

Book Review

Casper J. Miller: Faith-Healers in the Himalayas, CNAS, Kirtipur 1979, Rs. 52.

Full moon time is shaman time. Amongst many of the Himalayan societies one can find a marked connection between these calendrical dates and the activities of the traditional magico-religious healers, generally known as jhānkri. Most of them are initiated when the moon is full, many receive then their first vocational calls and tests. And many perform at such times healing seances, rites related to their paraphernalia or to their professional ancestors. Also on such dates jhankris assemble.

One fixed occasion for such gatherings is the jātrā, the pilgrimage to a holy place. In the Nepalese hills these jātrā are numerous and display some common features, worth a moment's attention. Most of them are held at high altitude locations, where a lake, a pond or a well is to be found: a source of water on a top. They are usually far beyond any human settlement, yet often equally distant from surrounding valleys, in which people from different local or ethnic groups have their habitual dwellings. They are, topographically, ideal inter-ethnic meeting grounds, for they are neutral territory. Being 'elevated', they cost the visitors some effort to reach, and this is part of the merit one gains from a pilgrimage: a pilgrimage requires, by its very nature, a physical stake. Jātrā are events for the crowds, laymen and officiants, men and women, this tribe or caste and that tribe or caste, events both religious and profane; for the purpose of worshipping can suitably be combined with the desire for fun. For the ethnographer's record I here present a list of some such jātrā-meeting grounds, which I have heard of or seen, mainly located in the northern hill regions of Nepal. They may differ in their individual object of worship, but constitute a homogeneous class in that they are frequented at certain full moon dates by pilgrim crowds of diverse populations, whose guides are shamans, drumming their way in full gear to the worshippers' destination:

Pānch Pokhari and Tin Pokhari, on high ridges between Arun and Tamur Kosi, for rikhitarpani or saunpurnima (July/August);

Salpa Pokhari on the Mayamdanda ridge, with three lakes at 3500m, for three annual festivals: dzandipurnima in baisakh (April/May), rikhitarpani in saun (July/August), dhanespurnima in mangsir (November/December);

Dudh Kunda in Solu, at a lake above 4600m, also called Omi tsho, for rikhitarpāni or saunpurnima (July/August);

Kalingchok, on the Tamba-Sun-Kosi divide, 3800m, also for janai-purnima in saun (July/August) and two additional, minor festivals;

Gosai Kuṇḍa, south of Langtang Himal, 4400m, for janaipurnima or rikhitarpāni in saun (July/August);

Dupche and Gupteswor, in Central Nepal, in mangsir (November/December) and baisakh (April/May), mainly frequented by Tamang;

Rikeswor or Chumik Chyangchub, near Dāman, at 2700m, for phāgun purnima (February/March);

Jaljale and Nisildhor in Northern Magar territory, for rikhitarpāni in saun (July/August).

It may be added that these jātrā-locations are neither unilaterally reserved for devotees of one religion, Hindu, Buddhist or local, nor for one single deity, even though a certain predominance for the worship of Mahādev (Siva) can be registered.

The overall pattern of similarity and the sheer frequency of such high altitude jātrā - the above list does in no way claim to be representative - suggest that they indeed reflect features of common religious customs in the Nepalese hills. One may wonder, therefore, why anthropologists have so far neglected to study them at any length. One of the reasons may be the self-protective provincialism, with which some of the foreign researchers reduce the scope of their work to THEIR tribe or THEIR village, shutting out everything that happens outside this limit. Or these events seem too casual to form material for extensive description. Casper Miller, S.J., in his first book: Faith-Healers in the Himalayas destroys such objections. His study deals expressly with these jātrā, attended by multi-tribal crowds, guided by their respective jhānkri. It is precisely the cross-boundary scope of Miller's view that makes his book an original contribution to our knowledge of Himalayan shamanism.

Miller has chosen the region of Dolakha/Charikot district as his area of investigation, whereto he undertook several journeys between 1974 and 1978. Here, he observed and described with precision, with a feeling for the significance of little events and with sound judgement three types of jātrā: the great janaipurnima jātrā of mount Kalingchok; the Devikot jātrā of Dolakha proper, performed in kārtik (October/November); and the Deolang jātrā, held at a Mahadev-shrine near the Tamang village of Deolang in a side valley

of the Upper Tamba Kosi at swasthāni purnima or full moon of pus (December/January). Each of these jātrā has its own implications and a brief review of their peculiarities may illustrate Miller's achievement.

At Kalingchok, a prominent peak at the Sun Kosi - Tamba Kosi divide, the main deity worshipped is Kāli, as the place name clearly indicates (kāli - cok = square of Kāli or Black Durga). Almost equal in rank is the worship of Mahādev or Siva, as can be guessed from the many thousand attributive tridents, stuck to the shrine and accumulated over the decades. Other names of deities mentioned in connection with the holy place are Lakṣmi (goddess of Wealth), Saraswati (goddess of Learning) and Setidevi (probably Satī, an avatar of devi and wife of Siva).

The diversity of pilgrims who come to this place to pay their annual, ceremonial visit (darsan garne) to the mentioned deities on the full moon of saun, is great: Miller has encountered Tamang, Sherpa, Thami, Brahmin, Chetri, Newar, Jirel, Damai, Kami, Sarki and Magar, - in this order of quantification. And saun, in the depth of the monsoon, is, according to the author, the right time to do so: saun is generally considered as the period when illness and death most frequently strike the population, for it is then that the gods are absent, gone on a journey to the underworld. To go on this pilgrimage and to offer them gifts of rice, flowers, incense, coins and trisul in the main shrine called Bhagawati Kuṇḍa is to remind these deities of their protective obligations. At another shrine nearby, consisting of two stones, blood sacrifices are made by the jhānkri and their assistants, apparently to appease such blood-thirsty supranaturals as sikāri (The Hunters) and ban jhānkri (non-human shamans of the jungle with a rich repertoire in black magic). And the shamans themselves beg for power or strength: "bal māgnu parcha."

During his participation at the jātrā of Kalingchok, Miller witnessed one of those legendary competitive battles between two jhānkri, which have a long and widespread folklore tradition and whose enticing shamanist yarn knits these pilgrimages into an attractively magical web. What Miller saw lacked the splendor of such wellknown contests between magicians such as Milarepa vs. Naro Bonchung about the hegemony over Mt. Kailas, the former flying on sunrays to the top or Padmasambhava vs. Tusur Bon, the First Tamang shaman, about their respective professional monopolies. Miller saw no shamans riding through the sky or falling dead on the spot, pierced by poisoned, magical arrows, - the dispute he witnessed concerned a plain copper vessel, - but a contest it was, nevertheless, for it had a winner and a loser. And power was manifested in it: the power of insulting words and daring gestures. And this is shamanism at the grip of reality.

The second jātrā described involves not so much jhānkri, as it does another group of media: men who become vessels or vehicles of a deity. The scene is Dolakha, perhaps the most fascinating ancient Newar town in Eastern Nepal.

The central event in the Devikot jātrā at Dolakha, named after the Devikot temple in the northern section of the town, is the enactment of a legendary plot, in which Bhagawati - is it Tripura Sundari? - travels the world in pursuit of wicked giants (raksas), which she destroys one after the other, until she encounters a demon called Raktabir, who poses some problems. For this demon, whenever slain by the sword of the goddess, multiplies into as many new demons as blood drops fall to the ground. There is only one solution to the dilemma: the dropping blood has to be gathered before it touches the ground. And this is done, in the legend, by some attendant-servants, (gaṇ), who drink the dripping blood. In the annual enactment of the story amongst the Dolakha Newar, this distasteful job is bestowed on Thami, members of a small ethnic group, a minority, living scattered in some villages north of the sophisticated Newar townspeople.

The blood-drinkers in the religious play are called nari and are, once chosen by the goddess for this role, attached to it for life. They are instructed by the main jhānkri of their tribal village in the art of shaking (kāṃnu) and in some basic esoteric knowledge (gyān buddhī). According to their own traditional interpretation of the act, the nari understand themselves as vessels or vehicles of the goddess, who, without their participation, would not come at all and would, therefore, withhold the beneficial results of the story's enactment. In fact, they say: 'The goddess drinks the blood through us herself; she mounts and rides us, while we are in the extatic phase of drinking the sacrificial blood (of two buffaloes) at the temple of Devikot; that's why we stand with our backs to her shrine. We are her thāpanā ... embodiment, and therefore the Newar need us.'

The Newar, on the other hand, interpret the role of the Thami nari in a depreciatory manner. For them the Thami are low caste in the first place, savages, whereas they are the Herrenrasse. And the nari in particular are termed by the Newar as betāl: demons, goblins, vampires, for everyone who drinks blood must be a demon. Instead of being grateful to the nari for helping perform the religious play, the haughty Newar expel the Thami assistants from the human plane, only because they do, what they are asked to do by their double-tongued employers. This schisma is well described by Miller and the performance of the scene well documented with descriptive words and vital ethnographic photographs. It is, in my view, the best section of the book.

The chapter concludes with a comparison of the relationship that is established between the goddess of Devikot and her devotees with that of mother and son in Nepalese society. The demanding and exclusive character of the former reflects that of the latter. "People cannot be in their religion other than they are in their society." p. 81. One feels to hear a distant echo of Emile Durkheim resounding in these lines.

The third jātrā described in Miller's book takes place at a shrine called Deolingeswari Mahādev near the Tamang village of Deolang in the upper Tamba Kosi region. It, too, is connected with a legendary story which, in part, is revived in the proceedings of the festivity. According to one of the legend's versions, a yak cow, belonging to a lama of Rolwaling, three days away from the present site, used to appear miraculously at the Deolingeswar stone to empty regularly its udders there for the god Mahādev, and the first man to discover these secret offerings was a shaman of the area, (a daṅgur), who, eyewitnessing the affair, was mounted by the god on his back (āṅgmā cadhera) and consequently began to shake. The present day successor of this jhānkri, always selected from one particular Tamang clan, is also the exclusive agent of the god Mahādev. Unlike other jhānkri, abound in the region, this particular one in fact acts only once a year, i.e. on the Deolang jātrā. He never performs any healing seances, called cintā = thought, reflection, worry, meditation, care, concern; he has no regular clientele, because he is reserved for the god. Through the jhānkri's embodiment the god transmits his boons to the people. The Deolang jātrā, therefore, is a one-jhānkri festival.

The main feature of the jātrā, which is attended predominantly by Tamang, but also by Sherpa, Thami, Brahmin and Chetri, is the sudden appearance of this shaman, in the night of the festival, at the shrine of Mahādev, where he is crowned with a necklace belonging to that deity. At that time he is furnished with the auratic blessings of beneficial powers attributed to the god: to fecundate living beings, to bring offsprings to the people and their cattle. Touching the shaman in this moment will fulfil, according to popular belief, the people's wishes for progeny. As transmitter of these boons the shaman himself has to remain poor and sonless. He redeems the god's generosity, by being excepted from its benefits, which his compatriots receive from the god through him as the intermediary agent. And this, once more, is an example amongst many that contradicts the widespread opinion about shamans as exploitative quacks.

A concluding chapter in Miller's well-balanced book, entitled jhānkris and the Jātrā of life, presents a series of vocational life histories of individual shamans from different ethnic groups and castes: a Kami- and a Chetri-, two Thami- and three Tamang-

jhānkri, calling to mind those pioneer sketches written in the early sixties by Macdonald, Miller's teacher or, as the author wants it, his guru. The Parisean "guru" also wrote the foreword to the book, indicating that he approves of his siṣya.

The final considerations of Faith-Healers in the Himalayas- the manuscript title had been Jhānkris and Jātrās, in my opinion a more appropriate headline for the contents of this publication - are reserved for a pragmatic discussion: what are, or better what could be the relation between traditional Himalayan faith-healing and Western medicine. In the author's opinion, - and an open mind would find it hard to discard it - both forms of approaches to illness have their own merits, one more concerned with psychosomatic, one more with physiological forms of discomfort. It would be very unwise, therefore, to play off one against the other, an attitude not to be feared from the shamans' side, who generally do not consider chemical or chirurgical medicine as a competition to their own magico-religious practices, but rather a desirable complement, although the author doubts, whether shamans would be willing to become active propagators of modern forms of treatment. The eliminative tendencies, then, would stem from those who think that Western medicine ALONE can be beneficial to the ill.

In order to prevent damages thus done to indigenous and ancient forms of coping with disease, Miller suggests: instead of teaching shamans some basic knowledge in scientific methods of diagnosis and treatment, teach the modern doctors - and one would like to add: the decision makers in health programs - some lessons in anthropology, until they begin to respect the shamans and their views and techniques. This is a noble suggestion, but more idealistic, I fear, than the one to win shamans over to additional training in Western medical practices. For the most that could be gained from Miller's proposal is an occasional nod of mutual respect for two otherwise separately practiced approaches. A shaman, however, who would incorporate in his individual work both ways of treatment could certainly become a trailblazing figure in a revolutionary medical experiment, for which China has already provided the model. I know some shamans who would undergo the training ... one has to find the money and those, willing to instruct them; and one has to find the means to supply them later on. A small project in Jhapa, as far as I know, works along these lines. It should be further encouraged.

Miller's book is appended by a glossary of Nepali terms used in the text and three rather craftless and careless sketch maps of the area; one of them claims blasphemically to be derived from an Erwin Schneider map, indeed the appropriate source for those interested in the geographical features of the area in question. (see: E. SCHNEIDER: Tamba Kosi, Lapchi Kang, Rolwaling Himal, all in 1:

50.000 m² and available at the Nepal Research Centre - Goethe House
- Ganabahal - Kathmandu).

The tone of the narration is both humble and strong, sometimes a little simplistic in its Present Tense presentation and the author's position has a Jesuit touch: naturalised, but not gone native.

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