

## **Meaning, Intention, and Responsibility in Rai Divinatory Discourse**

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In linguistic theories of what constitutes meaning in communication, or the purpose of a “speech act,” the notion of intention has been a crucial ingredient. If there were no intentions, so the general argument in the field of linguistic pragmatics goes, one could not distinguish meaningless words, like babbling, from meaningful speech. This position has been expressed in formal terms by the language philosopher H. Paul Grice: “‘A meant something by x’ is (roughly) equivalent to ‘A *intended* the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of a recognition of this intention’” (Grice 1973:46, also Du Bois 1993, emphasis mine).

According to speech act theory, as developed in ordinary language philosophy by J. L. Austin and later expanded by John Searle, speech acts are performances that can have an intended effect on other persons, as in illocutionary acts like ordering, threatening, or demanding.<sup>1</sup> In these cases an appellative act solicits the addressee to respond in some way. But speech acts can also be performances that are merely expressive of certain intentions, as in sentences that use verbal expressions of fearing, wishing, or hoping (Searle 1983). Intentionality is, in any case, a basic aspect of all linguistic communication and interaction. In other words, speakers are persons who have an intention to convey something to other persons; they want to “affect” the other person in some way, and the speaker as an individual agent is therefore taken to be responsible for these intentional acts and their consequences.

This view of language in early speech act theory has been criticized by linguistic anthropologists as culture-bound, because in other cultural contexts, where other notions of personhood are prevalent, the situation may be quite different.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the Ilongot studied by Michelle Rosaldo, for example, it is not so much propositions by individual speakers, but directive speech acts in complex social settings that are the paradigmatic case in linguistic communication. As summarized by Rosaldo, speech act theorists “think of ‘doing things with words’ as the achievement of autonomous selves, whose deeds are not significantly constrained by the relationships and expectations that define their local world. In the end, I claim, the theory

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<sup>1</sup>In his original model John L. Austin distinguishes “locutionary” speech acts, “illocutionary” speech acts, and “perlocutionary” speech acts. Only the first can be assigned truth values, while the other two are primarily defined by their performative character: illocutionary speech acts have a specific conventional force, and perlocutionary speech acts bring about a certain effect (Austin 1975). It was in John Searle’s reformulation of the theory (Searle 1969) that more emphasis was put on the actors’ intentions.

<sup>2</sup>The debate is well summed up in Alessandro Duranti’s introduction to linguistic anthropology (Duranti 1997:ch. 7), where he discusses at length the critique voiced by Michelle Rosaldo referred to here as well.

fails because it does not comprehend the sociality of individuals who use its ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ to act” (Rosaldo 1982:204). This has consequences for the notion of a speaker’s intention, as the “force” of a speech act is not located in the individual actor alone.

In fact, more recent studies in linguistic anthropology have stressed the social embeddedness of meaning and intention in social interaction.<sup>3</sup> One important issue that emerged is the notion of responsibility. Who is the speaker as the source of the statement? The person who intends to convey something to others through words is also the person who makes certain claims and takes responsibility for the consequences of what is being said. Thus speech is a complex social act, often highly ritualized, in which roles and positions are negotiated. As Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine point out in the introduction to their volume *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse* (1993), the focus on responsibility and the related notion of evidence (that is, claims to knowledge) in speech is in line with more dialogical approaches, which bring out the interactive and processual quality of the productions of meaning.

One case in point in which the ordinary intentionality of the speaker is absent is in the context of divination, that is, divinatory speech or prophecy (Leavitt 1997). As John Du Bois stresses, non-intentionality is especially pronounced in so-called “mechanical divination,” which can be distinguished from “trance divination” (that is, oracular divination), but in both cases a suppression of intention, and thus “intentionless meaning” is involved (Du Bois 1993:53, 70 n. 8). But if it is not the speaker who has intentions, this does not mean that intentions are not involved at all. They can be attributed to a special kind of person, for example, a divinity.

The following study of a shamanic divination in eastern Nepal deals with a form of speech in which the traditional healer presents a diagnosis of the afflictions of a household: he utters in a distinctive linguistic style words that are desperately awaited by the audience as words of truth and regarded as authoritative and binding. Yet, if we ask who is this authoritative speaker, the answer turns out to be complex: we are dealing with divine speech, and several deities are involved as the sources of knowledge. Moreover, the audience also takes a crucial part in the production of meaning.

In such a situation the traditional concept of basic speech act roles is not sufficient. Since Austin and Searle, other philosophers of language have elaborated the model of speech act participants. Inspired by Ervin Goffman’s work, Stephen Levinson (1988) distinguishes, for example, the roles of “spokesman” (who has no intentions of his own but contributes to form), “relayer” (who simply conveys a message)—or “ghostee” (a ghosted speaker who may have motives but is not responsible for the wording of the message). As Levinson (1988:222) concludes, it is necessary to go beyond the “bias toward dyadic interaction” involving only Speaker and Hearer, as “many of the world’s social settings do not afford the privacy that makes the dyad triumph in the Western world.”

In our case of a possessed shaman, the person who is the source (or author) of the message is a deity, but the actual speaker, in the sense of the utterer, is the shaman. Thus the question of intention and responsibility appears in a different light: whereas the visible agent is only a vehicle, it is a non-visible agency, a divine person, who is the locus of truth and authority.

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<sup>3</sup>For example Marina Sbisá writes: “The speaker’s intentions are often held to determine which speech act is performed, and the role of the hearer is reduced to getting these intentions right. I believe this is a limitation of the theory, since it leaves no room for collaborative achievements or negotiations about what is done” (Sbisá 2001:5).

Yet, as will become clear in the following essay, the meaning of the utterances is the result of more than one actor's intention.

### Shamanic Divination: *Bakhyāune*

The following performance took place in the Mewahang Rai village of Bala (Sankhuwa Sabha District, Nepal). The Mewahang Rai are one of more than two dozen of Rai groups, speak a Tibeto-Burman language belonging to the Kiranti family, and still practice their ancestral religion (Gaenszle 2000). The session was recorded on video in April of 1988 in collaboration with two Swiss anthropologists and filmmakers and included in the edited documentary "Dewa and Cinta."<sup>4</sup> The performing shaman and center of activities was a Kulunge from the neighboring village of Dankhila, named Phidisai (a nickname based on his clan name), who was frequently called to Balali households as a highly respected healer. Though there were two Mewahang shamans in Bala at the time, it was quite common to invite Kulunge shamans, who are particularly numerous and regarded as knowledgeable in the area.

The ritual tradition of these two Rai subgroups is called *muddum* in Mewahang and *ridum* in Kulung language, and though the Rais' religious cultures have strong commonalities, the specific ritual practices are almost as distinct as their languages, which are mutually unintelligible.<sup>5</sup> However, whereas this applies mainly to the rituals of the "tribal priests," called *ngopa* in Mewahang, and *nagire* in Kulung, the traditions of the second major category of ritual specialists, the "shaman," have much more in common.<sup>6</sup> This figure, who is in Nepali referred to as *jhākri* (or *dhāmi*), is mainly in charge of dealing with dangerous spirits, especially the spirits of inauspicious death, and other "outside," non-ancestral divinities. In Mewahang he is called *makpa* (< *mang* "spirit"), and in Kulung language *mop* (a cognate term). As has already been observed by Nicholas J. Allen in an article on the medical practices of Rai healers (1976), the "shaman" can be seen as a kind of mediator with the larger non-tribal world: he deals with spirits and deities who derive from other ethnic groups and castes and are not part of the ancestral heritage. Therefore, he also uses the *lingua franca* in the nation-state of Nepal, the Nepali language, in addressing Nepali divinities as well as in other crucial passages—like the divinatory discourse considered below. The shaman is a kind of cosmopolitan, and therefore he need not be of the same group as his clients.

The main activity of a shaman, the *jhākri*,<sup>7</sup> is to hold a nightly seance, called *cintā*, which typically starts at dusk and continues all through the night till dawn. This practice has basic

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<sup>4</sup>Dewa and Cinta. Two Rituals practiced by the Rai of the Sankhuwa Valley in East Nepal. Videofilm by Martin Gaenszle, Albin Bieri, and Majanek Garlinski (1990). Zürich: Uni-tv.

<sup>5</sup>For ethnographies on the Kulunge Rai see McDougal 1979 and Schlemmer 2004.

<sup>6</sup>The terminological distinction between "tribal priest" and "shaman" is not unproblematic, as also the "tribal priest" can get possessed and also goes on ritual journeys. However, there are good reasons to employ this terminology, which has been suggested by Nicholas J. Allen (1976), in order to express the fundamental duality.

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed account of the position of the shaman within the ritual system among the Mewahang is given in Gaenszle 2002:63ff.

similarities all over Nepal, and as the figure of the *jhākri* is found not only from the west to the east of the country, but also among virtually all castes (from blacksmith Kami as well as Bahuns, that is, Brahmans), the tradition has been described as a pan-Nepalese phenomenon and called *jhakrism* (see Macdonald 1976). A crucial climax of the *cintā* session, curiously awaited by the audience, is the diagnosis, called *bakhyāune*, which basically means a report or narration about something (< *bakhānnu*, vb. tr. and intr. To describe, relate. < Skt. *vyākhyāna*, s. Turner 1980:413). In other words, the divination is an account of the state of the household, it describes the “real” situation of fortune and disaster, the health and illnesses of its members, the conflicts and tensions, the imminent threats and possibilities of hope.

But before he reaches this point of contact with the divinities, the shaman first has to prepare the proper setting for the encounter. The seance begins, after the evening meal, with the construction of the altar (*thān*). The main assistant (called *dhole*), in this case the son of the shaman Phidisai, is responsible for erecting the altar on the veranda. The center of the altar is a construction of banana stalks, bamboo wands with frilled ends (*ghuñri*),<sup>8</sup> and feathers. In front of it are placed various horns and antlers, symbols of the hunt. In the middle is set an iron trident (*triśul*), the emblem of the god Śiva, who is looked upon as the guardian deity of shamans. The altar may be interpreted as a kind of “bridge” between the worlds.<sup>9</sup> It consists of objects that are pleasing to the attending deities and attract their interest. These objects further include: necklaces of *rudrākṣa* seeds; a necklace made of snake vertebrae; the pure light of oil lamps (*dīp batti*); metal vessels containing ritual water and purifying leaves, like mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*, *tite pāti*); incense (*dhūp*); magical stones, so-called meteorites, crystals (*śilā*); a conch shell (*śankha*) that can be sounded; a sickle (*kaciyā*) for use as a weapon against the spirits; the double-sided drum (*dhyāñro*).<sup>10</sup>

The shaman must protect himself in a variety of ways in preparation for his contact with the spirit beings. As if he were donning armor, he puts on the clothes of a shaman (*jāmā*), and on certain parts of the body fixes leaves from the tree of life, a kind of chestnut regarded as purificatory (*musure katuj*). To fortify himself he inhales the power inherent in ginger stems. He arms himself further with a belt of bells (*ghaṅṭi*).

First the altar is consecrated in order to secure the arrival of the attending deities. To drive off the rapacious spirits of the dead the shaman throws grains of rice into the air: this is given to them as their share of food. With a welcoming gesture Phidisai pays homage to the altar as the symbolic seat of the attending deities. In order to purify his utensils, the necklace of *rudrākṣa* seeds and the bamboo wands, which are used as magical instruments, he washes them in ritually pure water. The drum too must be separately consecrated and purified with leaves in order to develop its magic potency. An image of the symbolic trident is drawn with ashes, so that the drum might bear the power of Śiva within it.

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<sup>8</sup> *ghuñri* < *ghuñrimu*, “to curl up”; this is an important ritual instrument found throughout Kiranti culture.

<sup>9</sup> In an early article Höfer describes the altar among the Tamang as a “materialization of, and bridge to, the Other World” (Höfer 1974:171).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed description of the Tamang shaman’s altar construction, see Höfer 1994:59-64.

The rhythmic tone of the drum delights the attending deities; the shaman addresses them and asks them to come. Phidisai lays the necklace made out of *rudrākṣa* seeds on the altar for presentation to the attending deities. Smelling the necklace and counting the seeds is an important part of the divination. Depending on the smell and on whether an odd or even number of seeds has been counted within a randomly chosen section, the shaman can get answers to his questions and thus see into the future of the client's house.

For further protection against the evil spirits, he puts the necklaces on himself and on the drumming assistants. Since his assistants are likewise exposed to the dangers of the spirits of the dead, Phidisai blesses them with grains of rice. The metal food plate (*thāli*, “brass dish”) is another important instrument of shamans. It serves both as a magic shield to ward off evil forces and as a rhythmical instrument to flatter the deities. The grains of rice over which the shaman has spoken mantras turn into magic substances to protect the parts of the body especially prone to danger. The spirits of the dead are kept away from the altar and banned with the aid of feather-arrows.

Once the shaman, with the growing support of the tutelary deities attending him, has gained control over the rapacious spirits and has armed his own body, and those of his helpers, against harmful influences, he can begin to demonstrate the superhuman power he has now attained. For example, he is now able to touch an incandescent iron spoon with his tongue without sustaining injury. On the basis of dancing rice grains he can make divinations concerning the state of the patient: it is a good sign when they are quick to jump down, but a bad one if they are slow and hesitant. By looking through a hollow tiger bone he is able to spot witches and roving spirits of the dead. The dance of the shamans, like the rhythms of the drum, is meant to delight and flatter the attending deities. The deities are constantly conjured to appear and to give their support in the battle against hostile beings.

The tension increases noticeably, and Aitabare, the attending deity first called upon by Phidisai, slowly begins to take possession of him. Possession in this ambivalent phase, in which the shaman is partially himself but already partially the deity, is still uncontrolled. By means of the movements of Phidisai's body and utterances from his mouth, the deity signals that local impurities are still keeping him from fully appearing to the shaman. The assistant immediately begins to sprinkle purified milk. In addition, he cleanses the shaman's head with milk and later with mugwort leaves also. At the request of the deity in Phidisai's body, the helper gives him ritually pure water to drink.

All those present now wait in suspense for the moment when the attending deity takes full possession of the shaman and through his song reveals the current condition and the future of the household. Eventually, the shaman Phidisai is visibly being possessed by Aitabare, a local divinity, whose gender seems to be ambivalent. The name simply refers to the day—Sunday—of its preferred worship. The deity is sometimes regarded as a goddess, but the language of the deity itself indicates that this is not unambiguously the case. The deity, as we will see, uses a plural pronoun form, a *pluralis majestatis*, which includes a male and a female form of the divinity. Now, as the drumming stops and there is a sudden expectant silence, the shaman, apparently a changed personality, solemnly begins to speak, using a kind of formulaic and archaic Nepali

language, clearly distinct from both the spoken Nepali and the *muddum* Rai language (which is mostly used in the session):<sup>11</sup>

- 1        ma niśāni rājā hū, ma kalyāṇ jhkreni hū.<sup>12</sup>  
I am the King of Signs, the Auspicious Shamaness
- 2        o hāmi akās pātal ko haptawāri ghumikhelne jāne hū.  
O man, we travel weekly between heaven and earth,
- 3        Triśula Gaṅgā jala pāni khāi jānchū,  
I drank water from the Trisuli River and the Ganges
- 4        pyāsale marera gayo. [the assistant gives the shaman water to drink from a loṭā]  
I quenched my thirst.
- 5        hāmi niśāni rājā hū, niśāni rānī hū, kalyāṇ jhākreni hū.  
We are the King and Queen of Signs, the Auspicious Shamaness
- 6        yasai grihemā culā cauka bicmā,  
In this house, between hearth and courtyard
- 7        kailās thāna mandir thāna uṭhāi,<sup>13</sup>  
you erected a Kailash altar, a temple altar,
- 8        dewa dīpa kalasa sāñci rākhi,<sup>14</sup>  
you set up the deities' water container as a witness,
- 9        dān dakṣinā sāñci rākhi  
you set up the offerings as witness,
- 10       śīla-sabhā bhāegari: ke bhani ta ḍāki-bolāyo?  
with a noble gathering: Why have you called me?
- 11       hāmi niśāni rājā hū.  
We are the King of Signs.

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<sup>11</sup> The following text is not a complete divination but contains its major passages. Omissions are marked with [...]. The recording was not always clearly comprehensible, so there are a number of unclear expressions. I am grateful to Alaka Chudal for helping to revise the earlier version of the translation.

<sup>12</sup> *niśān*, “mark, sign, landmark; the flag carried in front of an army and worshipped daily by the officer who carries it [lw. H. niśān fr. Pers.]” (Turner 1980:351); *kalyāṇ*, “Happy, prosperous, well” (Turner 1980:79).

<sup>13</sup> *thān*, “place, shrine, temple.” The shamanic altar is like a temporary shrine for the divinities.

<sup>14</sup> *kalas*, “A copper water-pot used in the performance of religious rites” (Turner 1980:79).

The deity identifies itself as *niśāni rājā hū, niśāni rānī* (the King and Queen of Signs), which can be interpreted as a title that refers to the “reading” of the future and thus its oracular competence. Another epithet used by the shaman is *kalyāṇ jhākreṇi*, which underlines the female gender and the auspicious character of the shamaness. In the following line the deity alludes to the weekly rhythm of offerings to Aitabare. The name, in fact, invokes the name of a weekly market, which takes place every Sunday. When the divinity subsequently speaks about its thirst, alluding to the water of the Trisuli and Ganga rivers, the assistant immediately offers and pours water into the mouth of the deity from a metal container. The divinity then asks: Why have you asked me to come? It has been invited to the altar, which is seen like Mt. Kailash as the abode of Siva (*kailāś thāna mandir thāna*), while offerings are presented and regarded as “witnesses” (*sāñci rākhi*, lines 8-9).

Now it is the turn of the audience in the congregation (C), the respected men (*dasa pañca*, lit. “committee of ten arbitrators,” *bhalāḍmi*, “reputable men of good character,” Turner 1980: 471), to ask questions (usually no women are speaking). The standard address of all deities is *parameśwara*, a Sanskrit form referring to the highest of deities:

C: O parameśwara, esai grihemā kasari holā?  
O Supreme God, what will be the situation be in this house?

Then the divinity proceeds with its diagnosis, addressing the congregation as “*manuce*” (< N. *manuṣya*, “man,” “pop. manukkhe, s. Man, mortal, person,” Turner 1980:492). The superhuman agent thus speaks to the humans:

- 12     *purba uttar sāmu bāṭo kālo bhuta kheli ghumi āune rahecha,*  
          Coming from the north-east I see a black ghost playing around,
- 13     *e manuce, yesai grihemā bahuta garaha kholiāune holā,<sup>15</sup>*  
          O humans, the planets do not appear favorable over this house.
- 14     *yesai grihe ta,*  
          this house.
- 15     *he manuce, bahuta grihe ta ujjalai cha,*  
          O humans, there is much light over this house
- 16     *mahārājā pratāpa bāṭo,<sup>16</sup>*  
          through (your) own royal power
- 17     *graha kholiāeko cha, e manuce,*  
          the constellation of the planets is clarified.

<sup>15</sup> The verb *kholnu*, “to open” is here understood in the sense of “to uncover, solve.”

<sup>16</sup> *pratāp*, “Glory, majesty, dignity, honor” (Turner 1980:394).

- 18 e dasapañca, o bhalādmī.  
O you ten councillors, o you mighty men.
- 19 ... graha kholidinchū,  
I explain the constellation of the planets,
- 20 bahut garaha dekhincha  
many unfavourable constellations appear,
- 21 holā nai manuce.  
So it appears.
- 22 bahut, manuce, e grihe garaha bahuta kholi ta baseko,  
o humans, over this house there is much inauspiciousness
- 23 dui grihe bāṭo. [...]   
because of the two households.

The key notion in the diagnosis is N. *garaha/graha* < Skt. *graha*, a term that refers literally to the planets. But understood in the context of Hindu astrology, it basically means “constellation” or “affliction.” By “revealing” these afflictions the tutelary divinity reveals the truth. The deity comes to the following conclusion in its diagnosis: it sees an inauspicious planetary constellation threatening the residents, mainly because under one roof there are two households that are not yet separated. In fact, the sister of the household head, who suffered some health problems and had not been married off, was still living with her brother and her mother in the ancestral house, but the brother had built a separate hearth for his family after the household had grown bigger (five children). Thus there were two hearths in one house, and this was a situation that could only be temporary. It was time to split up.

The audience continues to ask questions:

C: Rāmro sikhāidinu paryo

Tell us nicely what the situation is.

The deity continues with the “story”—in a formal, mainly Sanskritic language. For example in the following section there are a number of terms that would rarely be used in ordinary speech, such as *birdha janani* (< Skt. *vṛddha*, “old,” + Skt. *jananī*, “mother”) or *karuṇ* (< Skt. *karuṇa*, “compassion”). Clearly the language is different from everyday village Nepali, as this is rather the language of officialdom, of courts and administration, which is heavily borrowing from Sanskrit but also tinged with some Urdu: for example, *sikista*, “seriously ill” [lw. H. *śikasta*

“broken, ill,” from Pers.] (Turner 1980:605), or—below in line 38—*duniyā*, “world” (from Arab.).<sup>17</sup>

- 24 Sunnijāu, manuce, he dasapañca,  
O listen, humans, Ten Councillors,
- 25 janani, birdhu janani ko kahiran kholigayaũ, bakhigayaũ,<sup>18</sup>  
I will tell you the story of the mother of this house,
- 26 manuce, garaha, grihe ko  
o humans, the planets of this house,
- 27 sunai rāni ko, e manuce, sunai rāni ko karuṇ bāto nai<sup>19</sup>  
through the compassion of the Golden Queen
- 28 sikista paryo. [...]   
the situation has deteriorated.
- 29 Mahārudra Mahādewa gāidubo gāiduboniko<sup>20</sup>  
For Maharudra Mahadewa, for the wellbeing of cows,
- 30 praṇām śaraṇa li rāho!<sup>21</sup>  
make offerings to provide protection!
- 31 he manuce, Lachimilāi pani, bahuta caupaya daupaya pani<sup>22</sup>  
O humans, also for Laksmi and all four- and two-footed creatures
- 32 ukāsai ukāsa garnu holā!<sup>23</sup>  
do worship to achieve prosperity!
- 33 bācā māri ta basa na ta ho, e manuce ho.  
This you should continue to promise, o humans,

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<sup>17</sup> The influence of Urdu on the Nepali language is due to its significance as a courtly idiom and legal language, linked to the powerful state systems in Northern India, particularly the Moghul empire.

<sup>18</sup> *kahiran*, “story,” “description.”

<sup>19</sup> *sunai rāni*, “golden queen,” is an epithet of the territorial deity known as Poyomme in the Rai language.

<sup>20</sup> *dubo*, “a particular kind of grass.”

<sup>21</sup> Skt. *praṇāma*, “obeisance”; Skt. *śaraṇa*, “protection.”

<sup>22</sup> *caupāyo*, “four-footed,” “quadrupeds.”

<sup>23</sup> *ukāsnu*, “To take out; raise; rescue, set free; turn up (a lamp)” (Turner 1980:43). Here this verb refers to the increase of prosperity.

- 34     tyati nai kholi āyo, niśāni rājā hū, niśāni rāni hū,  
This much is revealed to you, I am the king of signs, queen of signs.
- 35     baiṭhera gayū. [...]   
That's all, we will go back!
- 36     o manuce, grihelāi ko kahirana ta  
O humans, the story of the house
- 37     kholigāe ta bākhigāyū ta, o manuce  
I revealed to you, o humans.

The deity Aitabare speaks about the elder woman of the undivided household, the mother of the household head (who was absent for most of the time as a migrant worker in Arunachal Pradesh, but who was present on this occasion). Her health has deteriorated due to the “compassion” (a euphemism) of the goddess (Devi). After the diagnosis the deity continues by giving clear instructions to the household members: they are asked to perform rituals and to give offerings to Mahārudra Mahādewa (that is, Śiva), the goddess of wealth, Lakṣmī, and for the domestic animals.

C: lau parameśwari, chetcheti kahidinuparyo, parameśwari<sup>24</sup>  
Now, Supreme Goddess, tell us clearly, o Supreme Goddess

lau parameśwari, ke ke dekhincha?  
O Supreme Goddess, what do you see?

Again and again the congregation exhorts the divinity to give a detailed and truthful account of the situation. Aitabare then diagnoses the afflictions through a goddess, Sansāri Māi,<sup>25</sup> who is responsible for various illnesses. This deity is a version of the well-known Goddess of Smallpox, known as Śitalā, or by other names throughout South Asia (for example, Jāgrānī, “Queen of the world,” Baṛī Mā, “Great Mother”; in South India: Mariamman). She is in fact a typical divinity of the larger, “outside” world, associated with big cities and the many illnesses (especially fever, coughing, sores, and pustules) that one can catch in foreign lands. Thus Sansari Mai is not an ancestral being but a translocal, or transregional goddess, representing afflictions of alien origins.

- 38     jagat maṇḍalmā, sunnos, e duniyā ho bhane ta  
in this village territory, o listen, all the world

<sup>24</sup> *chetcheti* < ?*cheti*, *kṣati*, “loss, damage,” the expression could not be clarified. The overall meaning was given as “accurately,” “truly.”

<sup>25</sup> *sansār*, “the universe”; *sansārī deutā*, “(Tarai) the village goddess” (Turner 1980:584).

- 39      esai jagata sansār prithiwilokmā  
          in this realm, in this earth-place
- 40      sansāri māi, khoki māi, dhamki māi,<sup>26</sup>  
          (from) the World-Mother, the Cough Mother, the Asthma Mother
- 41      solā māi, kānchi māi, pyāra māi ko rājya bāṭo<sup>27</sup>  
          the Disturbance Mother, the Youngest Mother, Beloved Mother—from their kingdom
- 42      o manuce bahuta sikisti paryo. [. . .]  
          o Humans, much illness will come.

By enumerating the various epithets of Sansari Mai, the divination gives a vivid and rather detailed picture of the threatening illnesses. This can be seen as a case of what Andrés Höfer has described as “differential enumeration,” which is defined as a combination of “categorical” and “cumulative enumeration” and is found frequently in divinatory discourse (Höfer 1994:284, 292). This pattern contributes to a detailed and complete description of a whole that the shamans strive to represent.

After Aitabare has finished the diagnosis, other divinities also enter the body of the shaman Phidisai. In the following passage he is possessed by the Spirit of the Hunt (known locally as Molu Sikāri). Now the voice and the whole gestural habitus clearly changes, the rhythm of speaking is short and impulsive: he emphasizes every word equally, with a short break after it, so that the style is a kind of staccato. Everyone immediately recognizes that this is another tutelary deity. Now the audience can go on asking questions and thus cross-check the truth of the diagnosis.

- 43      prithiwi rājā, rāj-dhani hū<sup>28</sup>  
          I am the King of the World, the Owner of the Kingdom
- 44      yesai grihe culā cauka . . . je cha  
          in this house, this hearth, . . . whatever,
- 45      kailās thāna mandir thāna uṭhāi  
          where you erected the Kailash altar, the temple altar,
- 46      ke bhani dāki bolāi holā? [. . .]  
          why have you called me there, what do you want to know?

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<sup>26</sup> *khoki*, “cough”; *dhamki ko bethā*, “asthma.”

<sup>27</sup> *solā*, “a sort of trap set up by *caukidārs*, which when touched shoots the intruder”(Turner 1980:624); the goddess is seen as the youngest (*kanchī*) of 16 sisters, therefore—ironically?—the most beloved one.

<sup>28</sup> The word preceding *dhani*, “rich,” “owner,” is not entirely clear: it could also be *rās dhani*, “owner of (grain) heaps.”

The name of the second deity is “King of the World” or “Universal King.” This might be a surprising epithet for a Hunter Spirit, but he is the Lord of the Jungles, a true sovereign power of all territories!

C: lau parameśwari, ke ke dekhincha, chetcheti kahidinuparyo.  
O Supreme Goddess, what do you see, tell us carefully!

The Hunter Spirit now gives his version of the household conflict:

47 garaha juddhe bahuta hune ta rahecha,<sup>29</sup>  
there is be much fighting

48 nakali rāni, sunai rāni, bālasa-haru pani<sup>30</sup>  
the Charming Queen, the Golden Queen, the Old Woman of Bala, and the other territorial divinities

49 bahuta milindaina holā esai grihemā.  
they do not get along well in this house,

The reason for the problems of the house, according to the second diagnosis, is mainly due to the quarrel of ancestral divinities, the Old Ladies (*burheni*) of the house and land. These deities are responsible for the wealth and prosperity of the household, and therefore are also referred to as *ghar ko deutā*, “deity of the house” (Gaenzsle 1992:209f.). It is interesting to note that according to local mythology, the *burheni* of Bala, or Balme, has been forcibly abducted as a human by Molu Sikāri, who eventually killed her so that she could join him as a spirit.

C: hola parameśwari, hāmi kehi jāndunna,  
So it seems, o Supreme Goddess, we do not know anything.

hai parameśwari, manuṣya ajan.  
he, Supreme Goddess, humans are ignorant

The congregation, repeating their admission of ignorance, continue to inquire. The deity continues to diagnose afflictions and even gives warnings pointing out concrete, imminent dangers.

50 tesai ko karuṇa bāṭo, manuce,  
through their compassion, o Humans

51 bahuta garaha kholi ta baseko holā,  
many inauspicious constellations have been revealed

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<sup>29</sup> *juddha* < *yuddha*, “fighting, battle, conflict.”

<sup>30</sup> *nakali rāni*, < *nakali*, “nice, charming,” but also “imitated, fake,” apparently an ambiguous charm; *bālasa tangma*, or Balme, is the divinity of the village of Bala. All these “queens” are territorial deities.

- 52 e manuce, hāni noksāni pani, esai grihe mā ta bhaibaseko cha,<sup>31</sup>  
O Humans, even destruction has come into effect
- 53 caupaya daupaya lachimi pani.  
on the animals and humans, and Lakṣmī,
- 54 Her, manuce, esai grihemā ta agnilāi pani uṭhāi dincha  
Look, o Humans, they will even set fire to this house!
- 55 caṅkho caturi baso<sup>32</sup>  
So be careful!
- 56 chuṭṭai diyo bhane bhalo kuśalai dekhincha.<sup>33</sup> [. . .]  
If you separate, then there will be much prosperity!

The second divinity speaks out a clear warning: there is imminent danger of fire. If people do not watch out, there might be a fire destroying the house. While the second deity gives some additional or complementary indications of afflictions, the diagnosis of Aitabare is basically confirmed: the two households are not getting along as the two deities of the household altars are fighting. Clearly the only solution is: they have to split up and separate!

The divination also includes possession by Sansari Mai,<sup>34</sup> who also confirms the general diagnosis given by the other divinities. In all cases the shaman speaks for an authoritative being who somehow comes from another world—from where things can be comprehended more clearly than in the world of humans.

## Conclusion

We can now return to the earlier question: Who is the speaker? And what does he or she try to convey? Obviously, for the audience it is not Phidisaī who is speaking—he is only the vehicle, the medium. One cannot say that he is not involved, as he provides the vehicle, and it is due to his competence that the deities, which are his tutelary deities, are able to speak. But he is not responsible for what is uttered through his mouth. The “true” speakers, the true originators of the speech, are the deities.

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<sup>31</sup> *hāni*, “destruction, damage, loss, waste; disadvantage” (Turner 1980:636); *noksāni*, “damage, loss,” the expression here is a nice example of a Nepali binomial, which is similarly constructed as the binomials in Rai ritual language (see Gaenszle et al. 2011).

<sup>32</sup> *caṅkha*, “attentive, cautious”; *catur*, “clever.”

<sup>33</sup> *kuśal*, “prosperity, health, happiness; security, ease” (Turner 1980:102).

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the goddess Sansari Mai refers to herself as “Nepāli Rājā,” king of Nepal. This confirms our interpretation of her significance as translocal, here: national.

Here we may come back to the terminology suggested by Levinson (1988). What is the actual role of the shaman in this speech event? He is the “speaker” in the sense of “utterer,” but the “source” of the speech, that is, the “informational/illocutionary origin of the message” is the deity. But Phidisai is not simply a “relayer” or conveyor of the message, like the reader of a statement (for example newsreader) who has no personal involvement and motive of his own and has nothing to do with the wording or formal properties of the text. Nor is he a “spokesman” who acts without personal motives but makes himself complicit with the source and is held responsible for the wording of the message. Perhaps he comes closest to what Levinson calls a “ghostee”: a ghosted speaker, in analogy to a ghosted writer, that is, a writer who has a ghost writer (1988:173). This role implies that the shaman is speaking with a desire or motivation of his own, but the wording is produced by somebody else. The motivation is, however, not to pretend that it is his message, that is, the shaman is not responsible for the content. He is personally concerned with the fate of the household, but everyone knows who the “real” speakers are.

So what is their intention? What is the intention of the divine speakers who remain invisible? Or, in other words, what is the agency attributed to the divinities? The deities have a view of what is going on—they can see more clearly than the humans—but their view is not infallible. They speak in ambiguities, not everything is immediately clear; it needs interpretation. Often it takes days or weeks until people come to a conclusion as to what the meaning is. Above all, the different deities do not speak equivocally: their diagnosis is not always as unanimous as in this example, sometimes it may be conflicting. Thus the audience is left with some clues, but also many loose ends. It is the long process of the layman’s interpretation that eventually leads to some kind of village consensus (as has been well argued by Sagant in his excellent study, 1987).

Because of these ambiguities in the diagnostic discourse, a kind of verification is necessary. One cannot really trust only one deity, it may be wrong or one-sided. So in the seance itself a process of cross-checking is employed to come to a more reliable truth: different tutelary deities are asked, and thus the result is considered to have some degree of “objectivity.” In other words, one does not really trust the deities as individuals: they may have their own ulterior motives. But at least the deities seem to have good intentions: they want to help the humans, and warn them of dangers. It is thus apparent that divine intentions are not absent, it is only that these intentions are less clear for humans to understand. They can only be deduced or assumed—from their vague hints given from afar.

The fact that the divine intentions are in a plurality—not one but many intentions—reveals a notion of agency that is similar to what Ronald Inden has described in terms of “complex agency” (Inden 1990) or William Sax in terms of “distributed agency” (see Sax 2006, 2009:ch. 4). Referring to the agency distributed in divine kingdoms, Sax writes: “These gods’ agency is built up, as it were, from subordinate forms of agency distributed amongst individuals, families, clans and other kinds of associations in the region” (Sax 2006:481). However, the plural agency we are dealing with in the Rai shaman’s case is not always of one piece, but may be torn in different directions. This seems to be typical of systems of divine affliction in polytheistic religions. Whereas in a monotheistic setting, truth and authority can only come from the one and only, or at least the major, god, it is precisely the multitude of voices that conveys authority in a non-monotheistic setting.



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