the future and clarify present events in terms of their relationship to the past. He is therefore both a privileged intermediary between spirits (who cause and cure illness) and men; between the past, present and future; between life and death, and most importantly between the individual and a certain social mythology. (MACDONALD 1976, 310)

Shamanism in Nepal is in many respects similar to Siberian and northern and central Asiatic variants of the practice (HITCHCOCK and JONES 1976; HÖFER 1994, 18;



FIGURE 2. A *jhākri* projecting his soul into the spirit world.

RIBOLI 2000, 56–57; WATTERS 1975). According to my findings, Nepalese shamanism includes all of the specific elements that Eliade and his followers associate with “genuine” shamanism, which they consider to be exclusive to hunter-gatherer societies (WINKELMAN 2000, 71–75; 2002, 1873). These include soul journey, death-rebirth motifs, animal transformations, contact with animal spirits, communion with major deities, and hunting magic. However, although the above-mentioned elements are present in Nepalese shamanism, one of the prominent features of this tradition is spirit possession (SIDKY 2008, 59, 61; 2010; SIDKY et al., 2000). I was therefore unable to reconcile my ethnographic findings with either Eliade’s soul journey model, or Lewis’s spirit embodiment perspective.

Researchers working elsewhere have tried to address the soul journey/spirit possession dichotomy. For example, Siberian shamanism expert Anna-Leena SIIKALA (1992a, 21; 1992b), who considers interaction with the paranormal world as the key element of shamanism, treats both spirit possession and soul journey as merely “alternatives describing the communication between the shaman and the other world.” However, adopting Siikala’s approach, nearly anyone from the Siberian ritual practitioners described by seventeenth-century travelers to present-day clairvoyants, telepathists, psychokinetics, spirit channelers, psychic surgeons,



FIGURE 3. A *jhākri* healing ceremony.

astrologers,<sup>3</sup> New Age savants, and so on, could be classified as shamans. Distinct ritual practitioners are thus needlessly conflated through the use of this approach.

Eliade's followers who have adopted his soul journeying/spirit possession distinction use it as their main criterion to set shamans apart from other magico-religious specialists (for example, GOMBRICH 1988, 36–37; HAMAYON 1990, 32; 1995, 416; HEINZE 1991, 15; HEUSCH 1965; LE QUELLEC 2001, 148; ROUGET 1985, 20; WINKELMAN 2000, 88). For example, the anthropologist David GELLNER (1994, 29–30) construes Nepalese shamans as magico-religious specialists who “go” to the gods (that is, soul journey), and associates them with a “Himalayan and central Asian shamanic tradition.” Gellner contrasts shamans with mediums, practitioners who embody gods, ancestral spirits, and ghosts that “come” to them, which he associates with a South Asian mediumistic tradition (GELLNER 1994, 29–30).

Elaborating on this theme, the anthropologist Jean-Loïc LE QUELLEC (2001, 148) has observed that:

Shamanism and [spirit] possession are located at the two extremes of a continuum, [adding that], the shaman is not the instrument of the spirits, but their master... he is the taker and not the taken, tamer of spirits and not a mount of the gods.

LE QUELLEC emphasizes the point that the shaman, as the spirit master, “is capable of narrating his travels contrary to what occurs in the case of the possessed, whose personality is overtaken by the spirits” (2001, 148).

As pointed out above, these characterizations are at variance with the ethnographic pattern in Nepal, where the shaman not only undertakes soul journeys into the world of spirits (FIGURE 2), but also embodies numerous numinous beings during the same ceremony (SIDKY 2008, 89–114). Furthermore, Eliade's binarism



FIGURE 4. A *jhākri* embodying spirits.

is also problematic because Siberian shamanism did not exclude spirit possession. For instance, as the noted Russian ethnographer Sergei SHIROKOGOROFF (1923; 1924; 1935) reported, spirit possession was a central feature of Tungus shamanism:

The term [shaman] refers to *persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from spirits.*

(SHIROKOGOROFF 1935, 269, italics in original)

Likewise, the distinguished Russian ethnologist Waldemar JOCHELSON (1908, 49–52; 1926, 196–99) clearly recorded the concurrent presence of “soul journey shamanism” and “possession shamanism” in Siberia (KEHOE 2000, 7–13; REINHARD 1976, 15). This suggests that the data from Siberia are to a large degree consistent with the ethnographic picture in Nepal (see MASKARINEC 1995; SIDKY 2008, 28, 117).

During healing rituals lasting fifteen to twenty hours, or more, the *jhākri* beckons and embodies numinous beings of various classes (FIGURE 3). Among

Nepalese shamans, spirit possession events are characterized by shaking, bouncing, and trembling. Pounding his double-sided drum,<sup>4</sup> the *jhākri* bounces six or seven inches off the ground, while seated in a cross-legged position (FIGURE 4). Sweating and panting, he absorbs into his body the deities and other paranormal beings that have been invoked, reins them in with force, and brings them under control. Once he does this his trembling abates. Ethnologist András HÖFER (1974, 171) is correct in observing that the *jhākri* is not “the instrument of the spirits” or a passive vessel compelled to “endure” the force of gods, ghosts, and spirits, but controls them for the purpose at hand.

PROBLEMS AND ERRORS IN THE CURRENT  
DISCOURSE ON SHAMANISM

ELIADE (1964, 500) was not a fieldworker. He relied almost entirely on secondary sources. Moreover he did not use any systematic evaluative criteria with which to assess the accuracy and reliability of the source materials he used (see PARK 1965, 1306; SALIBA 1976, 116–18). Most of his sources on Siberian shamanism were sketchy, written by untrained observers during brief stays in the field, and in many cases the information they provided lacked context (see DIÓSZEGI 1960, 10; GENNEP 2001, 51–52; HUTTON 2001, 43–44, 151–56; SIIKALA 1992a, 17).

Inattentive to the quality of his data and associated methodological issues that such materials present, ELIADE (1964, xix, 500) went on to formulate his vision of shamans as mystical soul journeying champions of their communities. Given the inherent flaws in Eliade’s approach, his view of shamanism has been the source of innumerable unresolved debates and disagreements. HULKRANTZ’S (1989, 44) observation encapsulates the confused state of affairs in the field during the late-1980s:

[There] is a chaos in the understanding of what shamanism is: most authors dealing with the subject never give any definitions.... Those who define the subject differ widely.

The same circumstances characterize the literature on shamanism produced during the twenty-first century (see WALTER and FRIDMAN 2004, xxii; Peter JONES 2006). Therefore, as HUTTON (2001, 126) has observed, since scholars cannot agree on the nature of the phenomenon, elucidation of what shamanism is or what shamans do falls into the domain of the “experts.” Thus “entire continents may appear in or be deleted from the ledger of admissible data” (HUTTON 2001, 126).

One attempt to deal with this conceptual problem has been to extricate the phenomenon from its ethnographic matrix and approach it entirely in terms of the shaman’s altered state of consciousness (ASC). The outcome of this approach is what JONES (2006, 7) calls “spatiotemporally free theories” in which anyone employing ASC to interact with numinous entities for the benefit of clients or communities may be categorized as a shaman (GIBSON 1997, 40, 44; PANDIAN 1991, 94; SAMUEL 1993, 8; WINKELMAN 2000, 71–75; 2002, 1873).



FIGURE 5. A *jhākri* wearing his specialized ritual costume, headdress, and bell bandolier.



FIGURE 6. A *dhāmi* fumigating a patient with incense.

Rather than advance our understanding of shamanism, “spatiotemporally free theories” have merely created additional ambiguities in the literature. For those who rely on this approach, historically or ethnographically unrelated magico-religious beliefs and behaviors that appear to be similar—given that the human central nervous system exhibits common functional attributes under certain psycho-physiological conditions (see KEHOE 2000, 49, 52, 69)—are classified together under the label of shamanism (for example, KLEIN et al., 2002; KLEIN et al., 2005; KLEIN and STANFIELD-MAZZI 2004; LINDHOLM 1997, 424; PRICE-WILLIAMS and HUGHES 1994, 3–5; SMITH 2006, 63; SULLIVAN 1994, 29). Furthermore, “spatiotemporally free theories” actually render the ethnographic and historical material on Siberian shamanism superfluous to the debate because the “ecstatic experience,” as ELIADE (1964, xv, 504) himself described it, is an expression of the “timeless sacred” and a universal human psychological attribute.

#### A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF DIFFERENT RITUAL INTERCESSORS IN NEPAL

The criteria for “diagnosing” shamanism cross-culturally can be found in the rich body of information on shamanic practices in Nepal. This is because of the availability of a solid body of ethnographic data on the *jhākris* and their dynamic tradition, including an assemblage of fastidiously transcribed shaman oral texts, such as MASKARINEC’s (1995; 1998; 2008) remarkable works, as well as data gathered by pioneering anthropologists, such as HITCHCOCK (1974a; 1974b) and HÖFER (1981; 1994).

MASKARINEC’s (1989; 1995, 97–113) comparative look at *jhākris* and *dhāmis* (mediums) in Western Nepal is relevant to the present discussion because it highlights the importance of paying close attention to ethnographic evidence rather than employing preconceived classificatory schemes when trying to differentiate between various ritual intercessors.

Using the postulate that “anyone who uses ASC to commune with spirits for the benefits of clients or community to describe a shaman,” both *jhākri* and *dhāmi* would meet the qualifications. This is because both types of practitioners enter into ASC, become spirit possessed, and communicate with paranormal beings (MASKARINEC 1995, 98). However, overlooked are the significant differences between these specialists in terms of the kinds of spirits with which they interact, the nature and consequences of those interactions, and their functions in society.

The *jhākri*’s calling is associated with a prolonged initiatory psychological crisis; the *dhāmi*’s vocation is not necessarily linked to such an event. The shaman has multiple teachers, whereas the *dhāmi* may have a single tutor. The shaman is a free agent and can incarnate spirits at will, while the *dhāmi* cannot (see REINHARD 1976, 16). The *jhākri* communes with, embodies, and controls innumerable protective beings, tutelary spirits, minor deities, high gods and goddesses, demons, ghosts, and other paranormal entities, while in most cases the *dhāmi* is chosen and possessed by known gods that are part of a traditional hierarchical pantheon

(MASKARINEC 1995, 106). This traditional framework confines the *dhāmi*'s scope of activities and the nature of his interaction with the paranormal world within the parameters of the established religious order.

The *jhākri* and *dhāmi* also differ in terms of the timing of their activities. The shaman can enter into ASC at will and in any place and at any time. In contrast, it is the gods who bring about the *dhāmi*'s trances during specific predictable occasions based on a ritual calendar (GABORIEAU 1976, 225). Moreover, when possessed, the *dhāmi* is merely the mouthpiece of the divinity involved and—unlike the *jhākri*—his personality and identity are completely displaced or submerged.

There are other important distinctions between the *jhākri* and *dhāmi* that must be mentioned. For example, the shaman has a specialized ritual costume, head-dress, and bell bandolier (FIGURE 5). His most important ritual instrument is the drum (see FIGURE 4), which he plays in order to induce ASC (MASKARINEC 1995, 210). The *dhāmis* of Western Nepal often lack elaborate ritual paraphernalia and rely upon members of a musician caste for their entry into ASC (MASKARINEC 1995, 106).

The *jhākri* and *dhāmi* also differ in terms of the range and scope of their activities. The shaman's performances are theatrical, dynamic, fluid, and involve different types of psychic states and spirit possession events (SIDKY 2008, 89–114). His performances are public events attended by the patient, his family, friends, and fellow villagers. The *jhākri* pounds his drum, sings, dances, and recites specific memorized oral texts as necessitated by circumstances (SIDKY et al. 2000; SIDKY 2008, 135–46). He uses an array of therapeutic procedures that involve the employment of water, fire, the transference of illness into sacrificial animals, the sucking out of noxious substances from patients' bodies, and so on.

The ceremonies conducted by the *dhāmi*, in contrast, are frequently similar to one another (see MASKARINEC 1995, 106, and SCHMID 1967, 85), consisting of simply blowing mantras on his patient's body, placing a *ṭikā* (a red dot that has symbolic and religious significance) on the supplicant's forehead (HITCHCOCK 1976, xxv), brushing (*jhārnu*) away harmful influences, and fumigating the client with incense. In other parts of Nepal (for example, Kathmandu, Nagarkot, and Panauti, Kavre), *dhāmis* deal with trivial ailments that are caused by minor spirits. Moreover, the repertoire of these specialists often does not involve accessing ASC (FIGURE 6).

Finally, unlike the *dhāmi*, becoming a *jhākri* requires many years of apprenticeship under several established practitioners who often belong to different ethnic communities. Master *jhākris* train prospective students regardless of their cultural or ethnolinguistic affiliations. Moreover, the student will often apprentice under different teachers who may themselves belong to different cultural groups (SIDKY 2008, 57–78). The outcome of this process of practice and transmission has been the formation of a distinct body of beliefs and practices that all *jhākris* share in common, irrespective of their ethnicity or religious and cultural backgrounds.

One might argue that this perspective is problematic because each ethnic group in Nepal has “its own intractabilities.” This is unequivocally wrong with



FIGURE 7. A *mātā* brushing an afflicted supplicant to remove evil influences.

respect to the present discussion. My ethnographic research and the ethnographic studies of other fieldworkers suggest that Nepalese shamanistic practices do display certain minor permutations within particular local cultural contexts (SIDKY 2008, 23). However, the cosmology that underlies it is a pan-Nepalese phenomenon (see ALLEN 1976a, 124 and 1976b, 514; DESJARLAIS 1989, 304; FOURNIER 1976, 118; HITCHCOCK 1976, xii; JONES 1976, 52; MACDONALD 1975, 113; MILLER 1997, 20; ORTNER 1995, 359; PAUL 1976, 145; PETERS 1981, 68; SIDKY 2008, 57–78; TOWNSEND 1997, 441). There is a remarkable unity of belief and practice even though formalized organizations of shamans are absent in Nepal (SIDKY 2008, 23). Other researchers are in agreement. For example, as MILLER (1997, 4) plainly states, these practitioners, “no matter what their ethnic group, all have a basic unity of approach to the world, a world-view, which they share in common with their patients.” Aside from the striking correspondence of beliefs and practices there are also significant similarities in the costumes, the ritual paraphernalia, and specific techniques used by shamans throughout Nepal (see SIDKY 2008, chapters 4–5).

During the period of mentorship, the candidate acquires specialized knowledge that entails the memorization of long texts and mantras. These constitute a distinct body of mystical knowledge orally transmitted over many generations from teachers to trainees and are the theoretical underpinning of Nepalese shamanism (MASKARINEC 1995, III). Drumming techniques and learning particular dances and songs

are part of this training process as well. In contrast, the *dhāmi* does not undergo any of these activities or exercises (see MASKARINEC 1995, 106; SIDKY 2008, 31).

Similar analytical problems arise when we look at ritual practitioners called *mātās*, or “mother goddesses,” in the Kathmandu Valley. These women are regularly possessed by recognized deities, one of the principle ones being Hārī the protector of children (DOUGHERTY 1986). According to my findings, the *mātā*’s career is involuntary and begins when she is seized by a goddess. While possessed, she can heal the sick and divine the future. Because of the nature of the supernatural beings possessing the *mātā*, she is compelled to operate within the boundaries of the traditional religious order, as is the case with the *dhāmis*.

Mother goddesses administer their curative procedures in private sessions, unlike the *jhākri*’s public healing rituals (FIGURE 7). These therapeutic practices are similar to those of the *dhāmis* and include placing a *ṭikā* on a supplicant’s forehead, divination by looking at patterns of uncooked rice on a plate, brushing the patient to exorcise evil spirits, blowing mantras, and giving religious sermons (see GELLNER 1994). Also, the possessing deity completely overtakes the *mātā*’s personality and she emerges from her trance incapable of remembering what was said or done (SIDKY 2008, 33–35).

This brief comparison of the *jhākri*, *dhāmi*, and *mātā* illustrates that they are entirely different types of ritual intercessors who only superficially resemble one another. To classify them as “shamans” simply because they access ASC or interact with numinous beings for the benefits of their clients or communal groups obfuscates crucial experiential and empirical differences between them and distorts the ethnographic picture.

It must be emphasized that I am not advocating “ethnographic particularism.” This is a theoretical approach that is concerned solely with the interpretation of the individual case. In the context of the present discussion, this would amount to viewing the problem in terms of “shamanisms,” in the plural, rather than shamanism as a unitary phenomenon (for example, HOLMBERG 1984, 697; THOMAS and HUMPHREY 1994). This, however, is merely playing a semantic game. Such approaches have hindered rather than clarified matters because we are left confronting a wide range of distinct ritual intercessors who are treated as “different kinds” of shamans. Using this mode of analysis, the *dhāmi*, *mātā*, and *jhākri* would all be treated as various types of shamans.

#### SHAMANISM AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The term “altered states of consciousness,” or ASC, denotes any mental state that differs radically from ordinary “waking consciousness” (TART, ed., 1969; TART 1975). In other words, ASC involves changes in the awareness of self, ordinary reality, and perceptions of world (see BEYERSTEIN 1996; LUDWIG 1990).

Some writers maintain that through ASC it is possible to access psychological potentials not available during ordinary waking consciousness (HARNER 1982,

FIGURE 8. The *jbākri*'s body remains motionless, while his soul travels to the spirit world.



FIGURE 9. A Tibetan medium possessed by a goddess.

20–30; 1999, 1–5; TOWNSEND 1997, 442–43; WINKELMAN 2000, 6, 124–26). These ordinarily inaccessible potentials are thought to be central to shamanistic prognostication and healing.<sup>5</sup>

A number of scholars utilize the term “shamanic state of consciousness” (SSC) instead of ASC to suggest that the psychic state experienced by the shaman is a clearly distinguishable and unique event involving the integration of different components of the human brain, resulting in adaptive insights and enhanced awareness (for example, HARNER 1982, 20–30, 1999, 1–5; TOWNSEND 1997, 442–43; WINKELMAN 2000, 6, 124–26). The ethnographic data I gathered in Nepal and data compiled by others disconfirms the view that ASC or SSC are unitary phenomena or that these psychic states invariably make available otherwise inaccessible potentials, such as enhanced or adaptive insights (see SIDKY 2008, 57–78; TART 1999).

Although replete in the literature on shamanism, the concepts of ASC and SSC are highly problematic. First, no one seems to fully agree on exactly what constitutes a “genuine” ASC or SSC (PETERS and PRICE-WILLIAMS 1980, 400; SHAARA and STRATHERN 1992). Second, “consciousness” covers numerous simultaneous “micro-states” that people enter and exit during the course of a day, often without being aware of these shifts (TART 1999).<sup>6</sup> Treating SSC as a unitary integrative phenomenon that can be precisely differentiated from other psychic states, for example, dissociation (CASTILLO 1994), when ordinary meta-awareness that gives us our sense of personal identity is overtaken, can be both difficult and misleading.

While watching *jhākri* performances it became evident to me that their interactions with the paranormal world, and hence their psychic states, are far more complex than indicated in the extant literature on the shaman’s trance (SIDKY 2009). Bouncing and drumming, the *jhākri* beckons major deities, clan gods, tutelary spirits, demons, and ghosts. He absorbs some of these beings into his own body, others he may dispatch to perform certain tasks during prognostication, and some he relegates to the sidelines to be interrogated later on during the session. In addition, the *jhākri* projects his own spirit or soul to the land of the gods, while his body remains immobile in the room. He then returns from his soul journey and relates exactly what he has seen to the patient and audience.

Having made his determination through such interactions with the gods and spirits, the *jhākri* identifies the specific paranormal agencies (witches, demons, restless ghosts, and so on) responsible for his patient’s malady (SIDKY 2009). After diagnosing the causes of his patient’s predicament, he performs the requisite ritual to remedy the situation.

Close scrutiny of the evidence reveals that the *jhākri* simultaneously communicates with dissimilar types of numinous beings in very different psychic modalities during a single performance. There are also notable alterations throughout the ritual in the length and intensity of his psychic states and motor functions (that is, bouncing, sitting, walking around, dancing, and so on).

Another aspect of the *jhākri*’s interactions with the paranormal world that requires attention is that the *jhākri*, as a free agent, controls and holds at bay

the spirits and gods with whom he interacts. Furthermore, he does not show any significant discontinuities in consciousness, memory, or personality, even while he embodies deities and other numinous beings and speaks with their voices (SIDKY 2008, 94). This dramatically contrasts with the *dhāmi*, and *mātā*, whose personalities and identities are completely displaced by the embodying entity. The succinct description of Tibetan mediums (FIGURE 9) provided by the anthropologist Robert EKVALL (1964, 273–74) is equally applicable to Nepalese *dhāmis* and *mātās*:

[When spirit possessed] the personality of the medium gives place to the personality of the god. The possessed one loses his character as an intermediary. Like a good interpreter, he speaks, he speaks in the first person, with the voice—often hoarse and strange—of the god. With particular reference to the processes of communication, he has become the god himself. His hearing is the hearing of the god; and his speech is the speech of the god.

#### IDENTIFYING SHAMANS CROSS-CULTURALLY

Having briefly scrutinized some of the contentious issues in the study of shamanism, we can now address the principle methodological question with which we started: Is it possible to generate dependable criteria for differentiating shamans cross-culturally from other types of ritual intercessors? The answer, I would argue, is a qualified yes. In the same manner in which the *jhākri* can be shown in empirical terms to be a distinct kind of ritual intercessor in Nepal, there are no theoretical or methodological reasons to prevent the development of criteria to differentiate shamans from other magico-religious adepts cross-culturally.

Such an endeavor entails two steps. First it is necessary to pay meticulous attention to the ethnographic complexities within and between cultures, rigorously evaluate the quality of the data at hand, and be prepared to honestly assess and accept the implications of data that are at variance with cherished hypotheses or generalizations (LETT 1991, 1997). This is something that Eliade and his followers have failed to do.

The second step requires that we abandon Eliade's flawed construal of shamanism. Eliade made selective use of the data to fit his preconceived vision of shamanism. He did this by assembling bits and pieces of information from accounts of separate groups in Siberia, written at different times by different observers, and fit them together, like a jigsaw puzzle, to approximate what he envisioned to be the shaman, the ancient soul-journeying mystical champion of society (ELIADE 1964, 500).

To demonstrate the extreme antiquity of his soul journeying shaman in the absence of adequate historical information or archaeological evidence from Siberia, Eliade used the flawed and long discarded "age area hypothesis," developed by early twentieth-century diffusionist anthropologists (SIDKY 2004, 135). This theoretical perspective holds that cultural traits that are widespread are more ancient than those that are narrower in scope and distribution. In this line of reasoning,

if shamanism was humankind's first and most ancient religion, then once upon a time shamanism must have been widespread as well.

ELIADE (1961, 153) attempted to prove this point by scrutinizing the general literature on religious practices from around the world. He poured through “thousands of pages of facts and observations assembled by others,” as he put it, to find traits that fit his conception of the archaic soul-journeying shaman. Using this approach, however, the practices of almost any ritual intercessor with the slightest resemblance to the repertoire of Eliade's shaman can be used as evidence that the ancient shamanistic religion was once widespread, albeit surviving in fragmentary form in various locales due to the encroachment of the modern world.

Through such sheer scholarly ingenuity Eliade literally fabricated the evidence needed to support his case (DUBUISSON 2003, 219–22; 2005). ELIADE (1964, xix, 503–504) went on to conclude that shamanism was indeed an ancient and once widespread religious configuration—humankind's primordial and universal religion, dating to the Upper Paleolithic period.

Despite such methodological flaws and unsubstantiated generalizations that made up the core of its argument, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (ELIADE 1964) was received as a masterpiece by the academic community and public audiences of the time. Eliade himself not only became the final authority on the subject of shamanism, but he also emerged as an academic superstar of keen perceptions and much erudition. The popularity of Eliade's book, as KEHOE (2000, 42) has put it, gave scholars “the stamp of approval for lumping spiritual leaders and ritual practitioners around the world outside of the urban West under the term ‘shaman.’”

The final outcome of Eliade's efforts was basically a collage that conflated several ontologically distinct phenomena and ethnographically and historically unrelated configurations of practices, behaviors, and beliefs that has served as the blueprint for much of the subsequent research (SIDKY 2008, 206). This collage can be broken down as follows: (1) a historical/ethnographic complex in Siberia and surrounding areas; (2) a universal Paleolithic religion; and (3) magico-religious beliefs and behaviors with similarities based upon the propensity of the human central nervous system to display similar functional characteristics under particular psycho-physiological conditions.

Depending upon which element or elements of this collage a particular researcher chooses to emphasize, shamanism becomes something different. This is one of the underlying reasons for the chaotic state of affairs in the field of shamanic studies (see HULKRANTZ 1989, 44).

However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the ethnographic materials from the multicultural society in Nepal can offer a solution to this theoretical quandary, by illustrating that it is possible to empirically distinguish shamans from other magico-religious practitioners in accordance with their activities, sphere of operations, ritual practices, the experiential/phenomenological attributes of their psychic experiences, and their social functions. If this is possible within the context of

a multicultural society such as Nepal, then why not cultures further afield? KLEIN et al. (2002 and 2005) exaggerate when they assert categorically that it is impossible to “diagnose” shamanism cross-culturally. Establishing reliable criteria for identifying shamanism cross-culturally have not been forthcoming because many anthropologists and scholars in other fields have misunderstood and uncritically accepted Eliade’s contrived model and its incompatible components.

Based on the analysis of my own ethnographic data alongside the rich body of Nepalese shaman oral texts compiled by MASKARINEC (1995, 1998, and 2008) and others, and the extensive writings of JOCHELSON (1908, 1926) and SHIROKOGOROFF (1923, 1935), the shaman at the center of the historical/ethnographic complex—the first element in Eliade’s collage—may be characterized as follows:

The shaman is a socially recognized part-time ritual intercessor, a healer, problem solver, and interpreter of the world whose calling is involuntary and involves a transformative initiatory crisis. His repertoire consists of dramatic public performances involving drumming, singing, and dancing in which he is the musician. He has the ability to access ASC at will (without psychotropic drugs) and enters into distinctive modes of interaction with paranormal beings of various classes, as well as having the ability to go on soul journeys. The embodiment of spirits does not result in the replacement of the shaman’s personality or loss of memory. He has mastery over spirit helpers and uses that power for the benefit of clients. The shaman has distinctive specialized paraphernalia: the drum, costume, head-dress, metal bells, and beads. Finally, he commands a body of specialized knowledge transmitted orally from teacher to pupil according to tradition.

(SIDKY 2008, 209)

I propose that the ethnographic traits included in this definition represent the criteria for identifying shamans/shamanism cross-culturally. In geographical and historical terms this construal delimits the scope of the phenomenon primarily to North and Central Asia and northern North America. Moreover, it excludes a vast majority of magico-religious practitioners from around the world who have long been deemed to be shamans, for example indigenous healers in South America, Africa, and Australia, and so on (see KEHOE 2000, 4).

With respect to the second element of Eliade’s model—the antiquity of shamanism—the prehistory of shamanism in Siberia is unknown and there are no historical records of Siberian shamanism before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (HUTTON 2001, 113–49). Moreover, there are no concrete falsifiable data to support the postulate that shamanism was once a universal Paleolithic religion or that it remained unchanged for thousands of years until the present in places on the margins of “civilization” (SIDKY 2010).

More importantly, regarding the shaman’s communion with a Supreme Being, which is central to the view of shamanism espoused by Eliade and his followers, anthropological findings contradict the idea that monotheism preceded polytheism, both being complex sociocultural traits that are connected to demographic patterns, ecological factors, and levels of social complexity (DOW 2006;

PEREGRINE 1996; SWANSON 1964, 188–94). Thus Eliade’s assertion that communion with a celestial “Supreme Being” was the “original underlying ideology” of his archaic shamanism is patently false.

Finally, categorizing historically/ethnographically unrelated ritual intercessors as shamans because the human central nervous system has common functional attributes under certain psycho-physiological conditions—the third element of the collage—disregards cultural, temporal, and geographic contexts and produces a category that is so vague as to be theoretically useless.<sup>7</sup> If we are keen to attach the label of “shaman” to different ritual specialists on this basis, that is a matter of personal choice, not because the nature of the phenomenon dictates it. As KEHOE (2000, 52–53) has pointed out, this approach entails the facile use of a “simple blanket word, lifted from an unfamiliar Asian language, for a variety of culturally recognized distinct practices and practitioners.”

The errors embedded in Eliade’s collage and the quandaries in the contentious field of shamanic studies will linger until researchers become cognizant of the true nature of Eliade’s model of shamanism and its underlying problems that have heavily impacted current understandings of shamanism.

As a final note, it should be mentioned that self-proclaimed “experts” who have built entire careers studying shamanism following Eliade’s lead—and who therefore have strong vested interests in their own theoretical stances—will no doubt be compelled to react negatively to the issues presented in this article. My response is simply that if the goal of anthropology is to produce “paranormal fantasies,” as anthropologist James LETT (1997, 112) has put it in another context, then one need not be concerned with the issues raised here. However, if our objective is to ensure that our understandings of the world accord with the reality of the world, then honest appraisals of cherished hypotheses and models and what the empirical data reveal require the utmost attention.

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#### NOTES

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1. The book was originally published in French (ELIADE 1951) under the title *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*.

2. This overview is drawn in part from SIDKY 2010 and SIDKY et al. 2000.

3. These categories are taken from LETT (1997, 111).

4. *Jhākris* in the far western part of Nepal use single-sided drums, similar to those used in Siberia.

5. As an aside, it should be mentioned that while there is copious literature on the shaman’s ASC, rarely addressed is the question of precisely how what goes on inside the shaman’s

head/brain/mind (that is, his ASC) affects the patient's body/mind. This represents a serious flaw in portrayals of shamanistic healing practices (see SIDKY 2009).

6. Gregory Maskarinec, 2008, personal communication.

7. Such a perspective is analogous to assuming historical and cultural linkages between different human populations because all humans experience visual afterimages under certain conditions due to "retinal fatigue." This phenomenon is caused by the complex interface between the retina and the brain's visual cortex, common to humans everywhere. Retinal fatigue occurs when one stares at a red circular spot on a white background for about thirty to forty-five seconds. At this point, looking at a white surface one will see a green spot of identical shape in the same position as the red one (see COLE 1999, 52). To infer the existence of a once universal and ancient religion because the human central nervous system reacts similarly to certain types of psycho-psychological stimuli is ludicrous.

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