

## *Sita and the Goddess: A Case Study of a Woman Healer in Nepal<sup>1</sup>*

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### *Mother Goddess Possession*

The phenomena of Mother Goddess possession is not exclusive to Nepal. Kathleen Erndl's paper on the Cult of Serenvali (also known as Durga, Amba, Mata (mother) or Bhagvati) identifies a similar phenomena in Punjab state, north India. The Goddess usually possesses a female and being possessed is seen as a grace not an affliction. Erndl's interpretation is that the Goddess "plays" in people and speaks through them as means of helping her devotees and showing them her power (*sakti*).

I was told by several informants that in Nepal this tradition has been in practice for the last 25 years. One woman told me she has been regularly possessed by the Goddess for the last 18 years. This tradition may have once been exclusive to Sita's ethnic group (Newars) but appears to have become manifest in other groups in the last ten years. In the case of Sita, many of Ma's devotees are *Parbatiya* (Nepali-speaking peoples), mostly of Brahman-Chettri caste. *Mā* said she no longer speaks Newari because most of the people who come to her speak Nepali.

• In the area around Dilli Bazaar there were at least four women who claimed possession by the Goddess. All of the women are within a ten minute walk from each other. According to *Mā* (Sita possessed by *Mā*), *Mā* possesses only ten persons in the Kathmandu Valley. Many people claim possession but she said most of them are fakes. *Mā* also told us that one of the women in the Dilli Bazaar area is actually a witch (*bokshi*). She said the woman makes people ill and then cures them in order to receive a fee.

### *The Goddess Ajima (Mā)*

*Ajima* is one of the many forms of the Mother Goddess and is among the lower orders of the female pantheon. She is popularly known as the goddess of smallpox and her name is of Newari origin. *Ajima* literally means grandmother or old mother. Generally, she is also known as *Harati* ('reliever') among Buddhists and *Sitala* (the cool one) among Hindus. If left hungry she will harass children but if appeased with food offerings she protects and alleviates disease and trouble (Anderson 1977:78). She is invoked against disease and has a protective role of mother. Even today when a child is vaccinated against disease (such as smallpox) offerings are taken to *Ajima* by families from all different backgrounds.

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A most popular form of worship can be seen at the Harati temple at the Swayambu temple complex in Kathmandu. Each morning there are a large number of worshippers who come to that temple. The Harati figure inside the temple is seated with five children who are said to represent the five hundred children Harati was believed to have once stolen (Pradhan 1984:29). According to Pradhan, the woman figure inside the temple is said to be that of a *yakshini* (servant of the god of wealth). The following story relates how she acquired the name Harati and tells of the incident of the stolen children:

A *yakshini* had stolen 500 children and no one could catch her. The King approached the Lord Buddha for help. The Lord hid one of the *yakshini*'s most promising children. Distressed over the loss the *yakshini* also turned to Lord Buddha for help. The Lord said "why should you so seriously bewail the loss of one child when you have in your holdings no less than five hundred?" To this the *yakshini* thus replied "No my Lord, I was out of patience with the loss because that is the child whom I love most". "While only one out of the five hundred is lost" said the Lord, "you are so much afflicted, how very heart rendering the suffering of parents have become since you kidnapped their children". The remark of the Lord made a deep impression upon her. She was on the very spot mentally changed. Remorsefully, she begged pardon. The Lord then told her to refrain from her former misdeeds and take care of children. She henceforth, became a saviour of children. It was to symbolize this incident that the *yakshini* came to be worshipped as Hariti Mai the motherly goddess who relieves children of their pains. This name "*Hariti*" (reliever) is derived from the word "*Harati*" (relieves). Because she is supposed to relieve children of their child diseases she may have been named so (Pradhan 1984:30).

I was told a similar story by two different informants.

#### *Healing and Concepts of Illness*

"Faith-healer", is defined as "one who attempts to effect faith cures (a cure of an ailment held to be accomplished through religious faith)" (American Heritage Dictionary 1981). This definition implies that the faith-healer can only heal if the person with the ailment has "faith". Faith is required to be cured. This is not, however, an accurate description of Sita as *Mā*. *Mā* does not claim to cure by faith but actively through the power of the Goddess. She is not called a faith-healer by the people who come to her temple but rather they address her as *Mā*. Faith-healer is an outsider's term. At the temple I heard Nepali people refer to her as *janne manche* (one who knows) and

*deuta aune manche* (person to whom the god comes), but never by any term denoting "faith-healer" as we know it.

I would suggest that the inapplicability of "faith-healer" to Mā reflects an important cultural difference between Nepalese Newars and Western peoples. In the West faith-healing suggests the importance of each individual's inner convictions. The stress is on individual responsibility for one's own therapy. Similarly, Talcott Parsons (1972: 107-127) has suggested that American ideas about illness and curing in general reflect this view, since here therapy is seen as an individual "job to be done". Among Mā's devotees, by contrast, the individual is more passive; inner "faith" is not an issue and the stress is rather on the importance of obedience to Mā, worshipping Mā properly and following her dictates strictly.

Besides faith-healer there are other problematic terms. "Spirit possession" is an ambiguous term and has conceptual problems (Reinhard 1976). Scholars have defined spirit possession as:

an altered state of consciousness on the part of the individual as the result of what is believed to be the incorporation of an alien form with vital and spiritual attributes, e.g. the spirit of a human form such as a witch, sorcerer, god, goddess or other religious divinity (Jones 1976:1).

This definition reflects how scholars identify spirit possession, not how local people do so. Most important, Sita and her devotees distinguish between different kinds of "alien forms". For example, being possessed by a witch would be considered bad whereas possession by a goddess would be considered a blessing.

Even the common anthropological term "shamanism" is problematic. Reinhard's (1976) definition of shamanism emphasizes *the will* of the shaman in entering a "non-ordinary psychic state"; but Mā as described later, is subject to involuntary possession.

Practically, how does a person recognize when someone is possessed? One Nepali girl, after seeing Mā for the first time said Sita was not possessed because she was talking in a normal voice. Other informants told me that shaking is a sign of possession. Thus shaking and speaking in an abnormal voice may be some of the markers that make possession real for the local people.

After only one visit to a Nepali healer a Westerner is quickly struck by the different concepts of illness that emerge. For example, a woman's child is becoming sickly thin. Mā tells her it is due to *moch*, a woman whose own child has died had touched the baby. The sickness had been passed from one family to another. Mā prescribed 5 days of "blowing" (*phuknu*) which consists of Mā blowing on the child's head.

Many Nepali people distinguish between illness caused by physical factors and that caused by supernatural phenomena. Mā said that she could only cure illness caused by something supernatural (e.g. witchcraft, *moch*). She said that the flu and cold are physical illnesses.

"Blowing" (*phuknu*) is often prescribed in treatment and is done even when there is no illness. Here, the healer simply blows in short, directed puffs on the patient. Each morning after Mā gives *tika* (mark placed on the forehead at the conclusion of worship) to Sita's husband and children, she sometime does "blowing" on them. Mā said that this was to keep away evil and illness. Another common treatment is "sweeping" (*jharnu*) and this is done with a broom made of wild grass. Mā sweeps the broom over the area of pain or just over the devotee's head.

On many occasions Mā diagnosed that a witch (*bokshi*) had caused the problem or illness. A witch, as defined by Mā, is also a worshipper of the Goddess. Witches initially worship her so that they can benefit the welfare of people, but when they receive the power of the Goddess they cease to act according to their promise. They perform "reverse magic" with what they learn, for instance they utter *kumantra* (bad mantra) instead of good mantra.

I was curious whether modern medical facilities in the area have any effect on people coming to Mā. From my brief study I conclude it has little. One Nepali couple had come all the way from Charikot (about a seven hour bus ride from Kathmandu) where they have their own modern hospital, just to see Mā. Another informant had said that for the people that come to these traditional healers it does not matter if there are modern medical facilities in the area or not. This lack of conflict between the two medical systems is in part accountable to these people's own distinction between "supernatural" and "physical" illnesses. Mā and her devotees see Mā as an expert in the former, whereas doctors are for the latter. This distinction closely parallels Foster and Anderson's (1978) distinction between "naturalistic" and "personalistic" medical systems. I found the two medical systems to be complementary to one another rather than in conflict.

### *The Healer*

Sita is a Newar from Kathmandu. She has six brothers and is the oldest sibling. Sita is married and has three sons and one daughter. She is forty-one years old and has had fourteen years of education. Her family is of the Pradhan caste, one of the highest castes among Newars (Singh 1969:155).

Sita has been regularly possessed by the Goddess for the last two years. According to Sita over two years ago she did not know how to perform *puja* (ritual worship). Neither Sita nor her husband used to do worship. She said her husband used to say things like "why does one worship, what good does it do?" and become angry. When the children would become ill Sita's mother would say "why don't you do as our tradition (of Newars) says and take them to 'one who knows' (*janne*

*manche*).” Even though Sita and her husband are Newars they did not participate in that tradition.

About six years earlier Sita had become ill. At the time of building their current house she fainted and was bleeding (we never found out what kind of bleeding). Sita consulted doctors but none of them could cure her. In time she was confined to her bed. Finally, Sita was going to get help from the doctors in Delhi. Three days before she was to go to Delhi, Mā (the Goddess Ajima) came to her in the night. That night Mā appeared to her and possessed her for the first time. Before possessing her Mā told her the rules and regulations of doing worship (*puja*).

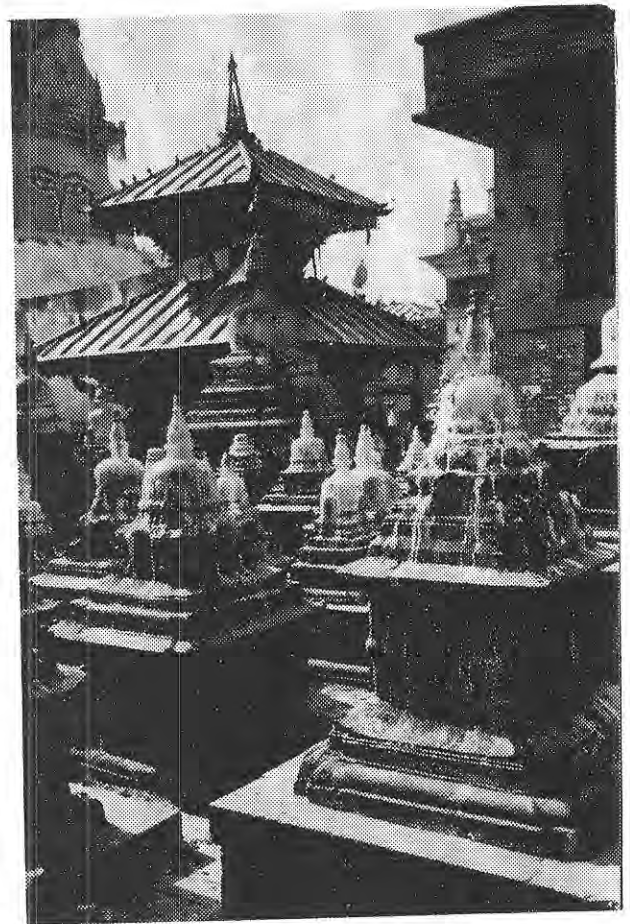
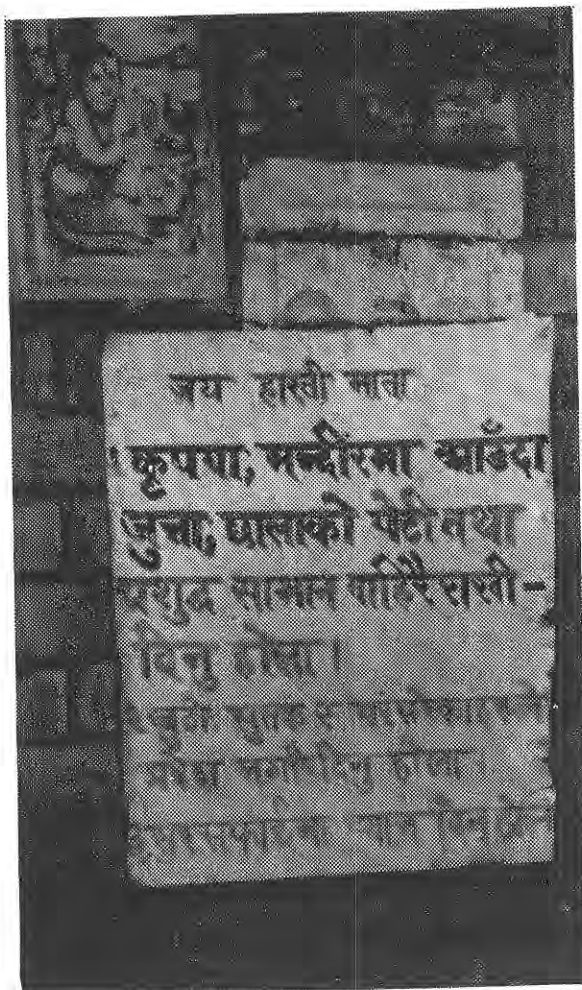
Sita told us that the cause of her illness had been four people. She did not specifically identify them but told us that they had also been interested in the land she had purchased before she became ill. Daily they had also come to inquire about her condition. After Mā had come to her they did not visit anymore. Sita said that after these four people could harm her no longer, they caused her son to be ill. They made him crazy for one month but he was cured by Mā. Since then there has been no major illnesses in the family except for common colds and flu.

On the night of Sita's first possession the Goddess told her to go to her (Mā's) temple at Swayambhu the following week. At the temple Sita did worship to the Goddess and was possessed. Mā took a vase (*kalas*) from the temple and brought it to Sita's home. It is this vase that is in the temple at Sita's house. The vase is a representation of the Goddess and is worshipped as such. The Goddess had also told her that she must now help people who are suffering.

Since the coming of the Goddess, Sita's life has changed considerably. Everyday of the week she is possessed by the Goddess and people come to see her. Each day before possession Sita worships the Goddess (as represented by the vase). Besides the daily worship and possession Sita must also cook the family meals. She is the only one allowed to cook in her house and can't accept food in another person's house except her mother's.

In Sita's house there is a heightened awareness of cleanliness, not just in the physical sense but also concerning ritual purity. Certain restrictions are put on her house and the temple inside. These restrictions concerning ritual and physical purity are written (in Nepali) outside the door, as seen in the photo below. For example, a person of a family in which a member has died within the last 13 days is considered ritually impure. People in this state are not allowed in the temple. Another example of ritual impurity is menstruating women. Sita said that if a person in a state of impurity entered the temple she would be immediately possessed by the Goddess. Sita said that she could become possessed no matter where she was and this was verbalized as an "unwanted possession". Sita said that she was afraid of this happening. "Unwanted possession" could also take place if a person in a state of ritual impurity touched her. Sita has lessened the chances of this happening by spending most of her time at home and not going into crowds.

Harati Temple at Swayambhu



Outside Harati/Ajima Temple in Dilli Bazaar

"Victory with Harati"

- 1) Impure things like leather and belts are requested to be put outside the temple.
- 2) People who are mourning or have been polluted by the death of a family member or by a new born baby -- and women having period are requested not to enter the temple.
- 3) Please pay attention to keep the area clean.

*The Daily Process*

I have divided the days events into three parts: *puja garnu* (to do worship), *deuta aune* (coming of goddess) and treatment of devotees.

Inside the temple the vase is in a red box hanging on the wall. Below the box is a red chair Sita sits on while possessed by the Goddess. On the walls there are various pictures of the Goddess and straw mats are placed on the floor for devotees.

1) *Puja garnu* (to do worship)

Every morning Sita does worship to the Goddess. Before Sita enters the temple she always washes her hair and body. While bathing she begins saying the prayer of the Goddess (*Bhagvati Stotra*). She then enters the temple and does worship to the Goddess, who is represented by the vase. Sita offers various items to the Goddess like consecrated rice (*ascheta*), red powder (*abir*) and some flowers. The worship lasts about twenty minutes and the devotees recognize Sita's actions as a prelude to possession by the Goddess. When the worship is finished Sita sits on the red chair. She is possessed in the morning and stays seated in the sitting place of the Goddess (*ashan*) until the afternoon.

2) *Deuta aune* (goddess coming)

This is the time when Sita begins to shake and is possessed by the Goddess. After this stage Sita is now *Mā*, the Goddess. Now she is seated crosslegged and her hands are palms together in front of her chest. Her hands begin shaking up and down along with her knees. After this her hands begin moving back and forth along with her head. *Mā* repeats this several times and is given auspicious foodstuff (*sagun*) by Sita's husband or son. Sita's family will now bow down to the feet of *Mā* and receive a blessing.

## 3) Treatment

During this time *Mā* might diagnose illness, give advice or foretell the future for her devotees. Typically, a devotee will sit crosslegged before *Mā*. A devotee will usually offer *Mā* something like a few rupees or some rice. Although it is not obvious to new comer like myself, everyone seemed to know who's turn it was. If *Mā* has not already asked the devotees how they are, she will do so at this time. *Mā* will often ask people throughout the temple how they are while administering treatment on another devotee. Many of the devotees were longtime visitors to the temple and had come previously to *Mā* with other problems.

*The Devotees of Mā (Ajima)*

The devotees of *Mā* are those people who come to her for help. *Mā* refers to these people as *bhakta*, which means devotee. The devotees of *Mā* worship the Goddess in the form of a human being. The Goddess possesses Sita and through her is able to have direct contact with her

devotees. Devotees come to Mā to be cured of illness, to have their fortunes foretold and to leave their personal problems with the Goddess.

In the short time that Kabita and I observed the interaction between Mā and her devotees we found that people had many different reasons for coming to Mā. There were both men and women and also people from many different caste and ethnic groups including Brahman, Chetri, Magar, Sherpa and Newar. We also saw people who from their clothing appeared very wealthy and others who looked extremely poor.

#### *Case Studies of Devotees*

The following are cases of Mā's interactions with her devotees (real names of devotees are not used). Here I describe six of the eighteen cases we recorded.

#### *Case No. 1*

Tenzing, a Sherpa had come to Mā for reading of rice (*jokanna*, reading a pattern of rice grains to diagnose misfortune). He complained that his body was in pain. Mā's diagnosis was that his clan deity (*kul devta*) was not happy. The prescribed treatment was *no grahasanti* (no-nine, *grahasanti*=pacifying bad effect of a planet). He was supposed to pacify the bad effect of nine planets. This could be done by performing specific worship to the Goddess.

#### *Case No. 2*

Hanuman appeared to be at least 55 years or older. His complaint was that his son had been beating him. Mā told him that it was not actually his son who was beating him but a witch who was causing his son to do it. Mā told him not to blame his son and he agreed and left.

Hanuman had obviously been disturbed that his own son was beating him. In Nepal a person reaching old age is to be respected by their children, yet Hanuman was being beaten by his own son. The guilt had been taken from the son and placed on an exterior force, the witch. It could be said that such a diagnosis had served the social function of minimizing tension in the family. How could Hanuman resolve the fact that his own son was beating him?

According to Geertz a key problem of religion is that "the problem of suffering is paradoxically not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat or the helpless contemplation of others agony something bearable, supportable something we say sufferable" (Geertz 1965:162). In a sense Mā had made Hanuman's situation more sufferable.

#### *Case No. 3*

Two women had come about a third woman named Lakshmi. The women said that Lakshmi had not been behaving well with her husband, child and



other people. Mā diagnosed that a witch had collected some of Lakshmi's clothes and hair. The prescribed treatment was for Lakshmi to receive Mā's *tika* (mark placed on forehead as blessing) for three days in a row.

Case No. 4

Sushila had wanted to know if she would bear a son. She already had three daughters and she wanted a male child. Mā told her that she would give birth to one more daughter and then she would bear a son.

Case No. 5

A man and a woman, who from their clothing looked much richer than most of the devotees, had come about their father who drank excessively. Mā made no diagnosis but gave them some salt to feed to their father. She also did "blowing" and "sweeping" on a bottle of alcohol the father was to drink.

Case No. 6

One woman had come because her daughter, Kamala, had flunked a high school exam. Kamala was acting strangely and locked herself in her room. Mā said that a witch had caused this by taking two hairs from the girl's head. Mā told the woman to bring Kamala to her and she would help her.

Out of the eighteen cases we recorded eleven could be classified as domestic problems (i.e. problems concerned with family and relatives like Hanuman, who's son was beating him). From the perspective of an outsider I saw the problem as a domestic one but the diagnosis was supernatural. Often it was diagnosed that a witch was the cause of illness or problem. Mā told us that witches are a main cause of illness. This is a key point in the different way problems and illness are viewed. A Western psychologist viewing this as a domestic problem *might* have told Hanuman that his son was beating him due to some kind of mental disorder. The blame would be essentially on the son rather than an outside force (the witch).

*Treatments*

As can be seen from the examples above the two major forms of treatment are "blowing" and "sweeping", which were discussed earlier. Two items that are used frequently in treatment are *jhal* and *prasad*. *Jhal* is sacred water, which is brought from a temple, given by a holy man or someone possessed by a deity. *Prasad* is the sharing in food or other offerings made to a deity. *Jhal* and *prasad* are usually given after Mā has done "sweeping" for several minutes. The sacred water is stirred with a knife and blown on. Mā said that she does not use formulas of words (mantra) to cure people but that she just has the power and can cure simply by seeing a devotee.

Besides treatment people come to Mā for advice and to give thanks. One man asked Mā if he should transfer to another office so he could

earn more money. She told him that it was not necessary to transfer and that he could earn more money by taking bribes. The man asked if this was safe and Mā said there would be no problem. Another man had come to give Mā 300 rupees for helping him win a court case. Devotees may also come to receive *darsan* (blessing of the Goddess) because just to see the Goddess is considered as a blessing or as religiously meritorious.

After a devotee has given an offering to Mā, she will begin treatment. For a "sweeping" (*jharnu*) treatment Mā sweeps a broom of wild grass over the devotees head. She may do this in a up and down motion followed by sweeping over each shoulder. A "sweeping" treatment could last anywhere from two to twelve minutes.

After the sweeping Mā takes some sacred water (*jhāl*) and some white substance (that looked like large sugar crystals) and places them in a bowl. This is stirred and cut with a knife while blowing on it. Some of the white substance left in Mā's hand is given to the devotee to eat. Mā then pours the sacred water into the mouth of the devotee. She then takes some red powder (*abir*) and ash and places it on the devotees forehead (this is the giving of *tika*). After this Mā blows on the devotee's forehead and the treatment is over. These actions signify the end of treatment and worship.

While Mā is "sweeping" or stirring sacred water she is usually carrying on a conversation with the other devotees. During our visits I noticed that there were usually relaxed conversations between Mā and her devotees. She would always ask people how they were and there was quite a bit of joking among devotees. I found this environment relaxing and comfortable and always felt that Mā was genuinely concerned about her devotees.

### Conclusion

The Goddess possesses Sita and through her treats illness, gives advice, and foretells the future for her devotees. The devotees are able to interact with the Goddess through a human vehicle. By participating in the offerings and receiving *tika* (mark placed on forehead) at the end of worship, I was able to identify with the devotees of Mā. I also found that discovering the different local concepts of illness facilitated understanding of this healing system.

My conclusion is that for Mā and her devotees, ideas about curing centre upon the notion of the necessity for *obedience* to a divine power (Mā), submission to this power, whereas individual "faith" as such is irrelevant. This contrasts with "faith-healing" in Western culture, where the stress is on the individual's "responsibility for his/her own therapy."

In this paper I have tried to focus on the *emic* (insider's) perspective in order to facilitate an understanding of Sita's performance as a healer and her actions with the devotees. I further suggest that

this kind of understanding is qualitatively different from and ideally prior to "explanation" in social science. As Kakar suggests:

Explanation by very nature lies outside the phenomenon being studied, produces distance and allows a critical attitude to be possible. *Understanding* seeks an identification with the experience of others without which no true interpretation is possible. (1982:209).

Of course anthropology has for long emphasized the significance of uncovering the emic perspective. Nevertheless, it appears that in the study of healing at least, researchers in their rush toward "explanation", become lost in their own concepts or theories. These researchers miss the chance to develop an understanding that draws from the insider's perspective. Thus, as I have shown here, standard concepts such as "faith-healing", "spirit possession", or "shamanism" do not quite fit the situation of Mā and her devotees. By extension we can question the cross-cultural applicability of these concepts.

Secondly, I have suggested that attention to the emic perspective helps to account for the lack of competition between Mā and the modern medical facilities in the area. It is well known that "traditional" peoples the world over easily incorporate modern curative medicine into their health behavior and therapeutic choices. This is usually attributed to "pragmatism" (Foster and Anderson 1978: 245-246)--people will use what works and are not really interested in the theoretical aspect of medicine. I would argue that my informants might in fact have such a theoretical interest in medicine. Even when they remain primarily interested in effective cures. Specifically, for Mā and her devotees, it is through their own important distinction between "physical" and "supernatural" illness that they can accommodate both "traditional" and "modern" medicine.

My focus on the emic perspective in a study of healing is, of course, itself limited. I was a foreigner in Nepal and an outsider among Mā's devotees. In this position I agree with Geertz who wrote:

The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive 'with'-- or 'by means of' or 'through'.. (1976:224).

In this discussion of healing, I have attempted to show something of my informants' perspective through a description of Mā and her devotees oriented around these peoples' own concepts of illness and the supernatural.

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