

Bōlērākō-cu! / “Speak, I’m Talking to You!” Reconstructing the Self in Tamang Shamanism

Vasile Albinet

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania

Vasile Albinet recently completed a PhD in anthropology at the Department of Sociology of the National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), Romania. He has conducted field research in the Himalayas, particularly in Nepal, and in South and Southeast Asia where he studied the Batak Palawan and Dayak tribes in Borneo, Indonesia.

Correspondence: valialbinet@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The social functions of ritual are well studied in anthropology, but their psychological and neural basis for reconfiguring the individual self remains less explored. This study focuses on the initiation ritual in Tamang shamanism in Nepal, demonstrating how cultural tools help transform the cognitive and embodied self-narratives of individuals experiencing various biopsychological disorders who engage in this ritual. Fragmentation, instability, and inconsistency create a separation between us and the world around us, as well as a disconnection from our own bodies. All of these are consequences of mental and physical suffering, and the central place where they manifests is the self. Through the process of internalizing the preconfigured structure or framework embedded within the initiation ritual in Tamang shamanism, individuals reshape their own sense of self to align with the role and expectations of a shaman within their society.

KEYWORDS

Self; embodiment; spirit possession; shamanism; divination.

Humans intuitively produce religious behaviours and beliefs. It has been argued that behaviours and beliefs are accidental evolutionary by-products of the mind (Boyer 2001; Sperber 1996; Atran 2002) or “spandrel” (Gould and Lewontin 1979) present in all societies. Cognitive mechanisms with evolutionary predispositions and inferences about the presence of intentional agents (Atran 2002) have facilitated counterintuitive concepts such as supernatural agents (Boyer 2001). Evolutionary predispositions are innate cognitive mechanisms developed over time for specific adaptive functions. Constrained by their environment, humans have developed superhuman agents to efficiently handle vast quantities of information, including highly emotional content that would otherwise be challenging for the human mind to manage. Superhuman agents with cultural cognitive

functions, such as gods or ancestral spirits, can resolve human tragic cognition through inferences and evolutionary predispositions of the human mind.

For example, a superhuman agent can transform death into a telic event, extending the meaning and purpose of life into a cultural event, such as reincarnation, transmigration of the soul, or resurrection after the “Last Judgement.” Such an agency is attractive, relatively easy to select and retain, and becomes a universal cultural attraction which can be represented by religion or universal social phenomena. Causal factors that generate inferential predispositions and cause certain representations to gravitate towards areas of attraction are called “pull factors” (Buskell 2017) or “cultural attractors” (Sperber 1996). Cultural Attraction Theory (CAT) is a transformative approach to the theory of cultural evolution, explaining how



ideational variants change over time and how some variants are more likely to be the result of transformations than others. The term "cultural attractor" was introduced by Dan Sperber (1996) and explains how certain ideas, practices and artefacts are more likely to be adopted and transmitted within a culture than others. In this perspective, supernatural agents are the most successful "cultural attractors" (Sperber 1996; Claidiere *et al.* 2014). Rituals, seen as universal "cultural attractors," distribute and shape cultural variants through regularisation that involves caution, rigidity, and repetition. Rituals serve as models through which cognitive capacities are recruited and inferences are made, and these cognitive capacities are similar in structure to rituals around the world, although their cultural implementation may vary.

Humans interactively manipulate evolving cognitive capacities through perception and conceptualization modules. Their distribution in thoughts (theories of mind) is reflected in the actions of a social group. Also, these intuitive capacities causally sequence a series of connections that further give rise to supernatural agency. This superhuman agency is produced intuitively and creatively and orders culture and the cosmos. As a result, a framework of purpose and meaning is created, replacing uncertainty with a known path in which we, humans, have the ability to intervene (Atran 2002).

In their cultural model, Tamang shamans use a similar method to embody spirits and deities. The Tamang initiation ritual contains compressed and opaque information that responds to implicit mechanisms of the mind. The opacity of these patterns escapes conscious analysis and is best acquired through ritualized patterns. Participants in such rituals bring as inputs implicit inferences correlated with ritualized behaviors. These inputs subsequently give rise to specific outputs in the context of the ritual, leading to changes in their mental state via the cognitive cultural model.

The difference between Abrahamic religious practices and the Tamang practices promoted by local Himalayan animism and popular Vajrayana Buddhism lies, among other things, in

the cultural perception of possession. Whereas in Abrahamic practices, such as Christianity, the perception of possession is often malignant, in Tamang society it is taught during initiation. For Tamang, to be possessed represents a cultural tool used to detect the presence of gods and spirits by activating unconscious modules of caution and threat detection. Unconscious modules are cognitive processes that operate outside of consciousness and are dedicated to detecting potential threats. They trigger automatic physiological and behavioural responses. In my field research, I have identified three types of possession in Tamangi: (1) self-induced possession for a specific purpose – among shamans use this type of possession; (2) intentional possession, induced by someone else for a specific reason; and (3) involuntary possession. Due to "cultural priming" (Han and Northoff 2020), participants culturally interpret these perceptions in terms of intentionality and culturally conditioning emotions that come from natural stimuli. Participants' perceptions further combine and reduce the fragmented, irrelevant, and ambiguous agency of stimuli to supernatural agency (Atran 2002). Cultural priming effects refer to the influence of cultural cues or stimuli on cognitive processes, attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions. When individuals are exposed to cultural stimuli, such as, symbols and social norms, their minds activate specific cultural knowledge and patterns, which can shape the individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. These priming effects occur because the human brain is highly adaptable and capable of encoding and processing cultural information. The brain's neural networks and cognitive systems are shaped by cultural and learning experiences, allowing individuals to navigate and make sense of their cultural environment. Cultural priming effects can have a profound impact on various cognitive processes, including attention, memory, perception, decision-making, and social judgments. Cultural priming allows stimuli to gain access and cross the threshold of minimal interpretation for information to compete and trigger supernatural agency (Atran 2002).



Humans conceptualize and form domains and information to imitate and manipulate natural stimuli, conditioning a specialized evolutionary domain for entities, agents, and information but thereby automatically creating cultural domains (Sperber 1996). These cultural domains automatically and unconsciously „ride” the mental evolutionary modules. In short, we could say that the conceptual underpinnings of religion intuitively derive from universal evolutionary cognitive domains, such as folk psychology, folk biology, and folk mechanics, which are part of the evolutionary endowment of every human individual (Atran 2002).

Evolutionary modules are specialized cognitive systems for survival and decision making. They detect agency, identify prey and predators, facilitate social interactions, and respond to threats. Examples include face recognition, language acquisition, and fear responses. In Tamang shamanic trance or altered state of consciousness (ASC), the shaman interpretes natural sensations as an intrusion and presence of gods or spirits such as Shiva, Kali, MahaKali, Bairav, or some ancestor spirit. The *trance* (ASC) is a learned cultural tool used to constitute an ad hoc cultural domain of supernatural agency. Supernatural agency is modulated by evolving mental patterns, overrides natural stimuli and is produced in part by ritual instruments and techniques, such as, sound, drumming, shaking, ritual gesticulation, and dance. The fragmentary incongruity of these stimuli is united by a religiously accepted and socially prestigious cultural domain – represented in this case by Tamang shamanism. Ritual is essential in reconstructing the self as a unified agent and reconnecting thoughts, emotions, and motivations with the bio-socio-cultural environment, forming social synapses that support a coherent unity. These cultural-cognitive tools, found in different societies, are products of biocultural evolution used in the process of bio-socio-cultural constraints for self (re)construction and identity development. Memory systems, especially autobiographical memory, are central to this

process. The more articulated the social agency, the more the participant’s self is perceived as unified – a unity. By internalising the structures of a pre-configured social role within the model, the initiation ritual helps those involved in the process to reconfigure themselves by personifying complex, psycho-socio-cultural roles impersonated in the collective memory. These cultural technologies, present in most societies, have an adaptive-cognitive role for the (re)construction of the self and the development of identity, with a focus on memory systems, especially autobiographical memory, essential for identity, always developed and subject to bio-sociocultural constraints.



Self and culture. The embodied self.

Recent interdisciplinary approaches have reformulated data from the social sciences and anthropology. In recent decades, traditional assumptions have been challenged and contradicted by neuro-social theories and hypotheses developed in the new interdisciplinary field of “embodiment” or “enactive cognitive science” (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992). Enactivism argues that cognition arises through a dynamic interaction between an organism and its environment. Thus, the cognizer is a human being embodied in complex biological, psychological, and socio-cultural contexts (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992). Csordas (1990) introduced “embodied cognition” into anthropology. The body becomes the subject of culture, the source of intra- and intersubjective experience. Integrating Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1962) with Bourdieu’s practical theory (1977), Csordas explores the perceptual processes that lead to “objectivity.” “Habitus” explains predispositions towards certain actions, but these actions change in social interaction. In this approach, the body is not seen as a static object occupied by culture, but as a subject of culture – the “existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1994),



in which culture takes various forms. Culture is produced, reproduced, and transmitted – always reconstructed and never identically copied. This perspective is related to studies of the “extended mind” (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 7-19) and the concepts of distributed cognition and situational/contextual cognition. Situational/contextual cognition emphasises the influence of context or specific situation on cognitive processes. It emphasises the importance of considering the immediate environment, cultural norms, and social factors in understanding cognition. Fuchs (2009) argues for cognitive embodiment in psychiatry. This perspective understands the mind and brain as a biological system connected to bodily experience and social interaction. Cognitive processes are embedded in brain circuits and originate in the sensory-motor experience of the body. Action and perception are interconnected, rather than separated physically and mentally. The brain is interpreted as a neuroplastic organ that mediates body-environment and social interactions. The theory of the four E’s (“embodied,” “embedded,” “enactive,” and “extended”), along with “emotion” and “ecology,” emphasises that human cognition is embodied in the body, the environment and extended through tools and objects (Hutchins 1995). These approaches recognise the importance of emotions in cognitive processes and emphasise their influence on perception, attention, learning, and memory. Analysis of the Tamang ritual reveals that the ritual is an extended cognitive system that contributes to the (re)configuration of the self through emotional interactions in an adaptive social context. In the perspective opened by Hutchins (1995), the Tamang ritual highlights the importance of understanding the body within the socio-cultural environment and while emotionally interacting with the environment. The Tamang ritual emphasizes that the self cannot be understood and developed outside of these complex and interconnected dimensions.



The synaptic self: the role of ritual and neuroplasticity in reconfiguring identity

Organisms are feedback control systems designed to achieve goals based on past experience. They make informed decisions with deep and implicit – unconscious – cognitive processes. Emotions play a central role as they provide direct motivation or feedback for behaviour. Context is crucial, and navigating it requires implicit and explicit navigation modules. In humans, this is reflected in the synaptic self – the totality of who we are. It is based on a primordial form of subjectivity present in the reptilian-paleomammalian instinctual brain (Panksepp 2017). The concept of “synaptic self” was developed by Joseph LeDoux (2002). Our identity and experiences derive from synaptic connections and patterns of activity in neural networks. These connections are constantly changing with experiences, learning, and interactions with the environment. Synaptic plasticity, the ability of synapses to strengthen or weaken over time, plays an essential role in shaping our individuality and mental life (LeDoux 2002). The synaptic self-reconciles the nature-nurture dichotomy and is closely related to the 4E plus 2E theoretical framework of cognition, which includes embodied, enactive, extended, emotion, and ecology. In the same way, the “6E” theory of cognition emphasizes that cognition is not limited to the brain, but also involves the body and the environment, LeDoux (2002) asserts that the synaptic self is not limited to the brain but includes the whole body and the social context. Neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to reorganize and form new connections between neurons, is the essential tool for synaptic reconfiguration. It allows our brain to develop and adapt by forming new synaptic connections and reorganizing existing ones according to our experiences and the environment. Neuroplasticity is a vital factor in influencing behavior, cognition, and emotions. Research on memory has uncovered the intricate relationship between neuroplasticity and me-





mory systems, particularly autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory is crucial in shaping our self-identity (Tulving 1972; Conway 1990; Schacter and Addis 2007). Neuroplasticity provides insights into the persistence of rituals, including initiation rites, and represents a framework for navigating through uncertainty and transforming experiences. Mental disorders affect the narrative of the self and challenge personal identity. Discontinuity, fragmentation, and instability arise when events affect profoundly one's relationship with the self and the world. Events influenced by psychosocial and physical distress highlight the symbiosis between the organic and the social aspects of human experience. In Tamang society, people use the initiation ritual to address these challenges and facilitate healing. The self, deeply influenced by the environment and the biosociocultural context, becomes both the focal point for healing and the source of fragmentation and illness. Tamang ritual manages the complex interaction between the self and its environment, expanding the capacities of the self to act. They embody extended contexts and intuitive ways of perceiving reality, allowing the examination of causal chains beyond individual actors. Ritual is therefore a universal cultural tool.



The cultural model as a cognitive and social tool: coherence and meaning in a culture. Cultural representations and identity

Brad Shore's work in cognitive anthropology (1996) introduced the concept of cultural model, which combines mental models in individuals' minds with institutionalized models to organize explanations and meanings of experiences and of the wider world. Every cultural community shares conventional models, distributed in complex networks between the social and personal spheres.

The Tamang cultural model is built on consensus, "interpretive drift," and symbolic

unity, with reductionism, consensus, and structural coherence as sources of cultural coherence (Shore 1996; Luhrmann 1989, 13-15). The cultural model is a dynamic process that adapts to human changes and needs. The liminal spaces of the Tamang model are inhabited by assumptions and meanings in which ancestors, gods, and spirits play an important role. Everything that comes from that space is culturally marked and conditioned and is interpreted within the model as an intrusion of spirits and gods and a calling: "Hey, I'm here! What are you doing with me!" It is only after this moment, when intrusion is manifested by means of various symptoms and signs, including visual and auditory hallucinations and multiple somatizations, so that those concerned begin to seek a way of healing by approaching the cultural model put into action by a recognized specialist, the Tamang shaman. In fact, by identifying, classifying, and modelling the personal experience of the self with gods and spirits, an organisational model is constructed. In this model, intrusive entities are culturally recognised, included, and accepted in local theories and models of the mind. The cultural model generates cultural products that articulate representations and explanations of experiences through evolutionarily adapted mental mechanisms. In situations of crisis and uncertainty, such as illness, misfortune of all kinds, death of loved ones, death of children, infertility, and approaching death the complexity of the world is reduced and encoded into a manageable framework using this intuitive adaptive knowledge.

The Tamang cultural model creates coherence and effective orientation in the social world by reducing the complexity of circumstances to a symbolic structure of characters and social roles personified by supernatural agents such as gods and spirits. These represent elemental truths in the daily lives of the Tamang people, constructing and providing a meaningful narrative. These agents have specific ways and roles of functioning embedded in the daily lives of the Tamang people. World, family, and personal issues are thus ordered and

reconfigured through the complex experience gained by embodying these agents in the structure of ritual. At the same time, the role and structure of the cultural model are embedded in the material world, in the objects of practice, in the space in which practice takes place, and become part of the symbolic efficacy (see Lévi-Strauss 1978, 237), so that a coherent and meaningful narrative is created from neophyte to Guru, Shiva-Mahadev, Sanghe, Nara Bon, Gotama, Amitabha, Dharma and Karma.

In this way, the narrative of the self integrates meanings from "collective rememberings" and "common memory" (Conway 2005) that form the social mythology of the group. The Tamang model is such a cultural tool with a cognitive role that needs to be understood in the bio-socio-cultural context that defines the group, "shared memory and memories," but also at the level of individual experience (Shore 1996). Through these frameworks, culture can be investigated by the Tamang people who take part in the initiation ritual. In fact, these are cognitive representations of the socio-cultural domain that help Tamang individuals define themselves, construct meanings, and select actions and behaviours based on their own experience in relation to these conventional representations as they believe they function (Dresler 2000; Shore 1996). These are not just individual cognitive resources, but representations shared by individuals in the same culture, whose internalisation shapes and gives coherence to social norms.

The Tamang model reveals how relationally constructed individuals who share a corpus of cultural information, a common ground, reinterpret their own experience with the pre-configured structure of the model by reorganizing autobiographical memory in relation to the meanings provided by the effective symbolic framework of the Tamang cultural model. Therefore, personal narratives create, organise, and give meaning to experience, while providing the premises to define self-representation and self-identity. The narratives that encode the Tamang model also embody the social and cultural meanings of the self.

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Settings and methods

Nepal is a landlocked country located between India and China, having been influenced by both countries throughout history. Ethnic Tamangs, with a population of 1,539,830 (according to the 2011 census),¹ currently occupy districts in and around the Kathmandu Valley. They are the fifth largest group in the country after the Chhetri and Bahun.

For this study, data was collected from both the growing urban Tamang community in Kathmandu and several Tamang villages, including Kafle, Dhamara, and Salambu in Gaunpalika Majhi Feda, Kavrepalanchok district, and Phondi in Ramechhap district over several periods between 2010 and 2019. In total, more than one hundred practitioners were interviewed, including initiated members, people at various stages of initiation and people who had received various traditional treatments at the Nepali Jhankri Association, located in the Balajur Shiva Mandir (temple) in Kathmandu.

The study employed a combination of research methods, including participant observation, person-centered ethnography, and structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. Additionally, experiential ethnography was utilized to gain a more profound understanding. By actively participating in a Tamang shamanic initiation ritual, I had the opportunity to grasp the intricacies of the ritual process and gain valuable insights into the dynamics of the community. I conducted video recordings of numerous hours of both formal and informal interactions within the temple and the Nepali Jhankri Association. I had direct access to members of the association, their families, and friends. In addition, I recorded over 50 formal interviews, participated in 70 informal interactions, and documented the entire process of initiation rituals, repeating this process ten times in the past two years of research.

I pursued several key questions: How do people express mental events and experience internal dialogues in relation to local concepts



of mind, beliefs, and religious phenomena? What sensors do these image-experiences produce? What body and mental experiences the image-experiences trigger? How do the body and mental experiences relate to “cultural invitations” that shape individual and group behavior in cultural contexts? Which senses matter most in Tamang culture and why? Where are ghosts, local spirits and gods born, how are they produced and where do they live? How is the Tamang mind conceived, as a container or as crossroads? How does the construction of the Tamang self differ from the Western self? I included gender, class, caste, and income differences in the analysis. 60% of the association’s four hundred members are women who live in relatively poor conditions, including housing, and have unstable incomes. The Tamang cultural model appeals to a large segment of socially marginalized individuals. Marked by social distress (Kleinman 1997) and existential crises, most of them have migrated from rural areas to the city in search of a better life. Many of them suffer or have suffered from a range of symptoms, including somatic crises, pain of unknown origin, chronic illnesses, and especially symptoms of mental disorders, the most common being psychosis and depressive-anxiety syndromes.

Symptoms associated with psychosis, diagnosed or undiagnosed, include frequent visual and auditory hallucinations (with or without imperative voices) and frequent spontaneous dissociations related to various conditions, including trauma, stress, or other mental illnesses. Dissociative disorders are disorders of thought, memory, identity, or perception manifested by dissociative amnesia, depersonalisation, and other related disorders. Most of the participants in my study were diagnosed in various biomedical, general medical, or psychiatric clinics. Many of them were treated with psychiatric medication, but the recorded data show that this medication was of real help for some and only partially or totally useless for the others.

Common narratives of individual distress are usually juxtaposed with social and

emotional distress, including the precarity of living conditions and traumatic events, such as critical illness in the family, miscarriages, suicide attempts, and domestic and sexual abuse. According to the data I collected, extreme somatic crises motivate individuals’ decisions to engage in the initiation ritual. Decisions are usually made after a long period of time in which they try various forms of treatment. The personal histories of interviewees contain a similar dramatic arc: initial crisis, initial symptom somatisation, a climax, and a decline. The climax coincides with a major crisis in their lives and with the decision to approach the initiation ritual as a last solution for treatment.

In the Tamang initiation ritual, participants are expected to identify, project, and integrate their experiences, behaviors, and personal stories, including traumas or any other issues, within the socio-cultural framework embedded in the structure of the model. These elements are partly articulated by what might be called “shamanic diagnostic criteria,” although Tamangs shamans do not use such terms. The guru shaman uses these criteria as tools to assess the resources and potential of each individual, ensuring his or her alignment with the culturally accepted norms of the model. Thus, the psychopathological states described above are interpreted according to these diagnostic criteria of the Tamang cultural model as an explicit form of intrusion by external forces – possession by gods, benign or evil spirits, or ancestral spirits.



The cultural model and the Tamang mind. Aggregation and impermanence. Connections and permeability.

Our mind works with maps, imperfect representations of a territory, called reality. Even the best maps are imperfect and cannot grasp social complexity beyond small groups living in direct contact. This is also evidenced by the concept of “Dunbar’s Number,” which argues





Image 1.
Saila and Kallo, my teachers in
Tamang shamanism, in trance.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.

Image 2.
Bargaining with the gods.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.



Image 3.
Bôlêrakô-cu! Speak, I'm talking to you, *Guru ji!*
Interrogation of spirits in Tamang diagnosis.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.





Image 4. Cohesion, semantic and autobiographical memory. The final stage ends with the transfer of the guardian spirit - the central figure of identification. The god or spirit that played the key role in the reconfiguration. Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.

Image 5. Cohesion, semantic and autobiographical memory. The final stage ends with the transfer of the guardian spirit - the central figure of identification. Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.



that in human groups, people have a cognitive limit of about 150 individuals (Dunbar 1992). Mental models are crucial in the construction of cultural models and in the perception of the world. They simplify complexity and prioritize relevance, providing tools for social and personal navigation. The specific culture of a group plays a crucial role in this simplification, facilitating the understanding and organisation of complex information within that group.

Complexity, organization of information and cultural representations in any human society are simplified by inferences and theories of mind. Theories of mind (ToM) are cognitive skills that allow us to infer and attribute mental states, such as thoughts and emotions, both to ourselves and to others (Kobayashi and Temple 2009). Theory of mind research suggests that this ability is influenced by cultural factors, and studies show that there are universal and culture-specific neural correlates in theory of mind (Kobayashi and Temple 2009). Therefore, culture plays an important role in the ways in which people use and understand theory of mind in social interactions (Lavelle 2021; Kitayama and Park 2010). These findings are related to an adaptive ecology and especially to the culture produced in that ecology.–

The basis of Tamang social organization focuses on close kinship relationships built through clan ties manifested in extended social networks from individuals to clans to villages. This interconnected system of relationships is reinforced by practices, such as mutual exchange, and are linked to local theories of mind

Tamang are members of the Buddhist community. In Vajrayana Buddhism, non-duality (*advaya*, in Nepali) is associated with interdependence, aggregation, and emptiness (*śūnyatā*, in Nepali). For the uninitiated, mind-mediated phenomena are seen as reality itself, while for the initiated, they are perceived as “mere representations” – an illusory superimposition generated by the mind. This differentiates the doctrine of theoretical Buddhism from popular Buddhism as practiced by the Tamangs and most Himalayan Buddhist groups.

In other words, religious specialists of theo-

retical doctrinal Buddhism see gods and deities as symbolic expressions of the mind. Ordinary people, on the other hand, often perceive them as real divine beings in popular Vajrayana practice in the Himalayas, as in all theistic religions.

Therefore, the Tamang mind is not seen as a centralized control container, but as an interconnection without a central decision-making module. Essentialism is missing from Tamang theories of mind. What we perceive as unitary is the product of composite and interdependent actions, reconstructed by the senses according to Buddhist cultural models. The Buddhist model perceives the mind as the product of a cause-effect system in conjunction with interrelated biopsychosocial circumstances. Influenced by Buddhism and local animism, in Tamang society the mind is seen as interconnected with others and the environment, blurring the boundaries between internal and external. This complex interconnectedness, combined with the human predisposition to share intentionality, language, and theories of mind creates strong bonds between people. In conclusion, Tamang minds are perceived as permeable, constantly influenced by others and supernatural factors in an interactive process that shapes their interactions with the bio-psycho-social environment.



Identity and identification in Tamang Shamanism: Transforming suffering into a spiritual vocation

In Tamang society, the material benefits of being a shaman are not the main reasons for engaging in the practice. Participants engage in the initiation ritual as a last resort, after struggling to find help and treatment for their problems. At first, most people do not trust the ritual, but then return to it after more crises. Khanci's case illustrates how difficulties and traumatic events, including a suicide attempt, led her initially



to give up shamanic practices. She then built confidence in the ritual as a cognitive response to her life.

A.V.: You kept coming back, for two years?

K: No, after a month I gave up because I didn't feel anything anymore. I lost all hope and went back to the hospital, where I was admitted again for ten days. When they let me go home, I tried to kill myself. But I'm not talking about that now. I told you. I've been coming here ever since. I'm a different person.

Patients with psychosocial problems find in the Tamang ritual a non-stigmatising and beneficial context. The ritual integrates participants into a network of psychological and social support and thus facilitates positive transformations in their lives. The ritual process is rooted in distinct cognitive mechanisms such as normativity of actions, signalling of coalitional identity, underlying all social groups, magical affirmations based on intuitive expectations of contagion, and ritualized behavior. These cultural and psychological aspects are central in shaping and interpreting the beneficial impact of ritual on individuals in the Tamang community (Boyer and Lienard 2020). All these cognitive mechanisms within Tamang ritual contribute to the transmission of culture and the construction of "cultural attractors" such as supernatural agents with cultural roles (Sperber 1996). Ritual has a significant impact on individual psychology, as it is a cognitive system that regulates cultural information and contributes to the formation of "psychological coalition" (Boyer 2018).

As part of this coalitional process, newcomers are respected and, according to the cultural model, they are chosen by spirits. The guru is seen as an experienced sibling, not a rigid, dichotomous authority who divides people into the healthy and the sick according to a standard classification of mental disorders. Rather, he stands in a pragmatic relationship with the spirits and gods they inhabit. This enhances the trust and respect the participants

have for him and the whole process. Thus, the initiate is not just considered a patient with a stigmatising diagnosis but goes through a complex process that transforms him from a victim of the spirits into a specialist of culture and the sacred. He becomes a psycho-cultural expert and ultimately a master of ritual practice.

Throughout the ritual the shaman has the social role to help the initiate become the master of the sacred and the mediator between the human and the spirit world. As argued by Maurice Bloch (1998), this path of initiation represents a transformation from victim to hunter, in which suffering is transfigured into a transcendent quality that is interpreted in the context of Tamang mythology and cosmogony. In this way, the initiate becomes the equal of the empowered gods, playing a pivotal role within the community.

Through the initiation process, the shaman assumes a role of negotiation, mediation and reciprocity with the gods and spirits. Suffering is transfigured and can become a call to a defining vocation that reconfigures the meaning of life and builds a coherent personal mythology for many who complete the initiation ritual. However, not all participants adopt the shamanic model. Some may abandon it for various reasons, while others embrace it fully. This process is similar to Western psychotherapy that does not work for everyone.

The initiate perceives this personal experience through the mediation of religious meanings and symbols. At the end of the initiation stage, initiates become deeply grateful and value their suffering as an essential catalyst for their extraordinary transformation. This is the obvious conclusion from data collected from interviews and informal discussions with most members.

Following initiation, the aspiring shaman accepts suffering as coming from deities. The apprentice shaman internalizes in his new identity these qualities of the gods as embodied in local mythology and the socially accepted Tamang cultural model. Suffering, known as *duka* in Nepali, thus becomes the source of inspiration for the shaman. It serves as a liminal

state from which the shaman draws insights and information for his practice. *Duka* is seen as an intrusion of the gods, a gateway to another world and a framework that grants legitimacy to the spiritual, executive, and ideal aspects of the shaman's self. The executive self involves self-regulation, self-control, and the ability to make decisions, and includes high-level cognitive processes such as planning, self-reflection, and inhibitory control (McNamara 2011; 2022; Boyer 2018; Bloch 1991).

Full identification with the Tamang cultural model is crucial for transformative identity change. This emotional investment is achieved through initiation, which provides expertise and competence. Identification is rooted in interconnected processes and reinforced in social contexts specific to the cultural model. During initiation, learning, doctrinal understanding, and belief development occur simultaneously through inductive methods (Hollan 1992; Spiro 1987, 164). According to Spiro (1987, 164), five cognitive stages are necessary for motivation: learning doctrine, understanding doctrine, understanding the meaning and importance of doctrine as transmitted by specialists, developing belief in its truth, and using doctrine to guide one's own actions. Doctrine shapes perceptions and influences future behaviour. External factors, such as positive social discourse and modelling, contribute to cognitive growth. These are all phenomena observed in Tamang shamanic initiation practices.

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Diagnosis and intentionality

In the first part of the Tamang initiation ritual, which corresponds to the separation stage (Van Gennep 1965; Turner 1969), the chief shaman (guru), together with a team of experienced Tamang shamans, leads the „diagnosis” process and works together to establish an initial “diagnosis” for the patient. Although not explicitly used, I refer to participants as “patients”

to distinguish between newcomers and the rest. They screen patients against “diagnostic criteria” to guide and redirect people in an interactive network. They lead patients to see suffering at the intersection of social, transactional, and unexplained aspects. The process of self-recovery and self-reconfiguration begins in the ritual structure of initiation always from the individual to the collective, from inevitability (we cannot live without communicating and interacting) to reconfiguration and reconstruction, from deconstruction and disorder to reconstruction and order. The Tamang shaman uncovers the cultural pluralism of the Tamang universe and develops psychosocial assumptions considering the whole human being and his life story.

Through divinatory practices (Evans-Pritchard 1937), specialists connect the patient with the invisible world, creating a matrix of interconnected meanings and open hypotheses. Divination facilitates coordination and therapy, enabling critical thinking and questioning (Boyer and Lienard 2020). During the therapeutic proposal, the patient is placed in front of the shaman and his assistants and receives a drum (*dyangro*, in Nepali). Together, they begin to beat the drums rhythmically to induce a trance state. The guru shaman observes the patient's ability to access the trance state and guides this state with the help of his assistants, inducing through sound and words one direction or another. Trance observation and monitoring provides an effective and non-stigmatizing setting in which patients can express their distress and sometimes have prolonged abreactions (emotional release and expression of repressed emotions), like in psychoanalysis (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974).

In Tamang practices, the diagnosis according to shamanic diagnostic criteria lasts several hours or days and the patient is stimulated to express their physical and mental suffering verbally and bodily. During the ritual, the guru leads and interrogates the patient, while the assistants keep maintaining the “collective” trance. The aim, similar to Western psychotherapy, is to uncover the patient's repressed perspectives and understand the

Mr. X
to
the
shaman
and
his
assistants
and
receives
a
drum
(*dyangro*,
in
Nepali).
Together,
they
begin
to
beat
the
drums
rhythmically
to
induce
a
trance
state.



Image 6.
Dancing in the fire.
Constructing episodic memory.
Empowering self-agency
and group engagement.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.

Image 7.
Guru Chet Bahadur calls the gods.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.



Image 8.
Interrogation of gods in Tamang diagnosis.
Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.



forces that produce suffering. In this process, the patient can experience abreaction that can facilitate healing and emotional relief.

In the traditional system of Tamang shamanism, there is always intentionality behind illness, which often means that illness is caused by supernatural agents that have targeted an individual. They chose the illness. Illness is associated with a spiritual attack by supernatural agent, and is interpreted as a surplus, an addition, not a lack. Illness is not seen as the result of a deficiency or lack, such as a lack of neurotransmitters in the body, but rather as an intentional spiritual attack by supernatural beings. This perspective suggests that illness is not a random occurrence, but rather a deliberate action with a purpose.

The shaman explores options and interrogates the patient with the scope to uncover both the superhuman agent and the intentionality. The most common question during diagnosis is *Bōlērākō-cu* ("speak," in Nepali) – "Speak *Guru*,² come and speak?" – asked repeatedly until the patient enters a state of deep trance and sometimes enters a state of catharsis. The induced state manipulates the vigilance of the analytic self and encourages the expression of suffering in an attempt to access hidden parts of the self. Intense, often violent, abreactions lead to questions that explore fragmented aspects of the self.

Questions such as "Who lives inside you?" explore such fragmented aspects. Bodily expressions are interpreted in the context of cultural model narratives. An empirical example is offered by Khanci ("the youngest," in Nepali), a 26-year-old who has been coming to the temple for two years. She has been married for seven years and she decided to come to temple when her husband accused her of infertility and brought home another woman. Khanci is seated in front of the altar beating the drum at a very fast pace and shaking violently in a trance.

The guru shouts: "*Bōlērākō-cu!* Speak, who are you, tell us now, speak!" Khanci starts screaming, her body contorts, shakes convulsively, and then she vomits. Guru and the assistants gather around her and shout

one by one: "*Bōlērākō-cu!?!?*" Khanci starts screaming even louder, then says something incomprehensible. This dialogue lasts for several weeks. Khanci communicates/expresses her suffering in a made-up language. The guru and his assistants frantically beat drums, urging and asking the spirit to speak. Khanci screams, cries, rolls on the floor, takes a handful of red powder, and spreads it over her face and body, pulls her own clothes until she tears them, and spreads the powder from her face onto her body. The Guru shouts in confirmation: "Mahakali Guru! Kuna Guru?/ Great Guru Kali? Which Guru?!" Then he repeats the question: "*Bōlērākō-cu!?!?* I am talking to you! Say who are you, *Guru Ji!*? Kali *Guru*, MahaKali *Guru*, Bhairav *Guru*, Mahadev *Guru*, Kali *Guru*, Kali *Guru!* Khun *Guru?*" One of the assistants keeps whispering a mantra in Khanci's ear: *Kali Guru, Kali Guru*. Khanci reacts aggressively. She pushes him and shouts. She stops, grabs the drum, and hits it violently. Her body contorts into a macabre dance. She gets up to her feet, strikes the drum, and takes a few steps in a kind of dance composed of violent and disjointed movements combined with sudden stops and catatonic stupor. Then, Khanci starts to move voluntarily with repetitive and excessive movements, apparently without any purpose. She repeats with her eyes closed: "*Kali Guru, Kali Guru, Kali Guru, Kali Guru, Kali Guru...*" She pauses for a while, stares blankly, then screams desperately for a while and begins to cry softly: "*Ma, ramro atma!*"³ *Ma, ramro atma!*" Guru initiates and stimulates dialogue. He calls out to Khanci.

Guru: *Kali Guru ji*, what happened, *Kali Guru ji*, tell us! We are listening! We are all ready to listen to you!

Khanci: *Mero atma dukiooo!* [My soul hurts!] (Field notes 18 April 2019).

The treatment provided by Tamang specialists concentrates on identifying and recognising the intentions of unseen beings, engaging in negotiations with them, and establishing a workable programme. These specialists use a range of cultural tools and



methods, including negotiation, seduction, respect, offering, sacrifice, service, humble behaviour, prayer or even cheating. These techniques serve as crucial elements in facilitating communication and exchange with the invisible realm.

The treatment process involves creating a structured plan, for example, compiling a collection of cultural artefacts, such as objects, relationships, and ingrained assumptions. These cultural artefacts then play an active role in negotiations and exchanges with the invisible world. The ultimate goal of the specialist is to understand the socio-cultural attributes of the individual and to help them reorient themselves in a new social setting. This involves reconnecting the individual to their social networks and emphasising their inherent value and distinctiveness within their community.

In this way, the patient is expected to find a new sense of affiliation and belonging, eliminating feelings of isolation and the implacable verdict of a biomedical diagnosis.

The treatment frees the patient from their essentialised content. The outcome of treatment does not involve dependence on psychiatric drugs, stigmatisation, or isolation, but is based on the reconfiguration and reintegration of the self into the social whole. The patient also acquires a new status through affiliation to the respected group represented by the sacred specialist – the shaman.







Case studies (excerpts from interviews)

These case studies depict the experiences of three individuals in Kathmandu, Nepal, namely Khanci, Lopsan and Krishna. We used pseudonyms to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants. The interviews were conducted at Balajur Temple in Kathmandu in August 2019.

1. Khanci

Khanci (“youngest,” in Nepali), 26 years old. Her family moved to Kathmandu many years ago. She has been married for seven years. Her husband brought another woman into the house two years ago. After a year, the husband and the new wife went to work in Dubai. In Tamang culture, the practice to bring a new wife, especially for infertility reasons, is accepted and legal since 1963. In most cases, women are blamed.


 A.V: Why are you here?
 T [someone in the group, Krishna]: She is like us.

 K: Because I am sick.
 A.V: What illness do you have?

 K: Malnutrition. In fact, for many years I have been suffering from tremors, many times I fainted. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

 T: She has god [spirit], like us.
 A.V: Do you hear voices?
 K: Yes, I often hear voices.
 A.V: What kind of voices?
 K: Very strange, you don't hear voices like that all the time, they repeat in your

head, like an echo. And they talk to each other.
 A.V: Are you afraid of these voices?
 K: At first, when I was in the hospital [at the psychiatrist], I was very scared, and I fainted. I was very scared, terrified, I fainted many times a day. My head hurt, my body hurt, and I was vomiting. But now they have become familiar to me since I come here. The pain is gone, and I don't vomit anymore.
 A.V: Do you see strange things too?
 K: No, I just hear.
 A.V: When did you first come here?
 K: Three years ago. When I couldn't take it anymore and wanted to kill myself. I went





Image 9. Khanci. Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.

to all the hospitals. They gave me pills, but nothing happened!

A.V: What kind of pills?

K: For pain. For my stomach to stop vomiting. And...

A.V: And... what other pills did they give you?

K: Yes, I got three kinds of pills from... hospital [psychiatric hospital]. So, I could sleep and not hear voices. But nothing happened. I slept all day, but when I woke up, I heard the voices again. I was going to kill myself!

A.V: How many years have you lived here?

K: I said, three years. Since then, I have been coming constantly, getting treatment and that's how I became *Jhankri* [shaman].

A.V: Have you been initiated?

K: Yes, this week is the last part and then I can do treatments. Easier ones at first and then, slowly, more difficult ones. After I started, all the symptoms reduced, became bearable and slowly disappeared after a while. After a few months of coming here.

[In the meantime, Khanci asks Guru if he can call his guardian spirit.]

K: Do you have any other questions?

A.V: Yes!

K: Well, these days I want to call on *mero deva* [my god]. I also asked the Guru if he would allow me, and he said yes. He said after I am done with you, I am free to call him. But it can't be over with you, you've been asking me for months! [She laughs]


A.V: You said that after you came here you started getting familiar with the voices. How did that happen?

[Ghanes, the administrator of the association, approaches us.]

G: You know Vali *dhai* [brother], the first experience when you experience these things is very, very scary. It was the same with me.

K: Yes, it was. I was very scared, and I didn't know what to do, who to talk to. I didn't even believe in *Jhankri*. I went to the city as a child and went to school in English. At first, I was scared to death, but after guru investigated me and identified the spirits in me (that possessed me), slowly, slowly I started to get acquainted with them. Now they don't derail me anymore. On the contrary, I find them amusing. [She laughs]





G: That happened to me too, but in a different way. I used to see all these things, they would appear to me in my sleep, and I would be terrified. For months I didn't sleep and didn't tell anyone. Then I went to my grandparents' village in Salambu for Dashain [Hindu religious festival]. You know I'm Newar, more Hindu, we don't believe in such things, but there are many *tamangi* there in the village and that's how I first heard of *Jhankri* or *Bombo* as they call it. After that, everything became familiar.

K: Yes, that's right, after that they became familiar. You feel like a presence in your body, foreign, walking under your skin. I was very

scared. Like one of those red ants that stings you hard!

A.V: Khanci do you have children, husband?

K: No, I don't have children. My husband went to Dubai a few years ago. With his second wife. Now I am single.

A.V: Isn't it hard for you?

K: No! I got used to it. It used to be very hard for me, when I heard voices, and I was very scared. I was in a very bad state. *Duka, duka* ("suffering, suffering," in Nepali). Now I don't feel it's difficult anymore. Here we are all the same.

2. Lopsan

Lopsan, ethnic Tamang boy, comes from a family originally from a village in Kavrepalanchok, Kathmandu. He is 19 years old and was previously a student.



A.V: How old are you?

L.T: Nineteen!

A.V: Do you go to school, are you a student?

L.T: No, I interrupted.

A.V: Why, when?

L.T: Yes, because I was sick. I was, for a year.

A.V: How it started, can you tell us a bit about that?

L.T: Yes, I was in hospital. They told me I had depression.

A.V: Who told you?

L.T: Well, some foreign and Nepalese doctors. I went to Mhaniphool Hospital, near the airport.

A.V: You went to a psychiatric hospital?

L.T: Yes, because I had been to a lot of doctors before, but I couldn't find any help. Then, they took me to a psychiatric hospital, where they told me I had depression.

A.V: Do you take pills?

L.T: Yes, three kinds. I use them every day, they help me sleep easier, because I couldn't sleep at night, and I was seeing terrible things.

A.V: What were you seeing?



L.T: I was seeing dead people and things.

A.V: So, you have a diagnosis.

L.T: Yes, depression. I started to learn a lot, because my family is poor, they are farmers from the village who came to the city because they have nothing to do in the village. And that's how the depression started.

A.V: Do you feel better now since you came here?

L.T: I've been coming for two months, I feel better. In the beginning, I couldn't talk face to face like now. I was always tired, I didn't eat, I was always thinking about death. I was very afraid. I fainted a few times and my mother took me to the hospital. Then I stayed in the hospital [psychiatric hospital] for thirteen days and then they sent me home, because there are so many people and there are no places for everybody. I took pills that helped me sleep. That's all! Then my mother saw that I wasn't feeling well and brought me here. My grandfather who used to live in the village and died a long time ago, was *Jhankri*.



3. Khrisna

Khrisna, 25 years old, is an ethnic Hindu from a wealthy family in Kathmandu, belonging to the Hindu Kshatriya Brahmin (*Bahun*, in Nepali) caste, the highest caste according to the Hindu caste system.

K: Someone told me that I had spirits in my body, and I came here.

A.V: But have you been to the hospital before?

K: I have been to the hospital, but I couldn't find any help for my illness. I was hospitalized for almost a month, but I didn't get better and continued to have symptoms. I followed the treatments and went to other hospitals. A Tamang friend brought me here, I was desperate, but I knew from the first moment that I was in the right place.

A.V: Aren't you Tamang?

K: No, I am *Kshatriya*. Brahman!

A.V: What did your parents say when you came here?

K: At first there was a big scandal, they forbade me to come here because we don't believe in spirits and we are not allowed to enter their houses, the Tamang houses. 'You know we are *Bahun* [Brahmins], from the highest caste,' my mother always reminded me. But I knew this was my place and I kept coming without telling them where I was going. I told them I was going to the temple, I wasn't lying, as you can see, this is a Hindu temple. [Laughs]. From the first day I came

here until today it has been three years. All this time I have been practicing. Now I can help others. Easier cases in the beginning. With family or friends.

A.V: Can you tell me exactly what you experienced before you came here, when you had to go to the hospital? Did you hear voices, did you see anything unusual? How do you know they were spirits?

K: You know, it's different from person to person, some people hear voices or see strange things. Some people get headaches, vomiting, body aches, hand aches. I used to see horrible things, but especially at night. When I got here and started practicing, I started to get used to it and became familiar with these images. I used to see horrible things in my dreams too. At first, I was scared, but then I understood that spirits come and teach us things in dreams, give us strength and knowledge to use. When I came here, I found people like me, and we were able to talk about our experiences for the first time. When you don't see people like you, you are scared, but when you meet people like you, you share emotions and experiences and then everything becomes normal.

Image 11. Tamang Kitchen. Photo credit: Vasile Albinet.





Initiation ritual and synaptic reconfiguration: Impact on memory, brain, and social resilience

The initiation period corresponds to transition, a period of testing, learning, and growing (Van Gennep 1965; Turner 1969) and combines sensory-motor and cognitive processes that incorporate both imagistic and doctrinal forms of religiosity (Whitehouse 2004). The Tamang model suggests that these two modes of religiosity are not separated, but form a phenomenal unity that refers to two types of embodiments of the self – the subject and object of the religious ritual practice. Tamang ritual encompasses various devotional practices such as mantra repetition, fasts, diets, purification rituals, and dances. Finally, the ritual of possession, where the body is offered to the gods, proves to be the most important of all (Prandi 2000; Lewis 1971; Motta 2005; Voeks 1997). It should also be noted that the concept of ritual is not strictly scientific but involves a variety of distinct cognitive mechanisms that combine in various interactions called “rituals” (Boyer and Liénard 2020). Tamang ritual consolidates information through specific neural systems and triggers, including the hippocampus for episodic memory consolidation (Wright 2020). The hippocampus, a major component of the human brain, is connected by the cerebral cortex area and plays a crucial role in the formation of the autobiographical and episodic memory, spatial awareness, and functional connectivity (Zhu *et al.* 2019). Specific memories are revisited and linked to the content of the ritual, particularly when trance (ASC) is involved. These ritual practices elicit intense emotions, leading to the formation of vivid episodic “flashbulb memories” (Cahill and McGaugh 1995; Van Stegeren *et al.* 1998; Brown and Kulik 1977; Conway 1990; Winograd and Neisser 1992). These memories are closely intertwined with autobiographical and episodic memory. Research demonstrates that events that evoke strong emotions are more likely to be remembered and have a significant impact on

memory formation and retention (Cahill and McGaugh 1995; Van Stegeren *et al.* 1998).

Memories associated with intense emotions, termed “flashbulb memory” (Brown and Kulik 1977; Conway 1990; Winograd and Neisser 1992), are stored in a distinct way. When these memories are retrieved and recalled, they tend to be detailed, vivid, and impactful. Possession or trance experiences themselves can be considered flashbulb memories due to the heightened arousal they induce. The brain mechanisms involved in “flashbulb memory” differ from those of non-emotional events (Budson *et al.* 2004; Candel *et al.* 2003; Davidson and Glisky 2002). Studies indicate that emotional arousal triggers neurohormonal changes that impact the amygdala (Dolcos *et al.* 2005). Therefore, the amygdala plays a role in encoding and retaining memories of significant events and in facilitating plasticity through associative learning, therefore it is not limited to fear conditioning alone (LeDoux 2007).

Doctrinal and imagistic rituals have different effects on memory and neurobiology. Repetitive experiences do not have a high degree of arousal and are stored in procedural and semantic memory, while emotionally-charged experiences, such as important individual events, are marked in autobiographical and episodic memory through hippocampal involvement (Zhu *et al.* 2019). Imagery rituals, such as Tamang shamanism, contribute to the reinforcement of agency and the reintegration of the self into social structures, giving them enduring importance in human cultures. Episodic memory involves the recall of specific moments from the personal past, including details such as time, place, emotions, and sensory experiences. Autobiographical memory, on the other hand, encompasses a wider range of personal memories, including both episodic memories and a general understanding of one’s own identity and life histories. These types of memory are central to the formation of a person’s identity and self-awareness (Conway 1990; 2005; Conway, Singer and Tagini 2004). The hippocampus plays a central role in these processes and mediates sensory processes (Zhu



et al. 2019). The hippocampus can reactivate the original neural network pattern that stores the original experience, allowing re-experiencing of events during rituals (Tulving 2001; Gardiner 2001; Vandekerckhove and Panksepp 2009). Synapse reconfiguration occurs through repeated re-experiencing of the original sequential images – a form of “mental time travel” (Tulving 2001; Suddendorf and Corballis 1997). The images and affect involved in simulations evoke memories and trigger strong cues that induce the sense that the scene really happened, even if this is not true but, for example, one repeatedly imagines they have experienced that scene (Ross, Buehler and Karr 1998; Johnson *et al.* 1981). Thus, ritual practices reconfigure discursive and reflexive cognitive aspects of the self, as well as sensory-motor experiential aspects (Gardiner 2001; Vandekerckhove and Panksepp 2009). During rituals, individuals are guided to surrender to possession, and being guided by gurus and assistants, they express everything they feel during trance (Tulving 2001; Suddendorf and Corballis 1997). The hippocampus receives information and can reactivate memories, allowing re-experiencing events during rituals (Tulving 2001; Gardiner 2001; Vandekerckhove and Panksepp 2009). Synapse reconfiguration occurs by re-experiencing the original sequential images – in a “mental time travel” (Tulving 2001; Suddendorf and Corballis 1997). Through ritual practice, cognitive, reflexive, and sensorimotor aspects of the self are reconfigured (Gardiner 2001; Suddendorf and Corballis 1997). During ritual practices, individuals are taught and guided by gurus and assistants to let their bodies go free, to offer themselves to the god, to the spirit and to express freely whatever they feel during the trance. This functions as a form of amnesia in which the possessed person is subordinated to the actions and intentionality of superhuman agents. In this way, the experience is attributed to and shared with supernatural agents associated with repressed fragments of the self. Trances allow individuals to experience fragmentation and discontinuity of the self and consciousness, which affects sensory-motor

and cognitive functions, including memory, personality, and identity (Lewis 1971; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008). These dissociations, which are considered pathological in Western psychiatry, can be understood as disrupted alternatives to the normal integration of cognitive functions related to awareness (Spiegel and Cardena 1991). These disturbances often occur when individuals deviate from their ordinary sense of self-awareness, either to enhance their social interactions or to cope with overwhelming pressures, such as in the case of ritualized behaviors (Boyer and Lienard 2006). In some instances, individuals may employ these disassociations for both purposes (Seligman and Kirmayer 2008).

Possession, due to the specific way human cognition organizes information, orders discontinuities and fragmentations through ritualization and exposes the subject to “cultural invitations.” These cultural invitations further articulate a coherent model through the social role of the shaman. In the process of embodying the shaman’s social role, various fragments of the self represented by spirits and god are integrated and, in the end, become the shaman’s guardian spirits. These spirits become an integral part of the shaman’s everyday life by entering the physical space of his material world and decisively influencing his entire life.

Through cultural technologies, the self is deconstructed and reconfigured. Tamang initiation ritual models an “ideal” self (McNamara 2011; Van Gennep 1965; Turner 1969; Bloch 1991). In Tamang shamanism, extensive practice and intense experiences are crucial to initiation. For example, long periods of seclusion and meditation in liminal spaces, induction of trance for hours, dances and mantras repeated until exhaustion, and other forms of exposure to extreme conditions are the norm. In essence, initiation into Tamang shamanism can be resembled as “exposure therapy,” a concept explored by neuropsychologist LeDoux (2002) in the context of neuroplastic reconfiguration in conditions such as generalised anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Through



intense practices, the reconfiguration and construction of new autobiographical memory networks in the synapses changes the initiate's perception of their own experience and patterns of thought, emotions, and senses. These intense experiences recompose memories that are similar to those previously experienced by the initiate, which amplifies their emotional intensity without having the same negative connotation as before. As a result, a reconfiguration of the self occurs and the biochemical changes that take place in neural networks contribute to the reconfiguration of the social brain (LeDoux 2002; Damasio 2010). Thus, these intense experiences play a crucial role in building a stable self. Wafer (1991) argues that initiates are "possessed" by a "protoself" – an initial, primary self. By modelling a preconfigured role, the Tamang initiate identifies and embodies aspects of the tutelary spirit, contextualising the impersonated psychological and emotional aspects of the self (Prandi 2000; Motta 2005; Seligman 2010). During the final stages, practitioners are involved in secret rituals in which they receive a personal mantra from the guru shaman. Guru transmits this mantra to the newly initiated disciple in solitude, usually in a cave or sacred place known as *gufa* in Nepali. The mantra serves as a powerful trance-inducing, altered state of consciousness (ASC) tool, that allows the shaman to access, process, and navigate the states of possession. Mantra is intricately connected to cultural structures, local cosmogony, mythologies, mental models, and theories of mind. These connections form a complex tapestry that weaves together diverse explanations from a multi-explanatory universe. This universe plays a vital role in shaping the shaman's identity and serves as the embodiment of their own mythology, often expressed in the form of a "song." It is the song of his mythology.



Transformation and healing: In search of the self

In the final stage of the Tamang initiation ritual, there are two parts corresponding to the concept of reintegration as described by Van Gennep (1965) and Turner (1969). The first part is a highly emotional and almost paroxysmal climax. During this phase, initiates engage in drumming and dancing to shamanic rhythms, entering a state of possession that lasts for an intense period of seven days.

In this post-liminal stage, the participant identifies herself both with the tutelary spirit and the "ideal self" of the Tamang cultural model, that of the specialist of the sacred, the shaman. The process of identification is a journey into unconscious zones where fragments of misunderstood and contradictory stories reside. The fragmented sense of identity has undergone a transformation, resulting in a restructuring and regrouping of its elements with the help of mythology and deities. This process is facilitated by the embodiment of the tutelary spirit, which plays a vital role in guiding and shaping this reconfiguration. As a result, the newly formed self is expressed and emphasized repeatedly to the point of exhaustion, which highlights the initiate's ability to manage the tutelary spirit using cognitive-discursive and physiological-semantic tools. Along this journey, fragments of the self can access self-awareness in specific circumstances, supported by pre-determined triggers derived from the dominant Tamang cultural model.

The post-liminal stage is a synthesis stage of the whole initiation process, where initiates put into practice and verify the elements of the cultural model. It is the graduation exam in which those who have gone through the entire ritual demonstrate that they can master the tutelary spirit through the techniques and cultural tools of the spirit possession ritual. This is demonstrated by accessing and controlling possession over long periods of time.

In the final stage, the individual demonstrates that they can use cultural tools to shape and

organize the disparate elements of the narrative. As a result, the entire composition acquires a unified sense of dramatic aesthetic value, leading to a profound encounter of catharsis. This process can be likened to the climactic stage of a play, in which a therapeutic effect is achieved by releasing repressed experiences and establishing order. At this stage, the initiate fully embraces the role of shaman by embodying and identifying herself with the tutelary spirit. The initiate undergoes a process of transformation through the integration of the guardian spirit, resulting in a reconfigured identity. This deep connection only leads to a unique vocation for the initiate, that of shaman, and brings valuable benefits to the reconfigured self through the incorporation of the guardian spirit.

The Tamang cultural model plays a vital role as it enables the individual to reconfigure their fragmented self and develop a personal mythology that reconnects him/her to his/her social and cultural context. Social interaction further enhances this process as the Tamang shaman's self is effectively managed through dynamic engagement with the local community. This interactive experience not only shapes the collective memories of the group and contributes to the formation of a shared understanding (Lambert *et al.* 2009, 194-218), but also influences the formation of individual memories, especially autobiographical and episodic memories that contribute to a stable sense of self (Conway 2005; LeDoux 2002; Conway, Singer and Tagini 2004; Boyer and Wertsch 2009; Berntsen and Bohn 2009). The initiation process is characterized by cultural practices and intense emotional experiences and plays a crucial role in establishing "mnemonic communities" and collective memories (Wertsch 2012, 130; Lambert *et al.* 2009). The initiators themselves contribute to the creation of a "schematic narrative template" (Wertsch 2012, 130) and "life script" (Berntsen and Rubin 2004) that facilitate an understanding of the cognitive and emotional factors underlying the construction of both collective and individual memories.



From the divided self to the sacred self

In the second part of the last stage of the Tamang initiation ritual, and in the last stage of the reintegration stage (Van Gennep 1965; Turner 1969), there is a significant event in which the tutelary, the guardian spirit is transferred to the new shaman's home. This transfer symbolizes the completion of the initiation process and the establishment of the shaman's connection to the spiritual realm in his own residence.

This transfer plays a crucial role in strengthening the individual's sense of autonomy, which refers to their ability to act and make decisions. The tutelary spirit serves as the central figure of identification, reinforcing the individual's sense of agency (SoA), as described by Synofzik and colleagues (2013). The concept of agency is closely related to autobiographical memory where emotional experiences are encoded and stored (Cahill and McGaugh 1995; Van Stegeren *et al.* 1998). During the ritual, participants engage in both predictive and postdictive processes, which allows them to anticipate and attribute meaning to their actions and the outcomes they experience. As outlined earlier in this paper, autobiographical memory plays a role in shaping and reinforcing identity and agenda. The transference of the guardian spirit symbolizes the unification of the fragmented self and the development of a higher consciousness (Wafer 1991). It signifies the transformation and consolidation of the new self that occurs during the initiation process.

In a festive setting, the "graduate" receives the shaman's equipment. In a remarkable and emotionally charged performance, the initiate is equipped for the first time with all the paraphernalia of a Tamang shaman. Under the guidance of the guru and with the help of elders and other shamans, the initiate embarks on a trance-like journey from the temple to his residence. This transfer is a remarkable episode because it involves witnessing a large group of people, sometimes up to a hundred, dancing in a trance through the streets of Kathmandu.



The procession itself creates a vibrant and memorable spectacle, capturing the attention of spectators and bystanders. However, this spectacle is not incidental, but just an integral part of the final ritual. The guardian spirit undertaken by the initiate decked out in the shaman's gear is transferred from the shrine in the temple to the initiate's home shrine. This transfer symbolises the initiate's affiliation to the group – the brotherhood of shamans. It also signals the presence of a new scholar in the town or area, which marks the importance of his or her role in the community.

The trance aligns with the identification and transference of the self that has been strengthened and reconfigured during initiation. The cultural tools used in the ritual unify the symbolic fragments of the old self and focus attention on this process of transformation. Initiation ritual reconfigures the original representations of the self, symbolically altering it and imbuing it with new meanings. The post-liminal stage of the ritual only concludes the process and grants the initiate the right to practice freely within the community.

The transfer of the guardian spirit to the personal shrine symbolises the individual's belonging to the group and serves as a social recognition within the community. This exchange is accompanied by ceremonial instruments, such as specific songs and dances and the rhythmic sound of numerous drums. The shaman's true recognition comes from social interactions, where he or she can demonstrate their abilities to serve the community, reinforce their psychosocial role, and gain recognition.

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Conclusion

The Tamang cultural model, psychiatry, and Western psychotherapy have the same goal: to mobilise the patient's resources to promote physical and mental health. Rituals, medication, and psychotherapy transform negative narratives into psychological terms,

bringing self-awareness. While psychotherapy focuses on mental processes and psychiatry on biochemistry, the Tamang model addresses both discursive and sensory components of the self. It does not attempt to translate the "personal narrative" into an ideological one but contributes to the cultural forging of a social role embedded in the construction of the Tamang self as socially connected with others. After initiation, the individual does not return to his or her original state, but takes on the role of the shaman – a master of spirits. This transformation is equivalent with a transformation from prey to hunter. It drives changes in behaviour and in social terms. Social and individual expectations complement each other, providing an ecological support for the construction of the new self.

The model is not limited to the therapist and their patient, but rather facilitates identity change at the individual and at social/community level through mechanisms of social recognition and rewarding. In cultural and metaphysical terms, the individual's identity becomes closer to that of a hero who has gone through the stages of an initiation. Initiates embody the culturally accepted structures of their new role and reinterpret their experience as a vocation with multiple psycho-social and cultural values. The paradigm shift from victim to hero is supported by their own suffering. The model provides the tools to reconfigure personal drama according to the existing mythology and to justify and socially accept a new identity, that of the shaman.



NOTES

1. <https://mofa.gov.np/nepal-profile-updated>, accessed on 4 August 2023.
2. In this context, *guru* is the superhuman agent.
3. In Hinduism and Tamang Buddhism, *Jiva-atma* is the embodied soul, the life force of a living entity.

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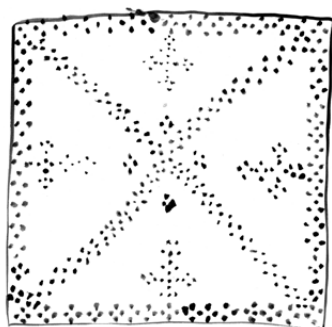
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APPENDIX

Video 1. Collective trance. Memory and cohesion: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1Mwn4KCnc0&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 2. Building the nation through ritual cohesion (collective trance): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAgB_daXQqg&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 3. Collective trance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=217HIEFTOhg&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 4. Impersonating Kali: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM9KqS0Sfc&t=133s&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 5. Walking on fire. Episodic memory, the primary matter of the self: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJa0ZMmQ9T8&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 6. Ritual and memory. Rewiring the synapses.

Collective trance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=217HIEFTOhg&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 7. Exposure therapy in Tamang initiation ritual. Meditating in the icy high-altitude water: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Le4TKoz7wyA&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 8. Planting rice, planting gods and spirits: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OTLsmm0_Sc&ab_channel=NepalJhakriSangh

Video 9. „Who's calling these drums?!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9exPqxsuQYg>.

Video 10. Experiential ethnography: <https://youtube.com/8CfbDMLwLdc>.

For more information visit the channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@nepaljhakrisangh1642/videos>