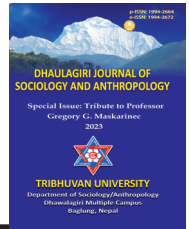


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Mesmerized by Mantra: Gregory Maskarinec and Nepali Shaman Oral Text

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Abstract

A cursory review of the literature shows that shamanism as traditional healing has been a subject of scholarly interest. Many foreign scholars have studied the Nepali shamans and their healing practices. Professor Gregory G. Maskarinec is known for his in-depth ethnographic study of the oral texts of Nepali shamans. He explored the shamanic world, particularly the meaning of mantras shamans use to diagnose and treat affliction, and published books on *Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts*. He was honored by *Birendra Pragyalankar*, a prestigious award given to foreign scholars for their scholarly contributions. Maskarinec, a professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Hawaii, passed away from cancer on June 16, 2022, at 71. He is no longer with us but will be remembered for his contributions. This paper examines the relevance of traditional healing in light of Professor Maskarinec's work on Nepali shamans.

Keywords: dhامي-jhankri, Gregory G. Maskarinec, oral texts, Nepal, traditional healing

Introduction

The name of Gregory G. Maskarinec (May 16, 1951 to June 16, 2022) comes to the top among the scholars who have spent their precious time researching various aspects of Nepali society and culture. Professor Maskarinec was connected to Nepal first as a Peace Corps volunteer and then as a doctoral researcher. As a Peace Corps volunteer, he served six years as a school teacher in Jajarkot, a hilly district of Karnali Province in Western Nepal. While in Jajarkot, he got interested in spirit possessions, the way Jhankri (Nepali shaman) conducted healing sessions and communicated with the spirit world.

He developed interest in healing mantras and did his Master's thesis on *Nepali Jhankri Texts*. Mesmerized by healing mantras, he continued his doctoral research on shamanism, making Jajarkot a center of his ethnographic field sites. With his deep interest in shamanism and long-term engagement in the field, even after his doctoral research, he became a key figure in the study of shamanism by documenting shaman oral texts, seeking the meaning of "meaningless mumblings" and making sense of "nonsense mumbo-jumbo." He published books and research articles, most related to Nepali shamans. He also served as visiting professor at the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Tribhuvan University. He remained connected with



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Nepal until his last days. Maskarinec was a professor at the Departments of Native Hawaiian Health and Family Medicine and Community Health at the John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii. He died of cancer on June 16, 2022, at 71, but will be remembered for his contribution to Nepal.

A certain period can be a turning point to shape a person's life. While working as a school teacher in Jajarkot for a few years, he became deeply interested in Nepali culture, language, traditions, and traditional healing practices. He was enchanted by the healing mantras that Jhankris recited to diagnose and treat afflictions. He wondered how oral texts used to treat the sick could have been stored in Jhankri's mind. Even today, one wonders how the Jhankris, who conduct healing sessions, could have memorized so many lengthy recitals that they sometimes run whole nights chanting with the rhythm of the drum beating. Professor Maskarinec explored how shamans create worlds of words during their dramatic night-long performances.

Shamanism: A Fascinating Subject

It appears that shamanic healing practices are of particular interest to most foreign scholars (Desjarlais, 1992; Diedrich, 2007; Hitchcock & Jones, 1976; Holmberg, 1989; Miller, 1997; Mumford, 1989; Nicoletti, 2006; Peters, 2004, 2007; Sagant, 2008; Sidky, 2008; Watters, 1975). Shamanism seems to be the dominant theme in early anthropological scholarship (M. Subedi & Uprety, 2014). The "exoticness" may have attracted early scholars, but shamanism remains a fascinating subject even today. The more one digs into it, the more one finds it unexplored. It was how Professor Maskarinec experienced it. Many foreign scholars studied Nepali shamans and their healing practices, but Professor Maskarinec was the only one who could go so deep to understand the meaning of mantras.

The initial impression of Maskarinec, similar to many others, was that the shaman's mantras were incomprehensible "meaningless mumblings." In the beginning, he could make little sense of shamanic recitals. However, his curiosity drew him further into shaman oral texts. He successfully dove into the depths of Jhankri-mantras and picked the pearls. He revealed the meaning of mantras and the context in which these mantras could make sense. According to Professor Maskarinec, the mantras, styles, beliefs, and practices of the Jhankris can only be understood in the context of their world. Jhankris, according to

Professor Maskarinec, create their world through the oral recitation of mantras, negotiate with invisible forces, and help restore balance and order in a chaotic social world.

Making Sense of "Nonsense"

Many people cannot make sense of healing mantras and find shamanic healing practices inexplicable. Many believe shamanic healing is "nothing more than primitive, superstitious nonsense" (Sax, 2009). Professor Maskarinec, who spent years studying Jhankri-mantras, emphasized the need to listen to them. One cannot make sense just by observing what Jhankris do without listening to and understanding what Jhankris say. Professor Maskarinec asserts, "It is pointless to talk about who the shamans are and what they do without knowing what they say" (Maskarinec, 1992). He found that the mantras are related not only to illness but also to the underlying causes of illness, such as family disputes, abuse of authority, violence, corruption, and caste and gender discrimination.

Professor Maskarinec wrote a masterpiece like *Ruling of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Oral Text* (Maskarinec, 1995), for which he was awarded by *Birendra Pragyalankar* in 1995. *Birendra Pragyalankar* was founded by the late king Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev to honor foreign scholars for their scholarly contributions to Nepal. He was among the few foreign scholars to receive such a prestigious award. A few years later, he published a bilingual book (Nepali and English) entitled *Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts* (Maskarinec, 1998). The book, published in two volumes, contains various mantras, recitals and spells, which he had collected from 15 shamans from Jajarkot and Rukum. The book contains the recitals to be chanted publicly as well as the secret spells to be whispered in a person's ear. What is noteworthy is that he kept these mantras in Devanagari script and diligently translated them into English. Recognizing his contribution and command over language, Professor Maskarinec was also awarded the *Vidhyadhari*, an honorary degree for Sanskrit scholarship.

Many indigenous communities want to preserve shamanism as their cultural tradition. Bilingual books such as those by Professor Maskarinec can be of great help for them. He had helped one of Jhankri's sons by providing his father's mantra. His books can help future Jhankris to regain their ancestral knowledge of oral texts. It shows the potential value of his books

not only for academicians and researchers but also for the indigenous people to reclaim their ancestral knowledge.

Many research articles have been published under his authorship. We can read his article on the Jhankri tradition of Nepal even in the Encyclopedia of Medical Anthropology (Maskarinec, 2004). From his writings, we know that Professor Maskarinec had a deep interest in the health sector of Nepal. We know that he was also watching closely the fast-onto-death staged by Dr. Govind KC, a veteran orthopedic surgeon and medical education activist who has been fighting against the corruption in the medical sector and striving for the reform of the medical education system (Maskarinec et al., 2020). According to Professor Om Gurung, Professor Maskarinec was also interested in Nepali literature and politics. He was a very sociable, helpful, graceful, quiet, and decent person familiar with Nepali culture, particularly that of Karnali Province, and above all, he was a good friend of Nepal (Martin Chautari, 2022).

Dhami-Jhankri And Traditional Healing

Shamans are known by various names among different communities in Nepal¹. Dhami- Jhankri is common across Nepal. There is, however, a difference between Dhami and Jhankri. Dhamis are oracles or spirit mediums, whereas Jhankris are shamans. Dhamis are associated with specific ritual functions related to their ancestral deities, even though they also use mantras, go into trances, deal with spirit possession, and offer blood sacrifices. Dhamis focus on ancestral deities and Gods in their mantras and swing *shyauli* (a broom of green leaves) or temple bell, whereas Jhankris focus on dead spirits and malicious and menacing souls such as *pret*, *masan*, *bayu*, *lagu* and beat *dhyangro* (drum) or swing *kole*, a bell that is usually made for lead cow. Both types of healers can

1. Shamanic healers are known by various names among different indigenous communities in Nepal. For example, they are known as *gurau*, *guruwa* and *bharra* among Tharu community; *lama*, *lambu* and *bonpo* among Tamang, *ramma* among Magar, *guvaju* among Newar, *poju* and *hlewri* among Gurung, *bijuwa*, *padem*, among Rai, *fedangwa* and *yeb* among Limbu, *lhapa* and *mindung* among Sherpa, *puimbo* and *ngiami* among Sunuwar, *pande* among Chepang, *phombos* among Jirel, *ayalam* among Thakali, *bunghing* among Lepcha, *dhami* and *jhankris* among Brahmin, Chhetri, Dalits and many other communities. There may be differences in their ritual practices, recitals, costumes and paraphernalia.

diagnose problems, treat illnesses, and restore order and balance to the patient and community lives by communicating with the spirits.

Not only in Jajarkot but also in various districts of Nepal, Jhankris have played an important role in diagnosing, treating and rehabilitating people with psychosocial problems. They know mantras, which they have meticulously memorized, and the skills to use them to perform ritualistic healing sessions. Professor Maskarinec learned through years of fieldwork among Jhankris that mantras, both to be recited publicly and whispered privately, are oral texts memorized through years of training. Mantra can be understood as a group of words that are uttered to remove evil spirits and ghosts as well as to appease benevolent spirits and deities. Mantra is made up of the Sanskrit terms *mana* (mind) and *tra* (tool), and it literally translates to “tool of mind.” This implies that mantra has something to do with the human mind. Mantras recited in public sound like musical songs. The recitation with the drum beat makes people spellbound.

Jhankris are skilled in interpreting symptoms, causes of problems, and the treatment methods and procedures to be adopted. Like *Pundits* who perform naming, marriage, and death rituals/ceremonies with the help of written texts, Jhankris diagnose and treat problems and perform healing rituals with the help of oral texts. Oral texts include sounds, songs, and stories communicated orally. They are equipped with memorized oral texts, attire, drums, equipment and things needed to perform the rituals. They have extraordinary skills in reciting healing mantras, beating the drum, and making dance movements. They go through the procedure from the beginning to the end of the ritual following oral text.

People believe in invisible forces and in the prowess of Jhankri to deal with them. They believe in invisible things such as evil spirits, ghosts, witches, soul loss, possession, *mohoni lagne* (attraction), *chokhe lagne* (disinterest in food), and nightmares. Jhankris help interpret dreams, nightmares, soul loss, bad stars, and evil spirits. There is still a traditional way of interpreting these events and seeking help from traditional healers. They consult traditional healers such as Dhami-Jhankri, Lama, Guruwa, Guvaju, Jyotish (astrologers), and herbal healers not only because of spiritual illness but also because they also use herbs, are familiar and friendly, less intrusive and less condescending, and far easier to understand than medical practitioners (Maskarinec, 2004).

Nepali Dictionary defines Jhankri as a person

who heals the sick by using magic spells (Nepal Pragya Pratisthan, 2018). Jhankris are also interpreted as people who play drums while reciting mantras, move into a state of altered consciousness, travel to the supernatural world, control evil spirits, and help eliminate them. Only those well-versed in mantras and practical mastery over the ritual processes are considered Jhankris in the community. Nobody can become a Jhankri until they learn to use mantras, the oral text and can go into trances. Jhankris are assessed based on "the number and length of texts they know, their flair in reciting, and the enthusiasm, energy, and aptitude displayed in performance" (Maskarinec, 1992). The divination, exorcism, and healing abilities of Jhankris involve control over well-defined groups of spirits that use sophisticated equipment and frequently enter trance states to undertake ritual journeys. Without the community's trust, support, and motivation, no one can become a Jhankri. Whether the Jhankri-mantra possesses the healing power that can restore health to the sufferer is still a matter of research. Today, institutions have been established to study and research shamanism. There are also separate journals that publish research articles related to shamanism. And occasionally, international seminars and conferences related to shamanism are organized.

Illness Experience and Shamanic Healing

Jhankris help sick persons feel well again. They have expertise in helping those who are suffering from illness. Illness is something what people experience. and disease is something that doctors diagnose. Illness is the "human experience of symptoms and suffering" (Kleinman, 1988), whereas disease is the condition which doctors diagnose. A person may experience illness without having a disease. Usually, people seek the service of Jhankri when they experience illness and want to address the underlying causes of illness. Shamanic healing is considered powerful and effective in dealing with mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of illness.

Relevance of Shamanic Healing

Many people view shamanic healing practices as superstitions because they do not see the logic or scientific reasoning behind them. However, shamans do not rely exclusively on mantras, they also use medicinal herbs. Professor Maskarinec also asserts that "herbal treatments are used in conjunction with

mantras" (Maskarinec, 2004). Along with healing mantras, shamanic healers use healing herbs, knead or massage, give hand warmth, give a healing touch, and offer treated water to drink, suggesting that their healing practices are close to the logic of science.

Chanting rhythmically to the tune of the drum not only mesmerizes people, the fact that sometimes the patients also get up and dance with the Jhankri. It, of course, seems mysterious to an outsider. It might seem meaningless and illogical to the "scientific mind", but in the eyes of those who consult Jhankri, it might be equally meaningful and logical. Many affirm that Jhankis help increase confidence in people, bring balance to family and community life, and help restore emotional, spiritual and psychosocial health. There is a need for services like those provided by Jhankris because they are not offered in hospitals.

Shamans mediate between the community and invisible forces, reconcile the dispute between households and the community with such forces, and facilitate the rebuilding of the patient's relationship with families and communities. This is why shamanism persists. Shamanic healing may seem irrational belief in supernatural forces but it can be a rational choice for many social-psychological problems. It is natural for humans to believe in the supernatural (Winkelman & Baker, 2010) and it is logical to seek shamans' help to address supernatural problems. Shamans interact with the spirit world through altered states of consciousness. Winkelman (2004) looks at the biological basis of shamanism and altered states of consciousness (ASCs). He says biological structures related to shamanic ASCs have a significant healing effect. ASCs activate a section of the brain that manages emotions and interpersonal relations. ASCs provide adaptive effects in producing a sense of connectedness with others. ASC serves as the foundation for the training and practices of shamanistic healers (Winkelman, 2004).

On the one hand, Dhamsi-Jhankri's role is frequently questioned for the violence against women stemming from the witchcraft charge. Additionally, they are charged with encouraging social vices and superstitions. News reports highlight cases of harmful practices by Jhankris and the deaths of patients as a result of inappropriate treatment. On the other hand, there are also examples of Dhamsi- Jhankris being involved in the campaign to end social discrimination, helping to stop child marriages, taking action against *Chhaupadi*, a tradition in which women and girls have to stay at the cowshed instead of home while they are menstruating, and encouraging patients to go to

health institutions and contributing to meet national targets. Today, when the entire traditional healing practices are being criticized, there is a need for more efforts to make healing practices of Dhimi-Jhankris harmless and acceptable. The herbal practices of Dhimi-Jhankris get unnoticed and unemphasized, often giving the impression that shamans exclusively rely on healing mantras. In reality, they not only possess the knowledge of healing mantras but also healing herbs and combine mantras with herbal medicines in their therapeutic practices. They usually give herbs, food items, amulets or just a glass of water (mixed with turmeric powder) over which mantras are recited.

Revival of Shamanism as a Cultural Tradition

Shamanism is described as a dying tradition. Shamanism had completely withered in regions like South Korea, China, the United States, and other countries. In some states, shamanism was even banned and outlawed. However, now shamanism is reviving as a cultural tradition in different parts of the world (Liu, 2004; Sang-Hun, 2007; Sundström, 2012; "The Revival of Shamanism in East Asia," 2020). Efforts are now being made to revive and preserve the shamanic tradition in many communities. Professor Maskarinec had "visited Mongolia to help restore the practices of shamans, who literally took their ancestors' drums and costumes out of the museums to resume using them" (M. Subedi & Khattri, 2022, p. 128). Shamanism has been struggling to revive not only as traditional healing but also as an expression of cultural identity. Books and research papers assert the need to preserve shamanic traditions as ancient wisdom (Rysdyk & Bastola, 2019). During various cultural events in Nepal, Dhimi-Jhankris are also invited to participate in cultural events, processions and rallies to add color and promote tourism.

Shamanic healing is considered important in psychosocial health. Some scholars have expressed the need to include shamanic healing practices in psychosocial counseling and psychotherapy (Castillo, 2001; Dalal, 2005). Moreover, the interrelationship between psychosocial and physical health is being increasingly recognized. Shamanic traditions cannot be underestimated in view of the importance of emotional and spiritual dimensions of health and the movement of neo-shamanism, which stresses spiritual healing and attempts to revitalize traditional shamanism. Further exploration of shamanic

practices is likely to establish the importance of traditional healing (Pham et al., 2020, 2021). Now the opinion is getting stronger that traditional healers should also be integrated into the healthcare system (Reddy et al., 2023; B. Subedi, 2023). More and more people are of the view that shamanic tradition as a cultural tradition should be preserved. It can be seen that the shamanic tradition is connected not only with the health of the community but also with the identity of the community (Reddy et al., 2023).

Nepal is also a country where indigenous people make up one-third of the total population. Article 25 of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) emphasizes the indigenous people's "traditional preventive care, healing practices and medicines." Similarly, Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples grants indigenous peoples the right to keep their traditional health-related practices, including conserving medicinal plants, animals, and minerals. It suggests that traditional healing practices, including those of shaman's should be preserved to respect international conventions and declarations.

Conclusion

Professor Gregory G. Maskarinec made a significant contribution to the study of shamanism. He excelled in going deeper to explore the shaman oral texts and revealed the meaning of what people used to say "meaningless mumbo-jumbo". The kind of ethnography he did was an example for future generations of medical anthropology. He will be remembered for his determination, dedication, courage, and contribution.

Foreign scholars like Professor Maskarinec devoted their whole lives to studying and researching oral texts in-depth and saw the relevance of the Nepali Shaman and their healing practices. Jhankri tradition is still a living tradition in Nepal but is at risk of disappearing. Many people see Jhankri tradition as a symbol of superstition and are eager to see its phasing out in the age of science and technology. Ironically, a study found that people who claim they do not believe in shamanic healing were consulting shamanic healers (B. Subedi, 2019). The ambivalent attitude and the mindset that views traditional healing as "superstitious nonsense" must be questioned. Here, I would not say we should turn a blind eye to harmful practices. But the trend of dismissing all types of traditional healing practices as "superstitious nonsense" does not seem to be sane at all.

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