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JOHAN G. REINHARD, New Lenox, Ill.:

Film E 2197

Raji (Nepal) – Divination and Magical Treatment of an Illness

Author of the Publication: JOHAN G. REINHARD

With 2 Figures

Summary of the Film:

Raji (Nepal) – Divination and Magical Treatment of an Illness. The shaman is shown performing divination with rice and then performing a brief seance in which he is possessed. With offerings for a witch, the shaman performs acts of exorcism, then takes the offerings out on a path, and makes a sacrifice.

Inhalt des Films:

Raji (Nepal) – Divination und zauberische Krankenbehandlung. Der Film zeigt einen Schamanen beim Wahrsagen mit Reis. Anschließend findet eine kurze Seance statt, in deren Verlauf er in einen Besessenheitszustand gerät. Mit Opfergaben für einen Hexer führt der Schamane exorzistische Handlungen aus, dann begibt er sich mit den Opfergaben zu einem Pfad und verrichtet ein Opfer.

Résumé du Film:

Raji (Népal) – Divination et traitement magique d'un malade. Le chamane fait une divination à riz, puis exécute une brève séance au cours de laquelle il est possédé. Avec des offrandes destinées à un sorcier le chamane exécute des actes d'exorcisme, puis il emmène les offrandes à un sentier et accomplit un sacrifice.

General Preliminary Remarks¹

Small groups of the Tibeto-Burman speaking Raji tribe are found spread throughout West Nepal. Their total population does not exceed 1500, and the population of the Purbia (eastern) Raji, with whom we are concerned here, probably does not number more than 600. They are reknown as boatmen and fishermen, who have now settled and become agriculturalists in various parts of Southwest Nepal.

¹ The research upon which this article is based was supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Film material was contributed by the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, Göttingen.

Forest produce, fish, and to a lesser extent game obtained through hunting, add important supplements to their food supply. Members of hill castes have had contact with the Raji for many years, but only recently have begun to settle year round in the area of main concentration of the Purbia Raji, the Babai River Valley.

The shaman (*gurau*) is the most important religious functionary in Raji society. Brahman priests are not normally employed by the Raji, and the shaman is the key person in most major village rituals, besides being a curer of illnesses. In the Babai Valley roughly half of all the adult married men have participated in shaman initiations, although only a few continued on to become practicing shamans. Many participated in the initiations primarily in order to gain a tutelary deity which would help to protect them and their families. Major reasons for there not being more practicing shamans are difficulties in obtaining the necessary instruction, and in acquiring rights to work in villages, since established shamans are usually reluctant to relinquish such rights.

The power of the shaman lies in the eyes of the Raji in his knowledge of spells (*mantra*). These frequently are spoken in the context of a ritual and accompanying some symbolic action, e.g. blowing on an object. Often the curing of an ill person requires that some offerings be made to the deity, spirit, or witch thought to have caused the illness. Basic offerings consist of strips of cloth, red powder, incense, hulled rice, a lamp, and a liquid of some sort. Numerous other items may be given, e.g. money, models representing animals and/or humans, sacrificial animals, etc., and some offerings may be quite distinctive, as for example blood from some part of a man's body for his tutelary deity or those offerings made for a witch. Occasionally an offering is postponed by making a promise to the deity to make it at a later date. Besides making offerings, the shaman occasionally uses other techniques to cure a patient, e.g. sucking out an intrusive object, giving medicines and amulets, and having the patient change his place of residence.

A shaman who has rights over a village is given grain annually depending upon the wealth of the contributing family. The shaman in turn helps cure ill members of the family free of cost and also performs important functions at village ceremonies, such as those prior to rice planting and at the time of its harvest, to help rid rice fields of insects, and to provide a protective barrier against evil spirits around the village. The shaman does not normally become especially wealthy from his work. However, he does often receive free meals and liquor wherever he stays, and is accorded considerable prestige in the community¹.

Background to the Film

A major cause of illness is thought to be witchcraft. Witches (*boksi*) are invariably women who unjustifiably use spells to cause harm to others. They often send their helping spirit to attack people. The shaman is theoretically unable to identify the witch and stereotyped offerings are made to appease a witch as a member of a

¹ For further information and analysis see REINHARD [1] and [2].

category rather than as a particular person. Occasionally the shaman may use other techniques to combat the witch, as for example when the witch has introduced an object into a person to cause an illness.

In order to identify the cause of an illness the shaman must resort to one of several methods of divination. By far the one most commonly employed involves the



Fig. 1. *Jhar-phuk* involving offerings for a witch

counting of hulled rice. The shaman takes a small amount of rice from a larger pile, blows a spell on it, and names a general category, such as house deity, witch, evil spirit, etc. The rice is set to the side and checked for a yes/no reply through the even/odd outcome of the amount examined. If it turns out to be even numbered seven times in succession, then the category named is considered responsible. In the case of deities and spirits, the process would be repeated again until the specific one responsible is discovered. If there is not an even outcome initially then the counting is started over again naming a different category. Since it may take a considerable length of time to arrive at the cause of an illness using this technique, the shaman may abandon it in favor of another method (e.g. measuring a stick or piece of cloth or becoming possessed) or name whatever he intuitively thinks is the cause (although he will not publicly admit this).

Frequently, especially in cases of serious illness, the shaman holds a seance in which he becomes possessed by his tutelary deity who then informs him or bystanders which causative agency is responsible. The seance itself is simple and brief, usually not lasting more than 15 minutes. The shaman does not normally undergo any

purification ritual. He usually talks to the patient in order to gain an understanding of the background of the illness, e.g. symptoms, other attempts made to cure him, etc. The seance may be inside or outside the house, although usually it is the former. If outside, the shaman should sit facing east. The seance normally takes place either at night or in the morning. The patient does not participate directly in the seance.



Fig. 2. Offerings for a witch

Sitting on a mat or blanket the shaman first removes his cap. A plate containing bulled rice, a small lamp, and perhaps a monetary offering is set before the shaman, who makes an offering of incense to his tutelary deity. During this offering a prayer is spoken and a respectful gesture made by the shaman, who presses his hands together before his face and bows slightly.

Normally the shaman does not use any instrument to accompany his chanting, although on occasion a bundle of leaves will be shaken. The chant consists of a simple repetition of a verse calling the tutelary deity. The chanting increases in tempo and intensity until the shaman becomes possessed and his entire body shakes. He usually remains sitting during the seance even while possessed. The deity may tell the shaman what caused the illness and what should be done, or a bystander may question the deity and it will speak through the mouth of the shaman. The deity soon leaves the body of the shaman, after which he may give a further offering of incense.

Frequently following a seance offerings are made to the spirit or witch found to be responsible for the illness. In the case of witchcraft, one of the more common causes, techniques and spells are used to remove the illness from the patient's body and into the offerings. These offerings are invariably made at night. Depending on the

location of the illness, the patient sits facing or with his back turned to the shaman while he brushes the patient with a bundle of leaves or a broom. As the shaman brushes from the patient on to the offerings, he says a spell which he blows on to the patient, hence the term *jhar-phuk* (cause to descent-blow).

A termite nest (*kran*) and the root of a jungle plant (*nat*) are bound with white thread seven times. Plates are constructed of leaves turned upside-down. Broken egg shells and bracelets, 2 balls made of ashes, red powder, incense, a lamp, 2 chicken feathers (preferably black), female hair, nail clippings, black collyrium, a small clay figure of a human being, a piece of black cloth, and a chicken (preferably white) make up the remaining offerings to the witch.

After *jhar-phuk* has been performed several times, the shaman takes some hulled rice and/or water and passes it over the head of the patient on to the offerings. Once the chicken has shaken its head, indicating its willingness to be sacrificed, all objects are gathered together and are circled over the patient's head, preferably in a right to left direction seven times. The illness is then thought to have been transferred out of the patient, and he does not participate in the remainder of the ritual.

The offerings are taken out on a path leading away from the village. Here they are placed such that the *kran* and *nat* are in front of the other offerings. Auspicious markings of red powder and black collyrium are made on the offerings. Feathers are stuck into the balls of ashes and the clay figure is covered with the black cloth. While offering incense, the shaman mentions the name of the victim and says a spell. He pours water on the offerings, and after saying a spell on the chicken he decapitates it by holding it behind his legs and slicing its neck against the blade of a bill-hook held between his feet. The head of the chicken is placed in a hole dug previously by the shaman, water sprinkled over it and other offerings, and dirt filled in the hole and patted down seven times. The shaman then pours a zigzag line of water as he backs away from the offerings making a cutting motion with the bill-hook at each turn in the line. Although the basic format of this ritual remains the same, occasionally some items will be omitted and some procedures shortened.

Notes on Making of the Film

The film was made on April 19, 1970 in the village of Ban Gaun, Sano Sheri Panchayat, Banke District. Since many events shown in the film only take place at night, it was necessary for them to be reenacted in the daytime. The shaman and principle character appearing in the film, NAINA LODHIAL, age ca. 40, is the most important shaman of the Babai River Valley. He has rights to 10 villages, 6 of which contain no Raji. He therefore had to learn shamanic practices common to hill castes, and some of these he has begun to incorporate into Raji rituals also. He had been trained to be a shaman by his father and is in turn training his son to become one. He has a wife, a son, and two daughters, and speaks three languages, Raji, Nepali, and Tharu.

Technical data: camera: Bell and Howell Model 70-D; lenses: Switar 16 mm, Bausch and Lomb 25 mm, Yvar 75 mm; camera speed: 24 f/s; film material: Kodak Plus X, black and white negative film type 7231.

Description of Film

The shaman is shown leaving a house and placing a mat. Sitting on the mat with a plate containing hulled rice before him, he begins to divine using grains of rice. A small leaf constructed "lamp" is brought to the shaman and placed on the rice. He begins to shake as the deity enters his body. After he has finished being possessed, he gives a gesture of respect to his tutelary deity.

Next the patient and an assistant bring offerings for the witch. The shaman binds the jungle plant and termite nest. With the patient sitting with his back to the shaman, *jhar-phuk* is performed. After this has been completed several times and water has been sprinkled on the offerings, they are circled over the patient's head and taken out on a path. These are placed, auspicious markings applied, water sprinkled over the offerings, and a chicken is sacrificed. After burying the head, the shaman backs away pouring water in a zigzag line.

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Filmography

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Sources of the Figures

Fig. 1 and 2: photography J. G. REINHARD.