

FLAG RETURN REPORT  
of EXPLORERS CLUB FLAG #60 for the expedition  
***Hindu and Nepalese Shamanism in Nepal***  
Kathmandu and Dhulikhel, Nepal, Sept. 23 to Oct. 10, 2001  
prepared by  
Capt. Robert Gregory Hahn ("Rio"), FRGS, FN'86

INTRODUCTION & EXPEDITION PURPOSES:

The purpose and activities of this expedition were two fold. One was to continue ethnopharmacological research and documentation of the ritual practices of a Hindu yogi, known as Swami Dharmjyoti, who has been trained since youth in the religious application of medicinal plants for healing, religious rituals, and his own spiritual practice. This is a continuation of previous work that the author has been engaged in since the mid 1980's and most recently under Flag #189 carried to Nepal in April 1999.

The other purpose of this expedition was to investigate and document the ritual practices of three Nepalese shamans. This was accomplished through arrangements made with a long-term research associate of the author and the associate's co-workers who have been studying shamanism in Nepal for over twenty years.

EXPEDITION ROUTE AND PARTICIPANTS:



After reaching Nepal by air, expedition work was carried out in two stable locations as the nature of the research required secluded, quiet environments.

Robert "Rio" Hahn, a member of The Explorers Club Board of Directors, and Teresa Fiske, who also participated in the 1999 Nepal expedition, worked with Swami Dharmjyoti (pictured opposite) in Kathmandu at his residence there. Swami now has great difficulty walking, which forced us to abandon our plans for more extensive fieldwork during this visit.

Work with the Nepalese shamans was carried out at the Dhulikhel Mountain Resort about 30 kilometers east of Kathmandu outside of the town of Dhulikhel.

Participants for this part of the expedition were Robert "Rio" Hahn; Teresa Fiske; Dr. Christian Raetsch, Germany's leading expert on ethnopharmacology and long time associate of Hahn; Claudia Mueller-Ebeling, anthropologist and art-historian specializing in visionary art; Surendra Bahadur Shahi, a Buddhist trained Thangka painter; Mohan Rai, founder of the Shamanic Studies and Research Centre in Kathmandu, whose father was a renowned shaman in the

royal palace of the father of the present ruler of Bhutan; Suraj Rai, son of and apprentice to Mohan Rai, who handled expedition logistics; and Hans van den Hurk, whose organization helped sponsor this part of the expedition.



Standing, left to right: Indra Doj Gurung, Claudia Mueller-Ebeling, Parbati Rai, Maile Lama, Mohan Rai, Surendra Bahadur Shahi.  
Sitting left to right: Teresa Fiske, Robert "Rio" Hahn, Christian Raetsch, Suraj Rai, and Hans Van den Hurk.

The expedition worked with the following three shamans and their entourages: Indra Doj Gurung (male) from West Nepal, a Gurung shaman by familial invocation and a lama by familial tradition, who was first initiated at thirteen and was officially installed as a shaman by the age of sixteen; Maile Lama (female), a Tamang shaman from East Nepal, who at the age of nine was abducted by Ban Jhankri, the mythical ancestor of all Nepali shamans, and became a well-known shaman by the age of twelve; and Parbati Rai (female) from East Nepal, a Kirati shaman who had her first initiatory experience at the age of nine and by the age of sixteen had become an acknowledged shaman, and is now the authorized shaman of the Kirati community.

Left to right: Indra Doj Gurung, Maile Lama, and Parbati Rai

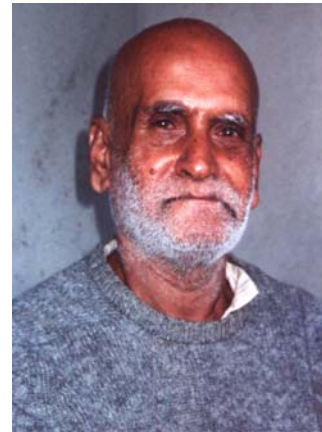


The Gurung, Tamang and Kirati cultures are three of a number of Nepalese cultures in which shamanism plays a central role. Almost every village has a practicing shaman of one sort or another. Some are quite specialized, while others tend to be more general in their healing practices.

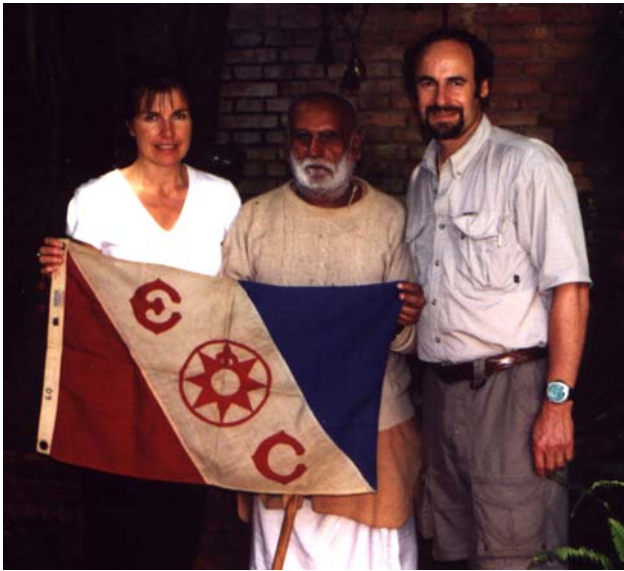
#### EXPEDITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

##### SWAMI DHARMJYOTI:

Swami Dharmjyoti, now 84, is a Hindu yogi and Sanskrit scholar. As a boy in his native India, he was recognized by yogis as having an aptitude for yogic practice, and according to ancient tradition was sent by his family to the yogis for training. As modern society no longer supports this ancient custom, Dharmjyoti has been hampered in transmitting his knowledge to young adepts. The author has been working with Dharmjyoti for a number of years in an effort to understand and preserve as much of his knowledge as possible, especially his use of medicinal and ritualistic plants.



During the course of his training, Swami Dharmjyoti was initiated at the age of sixteen in the use of the plant *Datura*, commonly known as Thorn Apple. In India, where *Datura* is associated with the worship of the Hindu god Shiva, knowledge of its intoxicating effects date back to prehistory and it is still valued today for its narcotic properties. During the Sanskritic period, Indian medicine valued the Old World species of *Datura metel* for treating mental disorders, various fevers, tumors, breast inflammations, skin diseases, and diarrhea.



*Datura* has been variously described as an intoxicant and deliriant, causing symptoms of spectral illusions, delirium, dilated pupils, thirst, dryness of the mouth and in-coordination. Consequently, *Datura* is universally treated with fear and respect by all that come in contact with it. (Indeed, the author can attest to its efficacy from his experience during a *Datura* initiation by Dharmjyoti on the 1999 expedition).

Dharmjyoti, by his own report, takes at least eight doses of *Datura* daily in the form of the betel chew, in which the *Datura* is mixed with tobacco. Typically, Dharmjyoti takes his *Datura* betel chew in the morning at 7, 8, and 9am, then again in the afternoon at 2 and 3pm or 3 and 4pm, and then at night at 7, 8, and 9pm or 8, 9, and 10pm, with none usually taken after 10pm. Not only does this constitute ingestion of an extraordinary amount of the narcotic; it is to the author's knowledge, a unique example of sustained daily *Datura* usage. Dharmjyoti reports that without his daily regime of *Datura*, he is unable to remember the vast number of books he has read nor is he able to attain the level of mentation to which he is accustomed.

During this visit with Dharmjyoti a detailed photographic record was made of each component of his betel mixture and the steps of preparation. Samples of the components were collected and notes made on each. The betel chew ingested by Dharmjyoti typically consists of a specially prepared mixture of *Datura* and tobacco, lime paste, Kerala betel nut (*Piper betel*), a white bark known as "katha," and cardamom for taste. All of components are wrapped in a leaf of the climbing pepper betel plant and inserted into the side of the mouth where they are permitted to slowly dissolve until the last parts are chewed. The mixture is hot, acrid, and astringent. It temporarily destroys the sense of taste, reddens the lips and blackens the teeth, which are eventually corroded. As a result of Dharmjyoti's years of betel chewing, many of his teeth have all but disappeared which has made it increasingly difficult to understand his speech, and on this most recent expedition caused significant problems in communication with him.

NEPALESE SHAMANISM:

Shamanism in Nepal is thought to date back some 50,000 years and the ancient healing traditions of shamanism are still taught in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal, Bhutan, and Northern India. These ancient traditions, however, are being threatened by the spread of modern civilization that distracts young people from the traditional study of shamanism, which requires a sustained level of discipline. The expedition participants were therefore particularly interested in documenting as well as studying the ceremonial practices of the modern Nepalese shaman.

The Himalayan shamans have a rich cosmology in which they divide the world into three main levels. The Upper World where the Sun, Moon, stars, planets, deities and spirits important to the shaman's healing work abide, the Middle World of normal human life, and the Lower World, where powerful deities and spirits exist that can cause problems in the Middle World. During the various shaman ceremonies, the shaman will call on the deities and spirits, which he or she wishes to assist in the ritual, and at the end of the ceremony the shaman will send these spirits and deities back to their appropriate worlds. This final step in the ritual is considered in some ways to be the most important, as all will have been for naught if the deities and spirits remain in the Middle World, where they can not only destroy the good work of the ritual but cause additional problems.

The participants were able to work directly with the three shamans described above, observing and participating in their ritual ceremonies. During the traditional shamanic ceremony, the costumed shaman, aided by traditional drum beats and dance, enters into a trance state in which he or she travels to seek the deities and spirits who assist in the healing work. By special agreement with the shamans, extensive video recording was done during their ceremonies while they were in the Trance State.



Pictured above, Maile Lama in Trance State beats her drum, while Mohan Rai reads to her the name and age of the person to be “read” during the healing ceremony.

Every ritual begins with the use of a particular type of incense as determined by the nature of the ceremony. This has been the case since time immemorial and is thought to have originated from early man who carried out ritual ceremonies around a campfire. The smell of the incense is then associated with the ritual experience, which helps the participant to remember the experience as smell has a strong association with memory.

Hahn, Fiske and other members of the team were able to participate as “patients” in these shamanic ceremonies. During the ceremony, the shaman, having entered into the Trance State, “reads” the patient and speaks his or her diagnosis in their own dialect using metaphors and terms specific to their cosmology. For later explanation to the patient, an assistant writes down the diagnosis. Depending on the nature of the diagnosis, further ritual ceremonies may be prescribed.



Indra Doj Gurung “read” Hahn in a particularly intense ceremony. During the course of the ceremony, Gurung appeared to transform himself into an animal, sniffing and investigating Hahn’s body, including a prolonged study of Hahn’s heart. As a result of this “reading,” Gurung later prescribed and carried out another ritual. In this later ritual, Gurung explained that he had identified one “planet” whose spirits were causing problems for Hahn. Through the action of the ritual and the presentation to Hahn of a special talisman, made especially for him by Gurung, the spirits of the offending planet were to be kept away. The talisman, which contains special writings and parts of healing plants, is said to provide protection from the problem planet.

Medicinal plants play a role in the rituals and healing preparations the shamans may prescribe as a result of the ceremonial reading. The shamans also use special plants for their own ritual preparations and health. As is true with many shamanic cultures, and as our work with Swami Dharmjyoti revealed, tobacco is a key ingredient in many preparations. Shamans in many parts of the world employ smoke in their rituals, and *Datura* and tobacco are often mixed in the shaman's smoking mixture. We did not, however, observe any use by the Nepalese shaman of the betel chew, with or without *Datura*.

Fiske participated in a ceremony carried out by Maile Lama, a female shaman. Maile displayed a completely different style from Gurung, one that was almost playful by comparison, but just as penetrating in terms of her "reading." Maile prescribed a further healing ritual for Fiske and during the course of this ceremony she taught Fiske a special *mantra* which Fiske should speak as a form of protection from the spirits which were afflicting her.

Mantras have a long and important role in the shaman's work. Part of the shaman's own initiation involves the bestowing of mantras by their mentor, and no shaman will ever reveal their mantras to anyone other than his or her students. Mantras work through the action of the vibrations they create in the practitioner's body when they are repeatedly recited. Often the literal meaning the mantra is not revealed so as to not occupy the mind with the search for logical explanation but allow the student or patient to concentrate on the repetition of the mantra from which derives its healing powers.

During our short time with Gurung, Maile, and Parbati it was possible to achieve only the most basic introduction to the complex world of Nepalese shamanism. However, all of the participants felt a depth of connection with the shaman that went far beyond the short time we had to work together.

The author and participants plan to return to Nepal in about two years in order to continue the work begun during this expedition. The author is preparing a video document from the ceremonies, which will offer an opportunity to more completely experience and understand the nature of the shamanic ceremonies the expedition participants took part in.

---