

DOI <https://doi.org/10.33314/jnhrc.1785>

Spiritual Possession and the Role of Traditional Healers in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual possession is a relatively common phenomenon, and occurs in many cultures around the world. It is a frequent claim in Nepal that illness is caused by spiritual possession, and ill people often seek out traditional healers for treatment.

Traditional healers are often not medically trained, and this could have an adverse effect on a person's health as serious illnesses may not be managed appropriately. However, there is perhaps a role that traditional healers can play in the management of patients.

Keywords: Culture; Nepal; spirit possession; traditional medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual possession has been described in different religions, and reports of possession have been documented all over the world. There are broadly two types of possession- positive and negative. Positive spiritual possession is thought to be a spirit entering a person's body and causing beneficial change in that person's life.¹ An example could be the different *Baba* and *Mata* found throughout Nepal, men and women who claim that spirits of Hindu Gods and Goddesses reside within them. Reincarnation is sometimes considered a form of spirit possession.²

Possession can also be negative. Spirits are thought to cause disease as a punishment for misdeeds in a person's life, or in previous lives.³

OBSERVATIONS

Many believe spirit possession can lead to illness. Elderly widowed, childless and lower caste women are sometimes accused of being witches (*boksiharu*), and are thought to cause illness via controlling spirits. This has led to violence against women in some cases.³

People who believe in possession often seek traditional healers, or shamans (*dhami-jhankri*) to cure illnesses. Shamans dress in specific attire, and perform rituals involving chanting, drumming, singing and shouting. Although their speech during these rituals may seem unintelligible, many have been trained extensively by other healers, and there is meaning to their words.⁴

Shamans are found throughout Nepal.²

The term *dhami-jhankri* is often used for traditional healers, however it should be noted that although they share similarities, *dhami* and *jhankri* are different. Both focus on spirit possession, however a *jhankri* is a shaman, whereas *dhami* are oracles or mediums.⁴

I had the opportunity to observe traditional healers across Nepal. The healers had different approaches when seeing patients. To protect confidentiality I have anonymised certain details.

The *jhankri* in Kathmandu had a permanent "office", where he saw patients continuously, throughout the day. He explained that he sees patients of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. He would chant and use a *dhyāngro* (drum) during rituals.

In Rupandehi, I observed a *mata*. She had set times for seeing patients, and people would travel from neighbouring districts to see her. Treatments for her patients included prayers and chanting, blowing into their hair, marking their foreheads with ash, and exorcisms. Some patients stated that just by seeing her, their pain disappeared.

The *mata* in Saptari would sit near to a well-known temple. She would observe people entering the temple and call out to those she suspected had been possessed. Some would then speak to her for treatment, which involved reciting repeated mantras.

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The healers expected money or a gift prior to treating patients. All of the healers I observed advised patients to seek professional medical attention if symptoms continued, however this may not be the case with other healers.

DISCUSSION

There are numerous reasons for belief in spiritual possession. Health education and services are often inaccessible, especially for people in rural Nepal.⁵

Women are more likely to experience spiritual possession than men.³ It has been theorised that possession may be a coping strategy for distress created by gender inequality, oppression and gender-based violence. Women who claimed spiritual possession were more likely to have symptoms of other mental health problems.³ Traditional healers can provide psychological support to patients.⁶

Many Nepali people told me that they have been cured by shamans. There have been instances of indigenous healers seeming to cure patients in other parts of the world. Research has found that people often seek healers to treat self-limiting or chronic diseases. This could explain why patients believed they were cured. This may also be an example of the placebo effect.⁶

Health professionals may be insensitive to the views of patients regarding traditional healers. Healers can play an important role in patient welfare. Closer links between traditional healers and health professionals could be beneficial.⁷

Training traditional healers in basics of first aid and medicine has proven to be effective.⁵ This could ensure patients seeing traditional healers receive appropriate care. An additional benefit of this could be an ease on the strained health services in parts of Nepal. Healers trained in first aid are more likely to refer appropriately to a professional setting.^{5,8} However there is a worry that training healers in modern medicine could undermine their traditional practice.⁹

Some people in Nepal are distrustful of Western medicine and prefer traditional healing.¹⁰ Some Nepali people turn to *jhankri* as they are often cheaper and more accessible than doctors. They are indigenous to an area and share beliefs with local people. Many believe that doctors treat symptoms whereas *jhankri* provide cures.⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional healers can have the positive psychological impact on the patients. The positive outcome may be due placebo effect, or be part of a psychosomatic

response. Healers frequently have undergone thorough training in traditional healing, and are often easily accessible and trusted by patients. It is important that patients are encouraged to seek professional medical attention when necessary. Solely relying on traditional healers can be dangerous if serious conditions aren't managed appropriately.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the traditional healers and patients who spoke with me, providing their knowledge and experiences.

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