

Re-Understanding Banjhakri: Forest Shaman as a Therapeutic Ally and a Social Equalizer

Uttam Paudel

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Abstract

This article explores the social and therapeutic roles of banjhakri, a supernatural shamanic entity whose presence extends from West Central Nepal to parts of North Eastern India. It draws exclusively upon a rich cross section of extant scholarship to offer a composite assessment of folklores and symbolism surrounding banjhakri. As such, the article discusses his physical and behavioural attributes, his status as the root guru of shamans, and his symbiotic relationship with his consort and antagonist, banjhakrini. In addition, I examine the curious phenomenon of abduction of mainly young boys by banjhakri, which marks their initiation into this arcane world. Moreover, I analyze banjhakri's role as a therapeutic ally, a social equalizer, and a tool that allows shamans to interpret woes and maladies. The article concludes by positing that banjhakri's place in Nepalese society has been tied inextricably to his utility in Nepalese social life, and discusses his legacy amidst unprecedented changes in social dynamics.

Keywords: shamanism, banjhakri, abduction, folklores, therapeutic rituals

Introduction

A supernatural entity with extraordinary shamanic powers, banjhakri (Nep. ban: forest, jhakri: shaman), is a popular figure in the folk mythology of Central and Eastern Nepal, Sikkim and parts of North Eastern India. Toffin (2005) traces their presence in the mythos of the Kham Magars of West Central Nepal to the Limbus of Eastern and North Eastern India. Nearly all caste-based traditions of shamanism in the region consider banjhakri as the original guru of all shamans and the source of all shamanic knowledge. He is universally described as a short ape-like man, with a conical golden head, red face, long ears, long tangled hair all over his body and a long white beard (Peters, 1997; Toffin, 2005;

Sidky, 2008). Like *kichkandi* (seductive evil spirits of young girls who died young) and the famous *yeti*, banjhakri's feet are turned inside out.

Associated with deep mountainous forests, banjhakri is often thought to reside in caves, caverns, big cliffs, sources of springs, and behind the waterfalls. Elusive and usually invisible to the untrained eyes, he sometimes ventures into valleys and lowlands (Toffin, 2005). While Peters (1997) opines that different accounts of banjhakri allude to the same entity, Toffin (2005) and Riboli (2000) counter this view by presenting the belief in a “brotherhood” of banjhakris¹.

For instance, one of the more distinguished banjhakris is *Sunna jhakri* (Nep. golden shaman), who is thought to have a *dhyangro* (shamanic drum) made of gold. Furthermore, jhakris who claim to have been trained by banjhakri do mention being under the tutelage of more than one banjhakris (Hyam, 2023). While it is intriguing to explore the distinctions between the different entities that are represented within the banjhakri mythos, it is well beyond the purview of this article as such an undertaking warrants extensive ethnographical studies.

Instead, I offer a composite assessment of folklores and symbolism surrounding banjhakri. To begin with, this paper attempts to understand how the enigmatic abduction narratives shape the social and spiritual identities of the initiated shamans. The contrast between banjhakri's benevolent teachings and the ominous presence of banjhakrini is then analyzed, as it underpins a rich layer of social and psychological themes. Furthermore, I delve into the diverse creation myths and syncretic practices, unveiling the nuanced interplay between indigenous beliefs and Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies. Likewise, the discussion section elaborates on the multifaceted roles played by banjhakri as a therapeutic ally, as a social equalizer, and as a tool through which shamans address woes and misfortunes. As such, I argue that banjhakri's place in Nepalese society has been tied inextricably to his pragmatic value and sociocultural function.

Abduction

To impart his recondite shamanic knowledge, a banjhakri kidnaps “unblemished” young people and trains them for an uncertain period of time, ranging from a couple of days to months. These young boys often describe how they were first drawn to deep jungle upon hearing a distant beating of a *dhyangro* (Toffin, 2005) in an almost hallucinatory manner (Desjarlais, 1989). This “call of the wild,” as it were, is an overwhelming event, one that marks the culmination of bouts of “fainting, falling into a state of spontaneous trance, having particular and recurring dreams, or being struck by lightning” (Beggiora, 2020, p. 46). After

1 Fisher (1989) introduces the concept of a generic family of spirits composed of similar individuals, a concept that can be helpful in understanding banjhakri. Examples of these families include spirits such as *shikari* (Nep. Hunters) and *ban manche* (Nep. Forest men).

their training, the boys reappear at the exact same spot where they left (Peters, 1997; Riboli, 2000). Sidky (2010a) notes the similarities between these with alien abduction stories. These young boys grow up to become jhakris, although Sidky (2008) notes an unusual testimony by a jhakri in which he claims that jhakris trained by banjhakris retain the name of their teacher and are themselves known as banjhakris (p. 154). This could be an outlier since the rest of the book, which contains detailed ethnographic accounts of shamanism in Nepal, preserves the distinction between the supernatural banjhakri and his human disciples, jhakris. This nonetheless hints towards the possibility that the distinction is not as clear cut and may have contextual variations that arise from differences in regional mythos and personal experiences. By and large, banjhakri is a supernatural deity of the forests who abducts young boys and trains them to be jhakris.

His targets, usually boys between the ages seven and twenty, need not come from a particular caste or religion, but must have a “pure heart” and must not have bodily scars from injuries or illnesses (Peters, 1997; Toffin, 2005; Sidky, 2008). However, among the Chepang people of Central Nepal, stories of abduction of much younger children are quite common. Riboli (2000) recounts the story of a Chepang boy who disappeared for three days when he was three months old. Three days later, he was found at the very spot from where he disappeared. However, he only started to get his powers after a sudden burst of shaking when he was twelve years old. From then on, banjhakri would appear in his dream and train him (p. 71).

Nonetheless, even after the first few years of their abduction and training, the initiates are prone to volatility and madness. Riboli (2000) observes the case of a seven-year-old Chepang boy, kidnapped by banjhakri at the age of five, and was still driven to “madness” and would disappear in the forest whenever he ate “impure” food. Before he disappeared, he made a strange noise, ran into the jungle and became invisible. Moreover, in his “healing” moments, he would enter in an altered state of consciousness and would suddenly wake up as if from a dream and not remember anything (p. 67). Like all initiates, he turned up exactly where he disappeared.

The more time these young initiates spend with their guru, the more powerful jhakris they later become. The initiates often speak of a splendid abode, hidden away from the rest of the world, where the banjhakri teaches them both *sulto* (right/proper) and *ulto* (wrong/improper) shamanic rituals. They are taught *mantar* (incitation) with special *dhyangro* beats that they will have to recite and sing to cure illnesses and chase ghostly spirits (Toffin, 2005; Riboli, 2000). Furthermore, Vedabala & Gazmer (2024), note that the “gestural rhythmic expressions” transmitted through songs and music are indispensable tools through which sacred occult knowledge is preserved and propagated (p. 65-66).

Away from the harsh realities of rural mountains, banjhakri takes care of them better than a parent would (Toffin, 2005, p.187). Riboli (2000) paints a somewhat different account of this parental love with the story of a rare female Chepang jhakrini. Abducted by banjhakri at the age of seven, she claimed to have been fed beaten rice made of iron² with milk and a regular diet of earthworms (p. 73). Nevertheless, almost all accounts describe banjhakri as a kind and intelligent teacher. Peters (1997) calls him a “yoda-type” figure (p. 42).

Banjhakrini

This is a sharp contrast with his consort, banjhakrini, who is described as a big beastly creature, with long saggy breasts, who is violent in nature and loves to devour human flesh (Desjarlais, 1989; Peters, 1997; Sidky, 2008; Vedabala & Gazmer, 2024). Indeed, banjhakri has to constantly dominate his wife through his power, so that she would not eat his pupils (Beggiora, 2020). Children are warned to run away quickly downhill if they meet a banjhakrini as she will likely fall over her long breasts, which she throws over her shoulder when going upwards so as to be able to move much faster.

The banjhakrini is the most powerful of all witches and is feared by jhakri in many areas of Nepal (Riboli, 2000, p. 70). Curiously enough, in communities such as the Chepang, she is believed to be the disciple of Parvati. While mainstream Hinduism holds Parvati as the ideal virtuous matron, Chepangs believe her to be a malicious witch who tried to kill her own son. According to this lore, Mahadev saved their son by creating the first banjhakri and killed Parvati for her crime (Riboli, 2000, p. 110).

In *puja* and ceremonies when jhakris call upon their guru banjhakri to ward off the evil spirits and forces attacking their clients, they often pray to banjhakri to control his wife. This is especially true if the attacker in question is a *boksi* (Nep. witch). Ever thirsty for human blood, banjhakrini can readily assist the *boksi*, who look up to her the same way jhakris look up to banjhakri (Peters, 1997; Riboli, 2000). If, instead of the benign powers, the *boksi* or banjhakrini possesses the shaman, they might tell him the cause of the affliction, but could cause him to lose all control, bringing violent unpredictable attacks on those present and could even cause the death of the jhakri himself (Riboli, 2000, p. 70; Sidky, 2010b).

The cannibalistic banjhakrini is typical of forest spirits of Nepal. In this regard, she is similar to *shikari*³, *budheni*⁴, and *ban manche*⁵. In fact, the kind and intelligent banjhakri

2 The expression “to chew beaten rice made of iron” is a Nepali expression for doing a grueling job. I was unable to ascertain whether the expression’s origin is tied to the banjhakri mythos.

3 A group of sixteen vengeful spirits associated with rabid dogs and hunting.

4 From Nep. *budhi*: old woman. A wrathful collection of seven hags, each of whom is associated with a disease. Although generally malicious, they are considered by the Kulung Rai of eastern Nepal to be capable of initiating female jhakris (Toffin 2005).

5 Evil primitive spirits.

stands out as the only notable exception to the violent forest dwelling spirits. In a way, this reflects the degree to which the rural mountainous societies regard forest as a dark and mystical domain, full of mysterious and powerful spirits who inflict terrible harm to unsuspecting humans. Desjarlais (1989) aptly compares this understanding with the Western concept of “the unconscious” (p. 295). Furthermore, these local indigenous views of forest differ with the Hindu and Buddhist views of forest as a place for quest, revelation, and renunciation (Toffin, 2005; Desjarlais, 1989). Indeed, Toffin (2005), posits that despite its highly social uses, e.g., the source of firewood, the forest is home to spirits and entities who offer the “clearest representation of otherness” (p. 191). His comparative ethnographic methodology, which draws upon ritual performance, oral myths, and fieldwork among Tibeto-Burman groups and Newars, maintains that jhakris are essential mediators who symbolically control and navigate this otherworld (p. 178–179).

Origins

C.J. Miller (1979) describes the creation story of banjhakri, as told by a jhakri of Kami (ironmonger) caste:

Mahadev fell sick and needed someone to blow on him and cure him, so in a dream he gave a mantra and caused a disciple to come down to his aid [...] that is how it all began, for that disciple then taught others. This first disciple, the one made by Mahadev to cure himself, was a banjhakri. (p. 156)

This story differs from the Chepang story mentioned in the previous section, or from the far west, where banjhakri plays a far more minor role and is associated with the spirit of dead shamans rather than a forest deity (Sidky, 2008, 147). Nevertheless, as Bouillier (1992) notes, this story is remarkably similar to many stories about the origin of shamanic practices across different communities, even among those that do not adhere to the Hindu or *Hinduized* beliefs. For instance, the tutelary deity of Sherpa shamans resembles “banjhakri, rather than with any native Sherpa god” (p. 181). Peters (1997) also mentions that the Sherpas consider him to be “the smallest and fastest yeti” (p. 49). This relative congruity in different narratives perhaps has something to do with the symbolism of the forest as a host of “darkness” and “wildness” that inform the indigenous imaginations of forest.

As evidenced by the prominent presence of Shiva (as Mahadev) and Parvati (as Gaura) in their origin stories, we can surmise that banjhakri legends are products of syncretic practices and beliefs. Along with Hindu gods and goddesses as well as aspects of Hindu cosmology, these belief systems have also co-opted powerful deities of Tibetan Buddhism such as Padmasambhava, or Guru Rimpoche. Moreover, many acolytes of banjhakris have incorporated skills and techniques from co-existing non-shamanistic medical traditions, such as the use of herbal mixtures and pulse reading from the Ayurvedic and Tibetan medical traditions. In addition, Sidky (2010b) notes how jhākris draw symbols drawn on *dhyangros*

that include “spirals, circles, zigzags, honey-combs, undulating parallel lines, sun, moon, sexual motifs, as well as aeroplanes, helicopters, etc” (p. 81). These allude to the continually evolving nature of Nepali shamanism. Syncretic, not only with religious influences, but also with modern ones.

Discussions and Analysis

Banjhakri as a therapeutic ally

Despite the heavy syncretism with Indic religions, the banjhakri lore contains characteristic elements of “classic” Siberian and north and Central Asiatic shamanism that are characteristic of Paleolithic hunting-gathering cultures. These elements include a transformative initiatory crisis, arcane knowledge, death-rebirth motifs, soul flight (magic flight), animal transformations, interaction with animal spirits, and hunting magic (Sidky, 2010a, p. 71). For instance, Beggoria (2020) notes that stories of tutelage under banjhakri feature “terrifying experiences of initiation” where the young initiates need to protect themselves from becoming preys to vengeful predators like banjhakrini by seeking protection and skills acquired via banjhakri. He also comments that banjhakri stories share with wider shamanic lores the “leitmotif” of young people being reconstituted and reborn, in one way or another, as shamans (p. 56). Riboli (2000) also notes how banjhakri initiation narratives are similar to the descriptions of stories of shamanic initiations from the early twentieth century Manchuria (p. 67).

Among the many healing practitioners in Nepal, jhakris are the only ones who can go into trance and allow themselves to be possessed by spirits, usually benevolent ones who assist the healing. Fisher (1989) notes that jhakris are not acolytes of these spirits, but have the “perception” that allows them to be intermediaries between the worlds (p. 6). There is no single tradition of Nepalese shamanism, and the tradition of banjhakri features mostly in the communities of Central and Eastern hills. Even in these communities, many different kinds of shamans exist. The Tamangs, for instance, have *bombo*, who are trained in the indigenous Tamang knowledge; *lama*, trained in Tibetan and Mahayana Buddhist ways; *dhami*, trained in syncretized Nepali ways along with the jhakris trained by banjhakris. They may all have varying degrees of powers, but are all thought to possess a “higher perception” of the world.

Sidky (2009) calls these “the interpreters of the world”, whose task it is to “remedy crises” and “deflect anxieties and stresses that arise in the context of day-to-day interpersonal interactions which are frequently attributed to angry divinities or the malice of witches and evil spirits” (p. 173). For a successful result, the jhakri needs to convince his patients that he has called upon divine powers to offer them protection. The rhapsodic moments of possession and elaborate rituals are the jhakri’s way of communicating the connections he has with benign spirits such as banjhakri and the powers they accord him to fight malevolent entities. When so much depends on perception and faith, having a venerable and elusive guru

emanates a degree of awe and respect that can create positive therapeutic effects. Banjhakri, thus, serves as a “therapeutic ally” that premodern societies used to cope with disease and illness (Kleinman et al 2002, p. 1).

Nevertheless, a close analysis of the stories of those “abducted” by banjhakris also suggests the possibility that the abduction by banjhakri provides an acceptable and even respectable outlet for those who are dealing with untreated mental and physical conditions. This provides a means of rationalizing aberrant behavior, since those guided by the forces of a powerful alien world behave in ways that cannot possibly be justified by existing social norms. Without sounding dismissive, it is possible that children with many psychological issues, who experience uncontrolled and unexplained tremors, disappear suddenly into dense forest as a way of coping.

In a rather uncommon story, Peters (1997) tells the story of a Giri woman who was abducted by banjhakri when she was seven. Upon inspection of her body, the banjhakri found her imperfect and abandoned her after having sex. The woman, who was forty at the time of writing, went on to enlist the help of different kinds of shamans and became something of a practitioner herself (p. 52). This story strongly suggests that banjhakri stories might offer an effective tool for the sufferers of childhood trauma.

Banjhakri as a social force

In a stratified and hierarchical society, banjhakri is also an equalizing force. He does not select his disciples based on their caste, wealth or background, but based on the “purity of mind and body.” In fact, a lot of his disciples come from castes other than the higher castes of Bahun and Chhetri. Sidky (2008) calls this “nearly a pan-Nepalese phenomenon” (p. 148). His disciples, even from the lower castes and background, are accorded a unique degree of respect, especially in the rural communities where the caste-based hierarchies tend to be the strongest. The Chepang jhakrini whose story has been told earlier, encapsulates this unique position, with her claim that “only gods decide who will be taken by banjhakri” and that “No-one can become a powerful [jhakri] only because they alone want to be” (Riboli, 2000, p. 73). This idea of being “called” or “chosen” is further validated by Beggiora (2020) in his survey of Himalayan folk shamanism, a sharp contrast to the initiation rituals of shamans in the West (p. 46).

Jhakri as the synthesis of banjhakri (conscious) and banjhakrini (unconscious)

A popular belief in Nepal that holds that although the jhakri and the *boksi* share the same common knowledge and *mantar*, the jhakri knows exactly one more “knowledge” than *boksi*, the knowledge of love. It is unclear whether this is really the case, or just a suitable parable on the ability of power to corrupt. Nevertheless, Peters (1997) asserts that a *boksi* is reviled because she goes against socially acceptable fundamental values, for she has “no

rules, no love” (p. 59). A *boksi* is believed to readily sacrifice anything that she holds dear to attain greater power; indeed, the higher the sacrifice, the more the power (Peters, 1997; Sidky, 2008). In a sense, she represents the primal lust for power and position that, without a moderating force like love, can destroy those around her.

On the other hand, the *jhakri*, despite his abilities to summon spirits, invoke deities, and perform magical tasks, refrains from committing the evils associated with *boksi*. His guru *banjhakri* has trained him to use his power for protective and constructive ways, whilst the *boksi* channels the cannibalistic malevolence of *banjhakrini* (Peters, 1997). *Banjhakrini* is yin to the *banjhakri*’s yang, she is id to his ego (Peters, 1997). With the ability (*superego*) to rein in these violent impulses (*id*), the *jhakri* establishes himself as a respectable synthesis (*ego*) of these powerful forces at work; whereas *boksi* is a cautionary tale of giving all in to the detrimental forces of *id*.

The *jhakri* nevertheless can seldom destroy the *boksi* (Sidky, 2010b), for each is essential to the existence of other. Peters (1997) adopts the same rationale to argue that *banjhakri* and *banjhakrini* are inseparable and represent the “cosmic marriage of the opposites” (p. 60). Each gives meaning and purpose to the other. In fact, *banjhakrini* provides a sense of “crisis” and “spiritual emergency” that lends meaning to the transformational experience that *banjhakri* initiates face.

Conclusion

Desjarlais (1989) ascribes numerous mystical spirits and elemental forces of the Himalayan forest, such as *banjhakri*, as tools through which shamans explore “visionary consciousness” (p. 303). In other words, *banjhakri* is a powerful tool that allows shamans to address and interpret the many woes and misfortunes that arise in a world that is shared by humans and spirits alike. He is as ancient as he is contemporary, a therapeutic ally for the ages and an important entity that helps in comprehending the natural order of things.

It is my opinion that *banjhakri*’s place in Nepalese society has been tied inextricably to his utility in Nepalese social life. As road networks connect remote mountain villages with the rest of the country, fewer and fewer boys are abducted by this elusive teacher. As rigid caste-based hierarchies crumble, legal, social and cultural changes, rather than recondite shamanic knowledge, have become the driving forces of egalitarianism. As Nepalese society moves further away from shamanic healing towards modern medicine, *banjhakri* has slowly receded from the popular imagination.

After centuries of service, *banjhakri* is gearing up for retirement.

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