

Shamanism and art himalaya;

[Previous Features](#)

V 1:1/ 2000



Art and Shamanism in the Himalayas

by *Éric Chazot and Jean-Pierre Girolami*

click on small images for full size images with captions

Over the centuries, the steep slopes of the Himalayas, from the great mountains to the plains, have been populated by a variety of ethnic groups of Mongoloid or Indo-Aryan descent. Despite their diversity, these groups reflect a unique geographical environment that has shaped their way of life and thought.



Over the course of the last fifty years, major changes have occurred in these remote hills. Political determination to modernize the region and open it up to the outside world has altered social structures and demographic distribution, and eroded traditional and religious values. Artistic endeavor, which here is largely rooted in religious beliefs, has been affected by the disappearance of not only ancient deities and forms of worship but also certain crafts, styles, and objects.



Himalayan tribal art is characterized primarily by its links with shamanism, which underlies and accompanies all religious beliefs in the region, whether Hindu or Buddhist. Although ethnological research has given us a better understanding of tribal life in the Himalayas, we still know relatively little about the art, statuary, ritual objects, or even older items of daily use, despite their cultural or aesthetic value.

Many different currents have shaped present-day society in the Himalayas. On the religious plane, there has been a convergence of three elements. The first of these are indigenous shamanistic cults, which took various forms but were limited in means and scope, having no military support, little political power, and rarely any social organization beyond the village or regional level. These have been confronted over the last two thousand years by Hinduism from the south, which has brought with it Sanskrit culture and Khas, an Indo-Aryan language and a forerunner of Nepali. From the eleventh century onwards Buddhism was added to this

mix from the north. It contributed the Tibetan language and its own form of Mahayana (Grand Vehicle) Buddhism: Lamaism. Faced with the growing influence of the Khas from the south, the northern Buddhist groups settled down slowly and formed a sort of alliance with the original inhabitants, who began to consult them for certain major rites but also continued their shamanistic practices. In the Himalayas, religions do not destroy one another; they cohabit and influence one another. The caste system made it possible for groups with different traditions to co-exist separately. Rigid rules and marriage taboos defined the relationships between groups and, until very recently, these were enforced by a very severe caste court (now abolished). Depending on their caste, individuals may seek the services of Buddhist lamas or Hindu Brahmans, but the shaman has remained a powerful man, consulted for healing, divination, and the appeasement of hostile spirits.



Among the original pre-Buddhist shamanistic and animistic religions, the one we know most about is the Bon religion, which was supplanted by Buddhism in Tibet but has persisted in various forms in different regions of the Himalayas. Hinduism and Buddhism, which is considered a schematic reform of the former, share a number of values and deities, such as Yama, the god of death, and Garuda, the god of the air. Ethnic groups in Nepal, including the Tamang, Thakali, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar and Sherpa, were originally attached to shamanistic traditions through the Bon, and present-day shamans perpetuate this tradition, which survives alongside the dominant religion. Despite this survival, some regions are regarded as Hindu by the central Nepalese authorities. They are thus labeled, not because of the extinction of Bon, but because of the settlement in the area of Brahmans and Chetri (the second pure caste after the Brahmans in the Hindu system), who dominate government and official rites.



Over the centuries, the Hindus have contributed the aforementioned caste system of social organization to the Himalayas, and the Buddhists a more egalitarian outlook and an individual approach to freedom. However, beneath this overlay, the traditional shamans still struggle to drive out evil forces and master the powers of spirits, demons, and local deities, which do not always respond to the unitarian aspirations of the two main religions. Orthodoxy and ritual purity are preserved by the Brahmans and the lamas, but in everyday life people still have room for the ancient agreements

between the shamans and their protective deities.

With this interweaving of indigenous and introduced belief systems, tribal art is not easy to separate from the main Brahmanic or Lamaistic cultural currents. The Bheri Valley is a good example of this situation. Here, traveling from the Indian border towards Tibet, one first encounters Tharu villages in the Terai plain. Then come the first mountain ranges, with peaks

at 1,300 meters, whose slopes and summits are peopled by Magars of Tibetan descent. Below them the valley floor is occupied by the Khas or Indo-Nepalese, most of them from lower castes. Their ancient effigies of protective deities are derived from animistic religions. These groups have three elements in common: local civilizations rooted in animism; Indian influence from the south; and Tibetan cultural influence from the north.



Another example. Many ethnic groups in Nepal have embraced Hinduism, but, despite their later divergence, these groups shared origins with the people who became the heroes of the great Sanskrit mythological cycles such as the Ramayana. Thus the Kusunda and the Chepang, whom we shall come back to, are said to be descendants of Sita during his exile in the forest; the Mushr of the Morang region are said to be the descendants of Valmiki (the author of the Ramayana); and the Rajbansi have an ancestor who was killed by Bhimsen, and was therefore an enemy of the Pandava, the heroes of the Ramayana.

Thus these tribal people are not "converts" to Hinduism; their ancestors participated in the creation of the great founding myths of Hindu tradition. Despite the cultural leveling brought by Brahmanism, there are major differences in the application of Hindu rituals and the transmission of the myths, in which events may be described from more than one point of view.

People interested in Himalayan tribal art often wonder about its relationship to the classical art found in Kathmandu Valley or Lhasa. Is it the precursor of this art or has it different functions, origins, and purposes? The answer to this question starts with the understanding that the tribal art traditions of the region existed before the beginnings of the area's classical art and have survived in apparently similar forms to this day. They are by no means a degenerate form of classical art; they usually illustrate different subjects and refer to beliefs and cults which are foreign to Buddhism and Hinduism. In social terms, the people who make the images are not of the same level as those they are made for. Works of tribal art are often the result of the labor of people of the lower castes, even the untouchables. These objects are primarily wooden masks and figures, which are seldom the crowned and richly adorned deities prevalent in the Hindu-Buddhist art of the region. Tribal figures of importance are found only in western Nepal. The tribal art in the east focuses on masks.



Guardians of Territory:

Statuary in the Jumla, Dunai, and Simikot Regions in Western Nepal



Western Nepal was once part of a vast empire dominated by the Khas people, who arrived in waves from India beginning in the seventh century, and mingled with the native tribes. Figurative art developed in the western regions, where effigies were made to guard the family and the house, the community and its territory against evil or hostile spirits. These beautiful, enigmatic statues are sober and stylized. Most are carved from wood, although in journeying through the region we observed a few rare stone pieces. These figurative carvings are found-as far as we could tell-only in areas

under Hindu influence, not in areas under Tibetan influence. An exception to this observation are the clay statues that stand at the entrance to the villages of Kagbeni and Jarkot. These aside, however, several types of specifically western Nepalese figural statues can be distinguished in terms of their purposes and, above all, their locations:

• **On the roofs of houses**



At the corners of the roofs of some houses stand rustic, often rough-hewn figures, in which the grain of the wood, the branches, and the existing shapes have been accentuated to form the silhouette of a protector. These figures, whose names have been forgotten by the people who live in the houses, brave all weather in dramatic or grotesque postures.

These sculptures are found astride the plank used to edge the roof, in which case the statue often has two separate, fairly long legs. The ones we saw were usually standing upright with hands joined in prayer. Alternately, they are also found in a standing, sitting or crouching position sealed into the matrix of the earthen roof itself.

In some villages we were told that the statues are always put on the roof in the new year, although the reason is unknown. In another village, the Brahman priest is apparently consulted when a statue is put in place. These archaic effigies are found on the flat-roofed houses belonging to lower-caste villagers. The upper-caste people, housed in another part of the village, do not have them.

• **In small temples**



Temples are usually built at the upper end of the village, often half buried with an open front and several arcades supported by carved pillars whitened with kaolin. The wooden roofs are not always waterproof, which partly explains the eroded state of some of the carvings that stand beneath. The decoration on the structural elements of such buildings ranges from geometric motifs to human or animal figures such as elephants or snakes. The terminals of the pillars are sometimes carved in the shape of a rams head, this animal being the shamans sacrificial animal. Sometimes fine sheets of copper covered with naive anthropomorphic designs are nailed to the pillars or the doors.

Inside, the statues usually rest on the ground and are daubed with white and, only occasionally, with red pigment on the heads. They are surrounded by other objects, such as a number of bells hanging on the ceiling and oil lamps on stakes stuck in the ground. The statues disproportionately emphasize the head and bust at the expense of the legs.

Although these temples show a Hindu influence, in one we were welcomed by two shamans (dhami), a sign of the complementary nature of the various religious intermediaries. On our first visit, several years ago, there were only primitive statuettes in the sanctuary; more recently we were surprised to find a concrete statue of Shiva on the altar, the pride of the

Brahman who now officiated there, assisted by two shamans.



The statues in the sanctuaries dedicated to the ancestors, located at the outskirts of the villages, are of a similar form. The figure is often seated or standing, hands joined in prayer. Sometimes dozens of statues can be found piled up in the same shelter, which is usually just a peaked roof of disjointed planks. The sparse information we obtained suggested that each statue symbolized a deceased individual. The spirits of the dead are treated with respect, but they are also feared.



In the Jajarkot area, the primitive wooden statues we saw in some small temples were often associated with the worship of Babiro, a local god whose sanctuary is filled with wooden effigies. But the god Masta Babiro, whose protection is sought by the shamans, does not itself seem to be represented as a statue. A certain type of praying figure, often referred to as "protector or god of the springs" because it is also found at water sources, is to be seen near or in temples dedicated to Masta deities. Nowadays, the wooden statues are still made or commissioned by the shaman at the time of an important event in a person's life, such as a journey, separation from loved ones for business or work, or (as is often the case) departure to join the army. Since the nineteenth century, many men have left this region to join the renowned Gurkha battalions of the British army.

• On bridges

The figural carvings associated with bridges are the most spectacular and clearly visible statues of the region. A number of different forms are found. One is a plain pole, carved at the top in the shape of a head with hands joined in prayer. Another is in the form of a guardian, who is depicted armed with a knife (kukri) or a gun. Yet another is a woman who carries a child. Finally, animal forms, such as tigers or birds are encountered.

• On mountain passes, at crossroads, or at the confluence of two rivers

Statues found at liminal points of travel are often very tall and beribboned with strips of red and white cloth. They are intended to protect travelers, who make offerings of food or money to them. One such statue stands on the Simikot-Jumla road after Darma, as it rises towards Chan Keli Lek. This figure is signed Hasman Bahadur, probably the name of the sculptor.

Guardians of Water and Springs



In addition to the carvings noted above that are associated with springs, sometimes a tree trunk is carved as a hollow torso. Placed over a spring, it becomes a sort of fountain as the water flows from an aperture in its chest. In this mountainous land, gods and spirits are perceived to be everywhere, planted in the fields, watching over the land and the grain, or thrust in the ground near springs.

Sexual Statues



Another group of statues depicts people, standing or drum playing, either engaged in sexual intercourse or displaying an erect phallus. We observed a number of different styles of this sort of figure; however, despite the differences, they seem to form homogeneous groups describing more or less similar scenes. They are vigorously but austere executed, with no apparent wish to



express sensuality. Among the shamans in western Nepal there are said to be magical sexual practices more or less comparable to Tantric cults. These rituals remain secret. To the best of our knowledge, they are scarcely mentioned in ethnological literature on shamanism, yet we think these objects reference such rituals. A man holding his penis, alongside a woman holding her vulva, and sometimes also one of her breasts, is a subject which, if not common, is at least well known in this artistic tradition (see Tribal Arts, II:2, Summer 1995). We have seen this motif on the terminal of a gajo (shaman's drumstick), which was carved on one side with a standing man with an erection and on the other with a woman displaying her vulva and cupping her breast in her right hand. If proof were needed, this object would confirm the link between shamanism and this type of iconography. But what exactly do these couples mean? A specific field study and informed sources would be needed to answer such a question.



The secrecy preserved by the few shamans who still know about these strange wooden effigies is no doubt similar to the secrecy that surrounds Buddhist Tantric practices. These overtly sexual figures are portrayed in postures that would seem obscene were it not for their austere facial expressions that express the gravity of performing a sacred act.

The Dang Region

Among the Tharu in the Dang region, areas of worship at the entrance to the villages are marked by planks stuck in the ground under a pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*). Grouped in pairs, these effigies symbolize ancient local deities: the goddess Daharcandi and her spouse Cabawaguni. The statues are carved in heavy wood, and are often very eroded. Daharcandi's effigy can be recognized by the notches at the top while Cabawaguni's is surmounted by a square of wood. Each sculpture is carved in an archaic style showing anecdotal scenes of village life, with people and animals. In the effigy for the god Cabawaguni, the upper part is occupied by a figure with joined hands sitting in the lotus position; the central part, as if between heaven and earth, portrays a camel and two men. These demon spirits, always in pairs, watch over the villagers, flocks, and crops, in return for animal sacrifices.

Statuary Shaped by Time

Another category of eroded wooden figures transmits visions, reflections of magic in the mountains. These strange objects are sometimes almost blurred in appearance, where nature in its slow destructive process has relentlessly worn away their surfaces, rendering them more vulnerable and fragile, yet perhaps at the same time bringing them alive. Time has deepened the artist's work, the object is in constant evolution, and we encounter it at a particular point in its history. Here, time is the creator.

In these carvings, the general outline of the tree trunk is retained and a face is hewn out with rough adze strokes. The flat planes of the face and the straight line of the eyebrows midway recall the techniques used by the Kalash tribes in Kafiristan in Pakistan to produce their characteristic gandaho (wooden funereal statues, on foot or horseback, carved in memory of the dead).

Lamas and Brahmins tend to underrate the importance of the tribal beliefs among the peoples of the Himalayas, and in the villages the laity have forgotten (or never knew) the rites of worship and even the names of the deities that are part of their everyday life. This reinforces the power of the shamans, who jealously guard their secrets. Perhaps the name of the spirit must be kept secret to preserve its power, just as the secret name the astrologer gives a child at birth is never divulged. The one thing that is known, however, is the protective function of these statues. Clean water is a necessity and a safe bridge is almost as important. Considering the insubstantial building materials and the gap spanned, the bridge is a vital and dangerous place, a point of transition. There is danger in crossing from one world to the other, from one mountainside to the other, from one floor of the house to another. The carved face at the top of the ladder is there to ensure that the person using it to move from one point to another does not fall.



Himalayan people seek protection for the road ahead, where unclean spirits gather at the crossroads. The spirit incarnated by the carving that is placed there is auspicious for local or distant ventures, providing protection from the dangers inherent in any journey and the perils of the world.



Understandably, the medium chosen, i.e., the dense, fibrous wood of a log, and the tools used are of crucial importance in the work. The carvings are usually done from a single block, as if the carver, a born artist, could already see the carving in the piece of wood and had only to bring it to life. His work is to remove the superfluous material and release the shapes already there, waiting to emerge. Culturally close to the natural and supernatural world, he is seen more as a medium than a creator. But what strikes us first is the extreme diversity, the great freedom and inventiveness of such work. The Nepalese sculptor takes the same approach as a Western artist: he seeks to model forms, find new ways to stylize the face, articulate or shape the arms, in short to create an original work. Even if regional trends and styles emerge and certain positions or gestures often reappear, we owe these strange, sometimes brutal but always unique works to the artist's imagination and vision.

The Shaman's Objects of Power



Specific information about Himalayan shamanism is available but it is too often separated from the objects the shamans use. If objects are used, it is to illustrate an ethnographic study without being considered as a subject of study in their own right, essential components of the transmission of knowledge. Objects have been methodically preserved and handed on from generation to generation, but with time the knowledge that went with them has been lost.

Phenomena such as trances and possession attributable to religious belief are the foundation of any mystic experience. A spirit possesses the shaman and he falls into a trance. Or at a later stage in initiation, the trance summons up the spirit and leads to a controlled, ritualized, appeased possession. In Nepal, the Ban Jhankri and certain forest spirits, and even Vedic deities such as the Masta gods, Indra's sons, are different entities. They grant the shaman the power and protection needed to perform the dangerous, complicated rites involved in appeasing or destroying the spirits of illness.

The shaman cures the body. He is consulted not for his wisdom but for his power. Although he belongs to a Buddhist or Hindu cult and respects its traditions or duties, the Himalayan shaman still invokes and submits to his ancestral or initiatory deity and summons up occult forces. He remains rooted in an ancient tradition that is preserved and strengthened by the initiation of others. The keys to these ancient practices are held by only a few shamans, who transmit them orally and closely guard their secrets. The shaman alone knows the myths and rites and how to control possession by a demon spirit. He is able to move in a world of symbols that terrifies ordinary people.



During possession, the shaman quivers, a sign of his state, and flies into bouts of violence and rage that he has difficulty controlling. Bloodthirsty spirits torment the young shamans and are appeased only by the sacrifice of chickens, which the neophyte often tears apart with his teeth. An experienced shaman is able to master these violent natural forces.



A shamanistic ceremony, such as the Boshine ceremony among the Magars, includes the presence of a lata (an idiot or simpleton, in Nepali). This character, which is also found in some masked rituals, serves as a fool or jester. He brings an element of fantasy, mockery, and distraction to a highly elaborate ritual. A world of difference exists between the haughty bearing of the shamans and the idiot's absurd gesticulations. Is it the need for contrast which introduces the disorder personified by the fool into a magical ritualized order dominated by rhythm and strength? Unlike the shaman, if the idiot is given power he shows that he can not master it. Catharsis also comes through laughter.

The shaman has many tasks to perform: healing or accompanying souls into the kingdom of

the dead; making or stopping rain; diverting storms, fire, flood, or even landslides; and even controlling the Nagas, the subterranean water gods. He is the bridge, the link, the mediator between the real and invisible worlds.

There are thought to be between 400,000 and 800,000 shamans in Nepal, men and women, and nomenclature varies by region and/or ethnic group. Broadly speaking, jhankri is the general term in Nepali which applies above all to shamans in central Nepal; dhامي is used in the west and bijuwa in the east.



One of the jhankri's indispensable accessories is the dhyangro (drum). It is made in a number of forms: double-sided with a carved handle terminating in a form like a phurbu—a ritual wooden dagger widely found in central and east Nepal (see *Tribal Arts*, II:2, Summer 1995)—or single-sided with a wooden or bamboo strut inside. Small metal objects (a knife, trident, star, or similar item) are sometimes hooked on to the drum. The drum and the drumstick (dhyangro and gajo) are both the shaman's weapons and his steed. Shamans in the west do not use drums themselves, but since music is essential for the trance, musical accompaniment is provided by the untouchables, the damai or musician-carvers. In the east, the bijuwa strikes a brass dish.



Other elements of the ritual paraphernalia of the jhankri and bijuwa include the ritual vase (bumba), trident (trisul) that is the symbol of the god Shiva, a bronze mirror, and a headdress of porcupine quills. The shaman's dress, regarded as the god's garment, is supposed to make him invulnerable to attacks from evil spirits. The jhankri or bijuwa wears a white shirt and a long white skirt symbolizing purity, and various protective necklaces. Necklaces made of rittha (a shiny black seed) or rudraksha (*Elaeocarpus* seeds) are supposed to be strung according to a magically prescribed number, either 54 or 108. Necklaces made from the vertebrae of a snake sacrificed by the shaman for ritual purposes are also used. These vertebrae are curiously like tiny cattle skulls. Small bronze bells, sometimes of ancient Chinese origin, tinkle on the shaman's chest to the rhythm of the dance or trance, frightening away the spirits. Other objects like wild goat (ghoral) horns, teeth from deer (sara), wild boar or pig, and conch shells (kawada) are used for ritual purposes, and the shaman sometimes wears an archer's wrist guard (bholto), which protects him from harmful spirits. This guard is often worn back to front.



The Chepangs in Nepal, who live a nomadic life in the forest with no permanent houses, have their own shaman, the pande. In the Tokolong festival at the end of winter, they honor a family god represented by a stone placed in the trunk of a tree or in a temple. A member of the family is chosen to be possessed by the god, who, after being summoned by beating the dhyangro, speaks through his mouth. Possession causes the shaman to leap about, and the people ask questions and warn him not to let other jealous gods steal the offerings. They burn incense and light oil lamps, then make offerings of alcohol (rakshi, jad) and meat. They sacrifice goats and chickens and spill the blood on the stone symbolizing the god. Lastly comes the feast: after eating the sacrificed animals, the people plunge into frenzied dance and song that lasts all that day and the following night.



The ram, which can be seen on the ends of beams or on the handles of certain butter churns, is closely associated with shamanistic worship. A ram is sacrificed during the shamanic ritual, and the fight against the ram is one of the symbols of the shaman's struggle. As in other parts of the world, the ram is an expiatory animal: it can be

laden with human faults, or used to contain demons or drive out evil forces, rather like a scapegoat. In Lhasa a ram, bearing the faults of the past year, is released for the new year.

The shamanistic pantheon in western Nepal numbers between twelve and eighteen Masta gods. They are brothers and each protects his own territory. They are often referred to by the name of their sanctuaries, such as the aforementioned Babiro Masta, near Jumla. These deities fight ogres and protect the devout, the other gods, and the nine Bahavani goddesses considered to be their "sisters." They tear out the entrails of demons, and when they find bells (jyu-ghat) in the demons' stomachs they offer them to the gods and deposit them in the sanctuaries. Thus numerous bronze, and sometimes wooden, bells are found in shamanistic temples. There are very few statues of deities. Sculptures of donors are often found laid near the temple as votive offerings, to give thanks or commemorate an important event. These statues, weathered by rain and wind, are usually the work of the lower castes or the untouchables. Offerings made by the upper castes are more often instruments or ritual utensils such as jugs or bells.



In the shaman's possession, it is the Masta god that chooses the shaman as his medium. The deity appears in a dream or in some other form, then takes possession of the dhami and speaks through his mouth. The dhami is momentarily the incarnated god and may act like a god; he has all divine powers and the right to sit on the god's seat and under the god's parasol. The villagers ask him about their problems, illnesses, accidents, their futures or those of ones close to them.



The dhami has a very long lock of hair or a plait held by a silver or gold thread (jhagre). The hair is usually rolled up on the top of his head and wrapped in a turban, but during his trance it flows freely down his back. Literally translated the trance state is called "carrying the god on his back." In the west, there is no other initiation than selection by the god, and the only proof is the trance and the power to perform miracles (oracular or spectacular), which can go as far as the recitation of the Vedas without having ever learned them.

The shaman has the power to transfer one person's illness to another living creature, a cock or a black goat. This ritual, called khadgo katne, "to cut through or annihilate the obstacle," is practiced by shamans from different regions.

Funeral Bronzes



Bronze figurines are made for funeral rites, for commemorative, and for votive purposes. Our source told us that they are made in portable crucibles and that the craftsman models them in wax and casts bronzes on request, referring to a description of the deceased. The artist depicts his subject in motion: elongated figures on horseback, walking, or sitting in an attitude of prayer as if for eternity. The bronze caster's art is unconventional, highly imaginative, naive, and even humorous.

These figurines form a panorama of Nepalese society. Social status is often represented, and these portraits can include indication of rank or function, age or a favorite occupation: a devout person standing in an attitude of prayer, a monk carrying the trisul or sacred vase or magic drum, a renouncer (saddhou) meditating, an old man, a warrior armed with a gun, a rider astride a horse or elephant brandishing a sword, or, in a less martial vein, a man sitting on a bed. To ward off harmful spirits, bells with small figures on them are also produced, as are oil lamps, small altars showing shamans in ecstasy or beating the dhyangro.



The bronzes are commissioned by the villagers in the western hills on the death of a close member of the family and laid in a temple or a place of power. At the time of the death, a cow was once set free to bring merit to the soul of the deceased. Anyone who found it could quite legitimately claim it as his property. These days it is often given to a priest or a close relative. Certain archaic bronzes are known that portray a cow and calf.

According to our source, some Pura Seni bronze figures were made to cast spells or to protect people from their enemies. Deliberately massive, powerful, and even brutal, they contrast with the artwork usually found among Himalayan peoples. They depict men with snakes rolled round their bodies, armed and in a fighting or defensive posture, and even offering a human head to a female god.



Butter Churns

One object often decorated with figural sculpture is the handle of the butter churn (neti). Most such handles are decorated with friezes and geometrical patterns, but some have stylized people or animals and even scenes from everyday life. It is clear that the position of the handle and its function as an axis have both a technical and a ritual

significance. Here we again see a major concern of tribal art: the desire to find an original sculptural solution, defined by the piece of wood, the available tools, and the constraints specific to the task itself. Whether he is carving a crouching man or a simple butter churn, the sculptor has to discern answers to the challenge before him, whether it is how to render the arms and legs of the figure, or how to find a balance between the opening needed for the axis of the churn and the equally necessary cord at the end.



In the carved churn handles of this region, there is no lack of variety in possible themes. All are drawn from everyday life: a

