

The Problem with Shamans: Shamanism in Contemporary Nepal and Mongolia

There are many problems with shamans. One is that the “shaman” is often held out as a universal cultural role present in all cases of “shamanism”; another is that the shaman role is often understood as a “thing” with consistent cross-cultural characteristics, in contrast to other “things” like priesthood or witchcraft. The ethnographic evidence already seen in the discussion of shamans complicates these assumptions.

But there are other problems as well. In some instances, there is too much shamanism even for the local people. In Nepal, not all people take shamans seriously. According to Stacy Leigh Pigg, some Nepalese declare “that they ‘don’t believe in shamans’” (1996: 186) or *dhami* as the healing specialist is called there. Pigg began with an analysis of the Nepalese term for “belief,” which is *biśwās*:

Both the Nepali word *biśwās* and the English word “belief” have several connotations. (Both English and Nepali are used in the discourse on belief in Nepal.) There is a slippage in the connotations of belief/*biśwās*, both within and between the two languages. These words can indicate trust and confidence in another person, or faith and conviction in a general proposition. The word *biśwās*, however, most often conveys faith in another person rather than adherence to abstract principles (166).

Significantly, the people who disavow the *dhami* tend to be the most modern and cosmopolitan Nepalese, who see shamanism as backward and rural. “They know that calling on shamans is taken as a sign of that backwardness” (180). They even have a term for such backwardness, *andhabīśwās*, which literally means “blind belief” (*andha* means “blind”). Pigg “was taught, just as Nepalis who learn English are, that this word means ‘superstition.’ Most of the time it does” (189).

But the reality, as always, is more complex. One local woman told Pigg that “when you have tried every possible remedy, and none has worked, then you become *andhabīśwāse*,” willing to give anything a try, even a shaman (189). On the other hand, some people accuse others of being *andhabīśwāse* for

rejecting the *dhami* altogether. Pigg concluded that belief/blind belief must be understood in Nepal in terms of the speakers' social position and identity. A modern person may not abandon belief completely, but he or she must believe consciously and wisely. "The *biśwās* that people in Chandithan understand themselves as having, and the kind of *biśwās* they value, is a *biśwās* based on careful judgment. To be a believer, then, is to be a conscious agent, a thoughtful acting subject—very much like the rational knower in the discourse of modernity" (190). In short, *biśwās* "signifies for them the ability to discriminate between shamans who are credible and those who are not.... People in Chandithan are making themselves into 'modern believers,' people who believe in shamans skeptically" (190-1).

Farther north, in Mongolia, the problem is not enough shamanism. Since the end of communism, the Darhad people have been experiencing an epidemic of *agsan*, a kind of "drunken rage" in which the victim "loses control over himself...and screams, cries, and aims punches in all directions" (Pedersen 2011: 1). The cause, they say, is the swarming of spirits that has resulted from the destruction of Buddhism and the suppression of shamanism by the communist regime. Now that the regime has fallen, the spirits are back and out of control.

Life has become in ways more "modern" for the Darhad, which means among other things that it has become more *uncertain*, and "the restless spirits simply *were* uncertainty as such; they were materializations, actualizations, instantiations, and condensations of the all-pervasive state of cosmological turmoil variously called 'democracy,' 'transition,' or 'the age of the market'" (39). Thus, in a surprising way, Pedersen claims that the contemporary situation is *more* shamanic than it has been in a long time.

The problem, then, is that there are not shamans, at least not highly skilled and powerful shamans like in days of old, who can manage the buzzing spirits. The great shamans of the past had the capability to occupy two different states, to switch on and off their connection to the spirit world and to “absorb” spirits and/or spirit power. Their primary tool or weapon was their gown or cloak, but they also wielded other paraphernalia with magical properties. The gown/cloak in particular was a kind of spiritual “armor” that protected them from spirits, as well as a sort of “lightning rod” for spirits: the many layers and knots in the cloak could entrap spirits (and human souls) and allow the shaman to exist in multiple simultaneous conditions and to adopt multiple perspectives, both that of spirits and of humans. This leads Pedersen to rethink the whole notion of spirits, at least in the Mongolian context. Rather than “beings,” spirits seem to be “inherently labile and capricious assemblages of heterogeneous elements” (175). Said more simply, spirits are the very essence of movement, change, transition, and transformation. The shaman, then, is the human who can most effectively and safely step into this spiritual flux and literally bridge the gap between the human and the spiritual. However, without old-fashioned shamans—with only modern-day versions who are “not quite shamans”—all people are exposed to spirit-movement but none can quite manage it.

References

- Pederson, Morten Axel. 2011. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Pigg, Stacy Leigh. 1996. “The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of ‘Villager’s Beliefs’ in Nepal.” *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (2), 160-201.