

JIREL RELIGION: A PRELIMINARY LOOK AT THE RITES AND RITUALS OF THE JIRELS OF EASTERN NEPAL

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Introduction

The Jirels practice what Bista (1980:71) has called Lamaistic Buddhism, but they also visit Hindu shrines and observe many calendrical Hindu rituals, as well as adhering to their own indigenous shamanistic religious beliefs. These beliefs are centered around practitioners called *Phombo*. Spirit possession, spirit forces, and ancestor worship play a central role in the world-view of the Jirels (as well as Nepali people in general), and the *Phombo* holds a key position in this world-view. The situation is, however, more complex than that. For example, according to Macdonald (1997: xx): "The importance of spirit possession in Nepal is now widely recognised; but it is still difficult to situate this phenomenon against the general background of Nepalese religion ...[which is] generally portrayed as a syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism rooted in an all-pervasive animism" (see also Reinhard 1976; Hitchcock and Jones 1976; Valeix et al. 1972).

The Jirels have their own Lamas, men who, according to local tradition, had traveled to Tibet in order to obtain religious training. There is also a Jirel *gumba* (Buddhist monastery), built recently near Lower Kot, where students are trained to become Buddhist monks. Some Jirels are also receiving training at a large Sherpa *gumba*, which is located on the northwest of the valley, above Dhunge village. Because of certain doctrinal variations, if these Jirel monks are to practice in their own community, they need an additional six months of tutelage under an established Jirel Lama.

It has been suggested that Buddhism had probably spread into the eastern hills of Nepal about 500 years ago, with the arrival of Sherpas from Tibet (cf. Poffenberger 1980: 30-32; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1964). The Jirels,

however, affirm that it was they themselves who adopted Buddhism after two Jirel men, Hongjuli and Gari Lama, from the Devlinga clan, who went to Tibet and brought Buddhism back to the Jirels. According to Devlinga genealogy, this event occurred about five generations ago.

There appear to be several differences between the religious doctrines and rituals associated with the Sherpas and the Jirels. A different text is used by the Jirels, called *Dawa Kundu*, while the Sherpas use the *Lama Doma*. The main variations, however, appear to be in the rituals followed, for example, in the conduct of funeral rites. In these rituals the Sherpa and Jirel Lamas use different procedures for lighting lamps and making the *tormas*, which are representations or temporary abodes for the gods, made from rice mixed with butter. These are made in different numbers, sizes, shapes, and colors. In the final rites, held 40 days after a person has died, called *ghewa*, the Jirel Lamas conduct a procedure known as *sensing*, during which they beckon the spirit of the deceased to possess one of the relatives and relay any final messages before departing for the other world. This is absent in the Sherpa funeral rites. Finally, if for some reason a Sherpa Lama is engaged to conduct funeral rites for a Jirel, he is forbidden to touch the body of the deceased, whereas a Jirel Lama may do so.

As far as the Jirels' Hindu ritualism is concerned, they affirm that although they are Buddhists, they respect Hindu deities as well. According to one clan elder, "we will stop and pray at a Hindu shrine or temple, for good luck, and if our prayers are answered, we continue to pray at the shrine." There are numerous Hindu shrines in the valley, the most famous being Jiri Shuri, which had its own Brahman priest until a few years ago. Jirels would go there to pray, make offerings of coins, and receive *tika* (the Hindu practice of placing a red mark between the eyebrows after making an offering to a deity). Jirels also engage the services of Brahman priests who consult astrological charts in order to determine the appropriate day for the naming of their children.

The Jirels follow the Hindu calendrical rituals, celebrating *Maghe Sangkranti*, *Saune Sangkranti*, *Chaite Dasain*, *Dasami Tika (Dasain)*, *Bhai Tika (Tihar)*, with the same degree of enthusiasm as they have in observing *Lohsar*, the Buddhist New Year's Day celebration (for further information on the festivals of Nepal, see Anderson 1975).

Additionally, all Jirels worship the "new god," called *Naya*. Each house has an altar, devoted to *Naya*, comprising a box that is attached to the outside wall of the house. Why this deity has come to be called the "new god" Jirel elders were unsure, but they suggested that perhaps people adopted this god in more recent times. They were, however, unsure as to exactly when this occurred. In *Naya's* box, the Jirels put offerings of coins, cloth,

rice, one chicken egg, and several miniature representations of the trident of Shiva (a Hindu god), called *trisul*. At harvest time, offerings are made to *Naya*, and people pray for good fortune and for the health of their children and livestock.

Each family keeps one chicken dedicated and named for this god. They pluck-out one of its feathers and place it in the box, saying, "this is your chicken." When a baby or an animal becomes ill, they take the egg, coin, or feather and rub it over their body to heal them. These items are then returned to the box. Another way that the healing powers of *Naya* may be tapped is to anoint the dedicated live chicken with water, and use the water to bless the patient. If for some reason a family needs to sell *Naya's* chicken, they must reimburse the god. Not to have done so will assure that *Naya* will become angry and inflict sickness upon the family, in such forms as headaches, dizziness, body pains, and vomiting. To be cured of these conditions the Jirels must seek the services of the *Phombos*, because these illnesses, they say, are of a supernatural nature and cannot be treated by modern medicines. In turn, the *Phombos* frequently attribute illnesses and other misfortunes to *Naya's* wrath.

The Jirels also worship the snake god, known as *Loo*, this is probably the same as *Naaga*, the Hindu serpent god. There are particular sites at the base of trees where altars to *Loo* are constructed. People make offerings and worship this god at these sites. The "snake god" is, however, slowly losing its popularity, although people may make offerings to it at harvest time. Most of the altars dedicated to *Loo* have fallen into disrepair and are overgrown with weeds. The power of *Loo*, however, is not forgotten or taken for granted. When a man who is walking in the forest is suddenly overcome with illness, the Jirels say he stepped on *Loo's* sacred ground. The remedy for this type of illness is also to seek out the services of a *Phombo*.

The Jirels may be seen as displaying a remarkable heterodoxy in their religious beliefs, having adopted elements and concepts from various traditions and downplaying any points of incongruity between them. Similar syncretisms have been reported among other hill peoples of this region and may be attributed to the effects of centuries of interactions between the various ethnic communities with diverse beliefs and traditions, all of which occurred under Hindu religious and cultural hegemony (cf. Rose and Scholz 1980: 73).

Clan Rituals and *Phombos*

The Jirels call the *Phombos* "priests," but these practitioners are more than simply individuals who passively perform rituals to appease the gods. *Phombos* are believed to have a direct and personal relationship with the

supernatural world. They pound their drums, chant mantras, dance, and enter into trance-like states, during which they voluntarily become possessed by supernatural beings, ancestral spirits, or particular deities (see Sidky et al., "*Phombos: A Look at Traditional Healers among the Jirels of Eastern Nepal*," in this volume for a complete description). The *Phombo* incarnates the spirits and deities, but is able to control and restrain them. Once possessed, the *Phombo* begins to shake and shiver. This is the tangible manifestation that the gods or spirits have entered into his body. He can then communicate with these gods, who may speak through him, thereby obtaining information necessary to heal patients or to amend any distresses affecting the community.

In the past, the Jirel *Phombos* performed all rituals, including funerals, marriages, and other life-cycle observances. After the Jirels adopted Buddhism, however, the performance of funeral rites, such as cremation and last rites (*ghewa*), held 40 days later, were taken over by the Lamas. Jirel Lamas have drawn on some of the practices and beliefs of the *Phombos*. One of the most famous Jirel Lamas, Pusing Lama (d. 1996) was at first a *Phombo*, but later underwent training to become a Buddhist priest. This was confirmed for us by his son, who is now himself a practicing Lama and healer. Pusing Lama incorporated elements of both traditions in his professional repertoire (cf. Williams-Blangero et al., 1995). We encountered at least one practicing *Phombo* who was personally trained into that profession by Pusing Lama. Jirel Lamas, like the *Phombos*, act as healers by uttering mantras, blowing blessings (called *phukphak*), and dispensing charms, known as *buti*. Unlike the *Phombo*, however, the Lama does not enter into a trance or undergo spirit possession.

In their ability to physically incarnate the spirits of the ancestors and gods, the *Phombos* are central to the *kul devata* rites, or clan god worship—as illustrated by the Devlinga clan stopping its ceremonies altogether when their last *Phombo* died. The Devlinga had a rule that only a *Phombo* from their own clan could perform the *kul devata* rituals. Other clans, however, appear not to observe such a rule. But they too stopped their ceremonies with the demise of the *Phombos*. The Chungpate stopped their clan god rites after the death of the *Phombo* priest of *Chyomu*, who is the Chungpate clan god. Both of these cases clearly illustrate the significant role of the *Phombos* in the clan god ceremonies. Little has been written about Jirel clan gods and ancestral spirits or the rituals performed in their honor. It is for this reason that the remainder of this paper shall focus particular attention to this aspect of Jirel religion.

The Jirels in general stopped observing these communal rites 20 to 30 years ago, although the Deppa clan held such a ceremony in 1990, but none

since. The cessation of clan god worship (called *kul puja*) coincided with a period in which the Lamasangu-Jiri Road was constructed. This opened up the valley to the outside world and numerous socioeconomic changes followed (see Hamill et al., "Some Socio-Cultural Consequences of Transportation Development in the Jiri Valley, Nepal," in this volume). Involvement in a cash economy, the disintegration of clan solidarity, and the declining numbers of the *Phombos*, may all be cited as contributing causes for the termination of clan god worship.¹

The Jirels worship several deities, as well as their own particular clan gods. The god of the Deppa clan is *Lha*. The Thungba, and the associated sub-clan Chewe-Thungba worship *Chen*. *Chen* is also worshipped by the Garasamba, Jupule, and Thabo clans. Elders from these clans could not explain why they worship the same god, other than that it has been that way as long as they can remember. The phenomenon may be an indication that these descent groups may have at one time been closely connected genealogically, later fissioning off into different distinct descent groups, while retaining their common religious ideologies.

Another cluster of Jirel clans, the Serba, Thurbido and Chüngpate worship the god *Chyomu*. The Thungba also worship *Chyomu* in preliminary rites, prior to paying devotion to their main god, *Chen*; but the sub-clan Chewe-Thungba does not. The Devlinga and Meyokpa clan worship *Nangy Laha* (also called *Kalincho*). The Garchinga clan worship the god *Cheramjo*. The Palpali clan, however, has no particular god, making it an exception. Palpali clansmen say that they pray to Buddha, *Naya*, and *Loo*. These deities are also worshipped by all other Jirels, as well as the various other ethnic groups who live in the Jiri Valley.

While there are variations in *kul devata* worship, these activities have one thing in common. They are a means of ensuring prosperity, good fortune, and appeasing the gods and ancestral spirits. Given the importance of the rites for the well-being of the descent group, it was the social obligation of every household that possesses the necessary resources to hold *kul devata* worship, to sponsor the ritual activities.

A family that hosts the *kul puja* is obligated to do so for three consecutive years, before another family takes over the duty. This is a requirement observed by all Jirel clans with respect to their clan gods. It was explained that the deities and clan ancestors will be pleased if a family commits to three years of hosting the ritual, three being an auspicious number for the Jirels.

Lha Worship

Deppa clan members have a small *puja* room dedicated to their clan god, and it is within this room that *Lha*, a male god who controls the sun and

the moon, is worshipped. Within this room the Deppa have a stone altar, with the picture of the sun depicted on the right side and the picture of the moon on the left side. The Deppa claim that the sun and the moon are the guardians of their people and their crops. Ordinarily, members of the family put rice and holy water (*jangli*) before the stone altar whenever there is a full moon. Only men are permitted to enter the *puja* room. If women enter or see the room, it is said, that they will become sick.

At the appointed time, during the full moon night in April, the wall of the *puja* room is decorated with red flowers, and pots of *chang*, the local millet beer, are placed before the altar. *Chang* is indispensable in the ritual and festive lives of the Jirels, while raw millet is never offered to the gods. According to Jirel clansmen, "millet is not a god crop."

The Deppa possess an array of ritual objects used during their clan god ceremony, such as the implements used in making *tormas*, *torma*-holders, *chang* pots, plates to hold the left over of *chang* offerings (*sezho*), and pots for offering maize, and barley. These are communally owned by the clan and are passed on to the next family that hosts *kul puja*.

Unlike the other clans, whose *kul puja* is supervised by a *Phombo*, the Deppa themselves perform most of the procedures. Clan members and guests arrive at the home of the host, bringing chickens and other foodstuffs. The host must provide the bulk of the sacrificial animals and the food. This can amount to a tremendous economic burden. Attendance for members of the clan is obligatory. Should circumstance prevent them from attending, they must formally ask to be excused by the clan elder.

The worshippers (called *naksung*) collectively beckon their god and the spirits of their ancestors from their "original homeland" in Simraungadh to come to them (for further information on Simraungadh, see Ballinger 1976). This *kul devata* enterprise, in which clansmen gather with the singular purpose of paying homage to their god and the spirits of clan ancestors is an overt expression of group identity and solidarity.

It is said that *Lha*, who is in the company of the clan's ancestral spirits, stops at every Deppa village during his journey, travelling along a spiritual pathway. The *naksung* ask him to come through every gate and over each boundary and name specific places along the spiritual trail, starting at Simraungadh, then proceeding on to Khurkot, Rjagaun, Manthah, Namadi, Pulping, Buridiyan, Kharayoban, Lower Sikri, and finally arriving at the *puja* room. Deppa say that, once the god and his spirit companions arrive everything "appears golden," and the people feel joyful, and they throw flour and rice at the altar. The god and ancestral spirits are thought to be physically present among the worshippers.

After the god and spirits arrive, animals are sacrificed inside the room and everything is drenched in blood. A black goat is sacrificed for the sun and a white goat is offered to the moon. Elder clansmen were unable to explain the symbolic significance of the color of the sacrificial animals. In addition, to the goats, 20 cocks are sacrificed as well. After the animals are killed, the clansmen extract their internal organs and remove the hair from the goat carcasses. Then they put all of the carcasses near the altar and offer prayers to the god and ancestors for good luck, bountiful crops, etc.

On completion of the ritual those in attendance send the god and ancestral spirits back along the same spiritual pathway they came. Thereupon the meat is cut into pieces and cooked. Afterwards everyone sits on the floor and a great quantity of *chang* is served. Next, members of the clan and guests come and bow before the seated clan elders and the host. They do this by touching their heads to the elders' feet in an act of homage. Following this the food is served.

The Deppa clan also observe a number of food taboos. They have a religious prohibition against eating buffalo meat. However, there are no restrictions regarding buffalo's milk or cheese. The elders explained that the reason for this taboo that *Lha* dislikes these animals, but they were unable to explain why the god has an aversion to buffaloes. *Lha* also is described as hating sheep, so for this reason, Deppa clansmen never kept sheep nor did they eat mutton, whereas members of other clans did. In the past, it was also taboo for the Deppa to eat garlic, but this restriction no longer applies. Stinging nettle, which is boiled and eaten by many Jirels, is also a taboo food item, and again the reason for the taboo is forgotten.

Some of these restrictions may be syncretisms of Hindu beliefs. For example, the Brahmans and Chhetris view the buffalo as a vehicle of *Yamaraj*, the god of Death, and killer of gods. For this reason, members of these Hindu castes will not eat the flesh of buffaloes. Stinging nettle is also considered a taboo food by Brahmans and Chhetris.

The Deppa pray to *Lha* during every full moon and change the holy water that is left before his altar. At harvest time, maize and wheat are offered in the *puja* room, and they pray to this god in times of sickness, and crop disease, and give him offerings before marriage ceremonies are held. However, he is not called upon during funerals or births.

Chen Worship

The Thungba, Chawe-Thungba, Jupule, Garasamba, and Thabo worship the god *Chen*. The Thungba ceremony is nearly identical to the ceremonies of other *Chen* worshippers. The *kul puja* takes place once a year, but the scheduling of its actual date varies. It must be conducted during a full moon

in January, February, or April. The host family begins preparations by assembling 60 to 70 chickens, along with one egg for each bird. A large quantity of rice is cooked for the guests and many liters of *chang* are brewed in preparation for the occasion.

The ceremony is conducted by the *Phombo* and his assistants, called *choyupa*, who make *tormas* (representations of the gods) out of rice mixed with butter. Clan members gather at the home of the host and here they pay their respect to clan elders and wish each other a good fortune. Such a gathering of clan members and their participation in the ceremonies is again an overt expression of their group identity and cohesion.

The Thungba ritual is conducted in two stages. While preparations are being made, they pay homage to a goddess called *Chyomu*, in a ritual called *Tharshyo*. This ritual must be completed prior to the beginning of the rites for *Chen*. *Tharshyo* begins with clansmen raising a flag on a tree that is then blessed with *chang*. Then they beseech *Chyomu* not to be angry with them for their upcoming worship of *Chen*, an occasion calling for blood sacrifice. Thungba are unable to explain why they have to placate *Chyomu*, before they can worship their god, other than noting the goddess's dislike of blood sacrifice. Thungba informants are also unsure of the exact relationship between *Chen* and *Chyomu*, but speculate that perhaps the deities are brother and sister, or even husband and wife. Therefore, to worship *Chen*, *Chyomu* has to be placated. For three days, during *Tharshyo* no one is allowed to slaughter any animals or eat meat. It might be hypothesized that *Tharshyo* expresses indirectly the inherent contradiction or tension between the Buddhist interdiction against the taking of life and the Hindu acceptance of blood sacrifice, both of which have been incorporated in the syncretic religion of the Jirels.

While religious rites associated with *Chyomu* are conducted inside the house, the rituals associated with *Chen* are held outside, as the Thungba say in the "jungle." Here the host family selects a large tree and constructs an altar at its base where they place a *torma* to represent *Chen*. Then they make *tormas* for each of the eggs. When this is completed they place the *torma* representing *Chen* on the altar and arrange the other *tormas* and the eggs around it. The worship place is known as *lashing*. The *Phombo*, next, lights a lamp and burns incense (*sasing*) and begins to pound on his drum, called *Nga*, and invokes *Chen* and the clan ancestors to come from Simraungadh, naming each location they must pass through, until they reach the *lashing*. The *Phombo* becomes very agitated and starts to tremble when *Chen* is nearby. Finally, the *Phombo*, who is now in a trance and shaking violently and pounding his drum, announces the god's arrival. It is believed that the god has taken possession of the *Phombo* at this point.

Chickens are now sacrificed and their blood is scattered on the *tormas* and the altar. The chickens are cut open, and their livers are extracted. These are fried and offered to the god at the altar. Clan members then say prayers to the god and the spirits of their ancestors. Upon completion of the ceremony, the god and ancestor spirits are sent back and the worshippers attend a big feast, which includes chicken, and great quantities of *chang* and rice. Once again the host family provides the bulk of the food consumed at the feast.

It is interesting to note that the Thabo, Garasamba, and Jupule, who also worship *Chen* in a ceremony very much like that of the Thungba, do not worship *Chyomu*. Clansmen could not explain the reason for this.

The Thungba, Chewe-Thungba, Jupule, Garasamba, and Thabo invoke *Chen* at all life-cycle ceremonies, such as the naming ceremony (*nwaran*), rice-feeding (*pasni*), when a child receives its first solid food, a hair-cutting ceremony (*chewar*), when little boys at the age of 5 have their hair cut for the first time, and final funeral rites (*ghewa*), when the spirit of the deceased person is called upon and enters into the body of a relative and conveys final messages.

There is yet another variation among these clansmen who worship *Chen*. The Garasamba in Bhaiselumbu village also worship a female deity called *Bajhu Abhi* (probably the Hindu goddess, *Bhagabati*). According to Garasamba elders, they acquired her from the village of Jungu, during a magical duel between their *Phombo*, and *Phombos* living in Jungu. After taking the idol, the *Phombo* put it inside the Garasamba *puya* room and thereafter, out of reverence to this goddess, the Garasamba stopped cooking buffalo meat inside their houses.

The circumstances surrounding this event sheds a unique light on one aspect of Jirel religious beliefs. The Garasamba say that the ancestor of their lineage was a *Phombo* and that at that time there were many powerful *Phombos* in the village of Jungu. There was much rivalry between these *Phombos*. Each one wanted to demonstrate their powers and to be recognized as the most powerful *Phombo*, so as to recruit more followers and hence more income. In their competition they began a war of spells with the Garasamba ancestor. *Phombos* fought by going to a holy place (*jatra*), where people gather and worship. Here they would challenge one another by uttering incantations and performing their rites. The *Phombo* who could stop the other *Phombos* from shivering was acknowledged as the winner. The defeated *Phombo* would accept the triumphant party as his guru. In this rivalry the Garasamba *Phombo* was victorious, and upon his victory he confiscated the goddess of the Jungu *Phombos* and brought her to Bhaiselumbu.

This was an important victory because the goddess *Bajhu Abhi* (*Bagabati*) and *Mahadi* (Lord Shiva) are the primary deities worshipped by the *Phombos* and *Jhankris* (see Sidky et al., "*Phombos: A Look at Traditional Healers Among the Jirels of Eastern Nepal*," in this volume). Following this event, an altar was built for *Bajhu Abhi* in Lower Sikri. The *Garasamba* go there to worship, taking a bowl of *chang* and a sickle (a female weapon, *hasi*) or a bell. As an act of respect, the man carrying these must remain silent until he has made the offerings, only then may he speak. No other Jirel clan worships this goddess, but Brahmans and Chhetris living in the valley do so. They also offer bells and tridents (*trisol*), but never bring *chang*.

***Nangy Laha* Worship**

The Devlinga and Meyokpa clans worship *Nangy Laha*. This is a mountain god associated with Kalinchok, a peak in the Dolakha district. This place has special significance to *Phombos*, who make annual pilgrimages there (see Miller 1997:11). The Devlinga clan once had numerous *Phombos* who worshipped at Kalinchok, this may explain why Devlinga worshipped this deity. The date of *kul puja* is on the first full moon of January. As with other clans, the family who wishes to organize this ritual is obligated to do so for three consecutive years. Members of the Devlinga are obligated to keep one cock for their clan god and bring it with them at the time of *kul puja*. While the relatives are assembled, they pay their respects to their clan elders and the host of the *kul puja*, reaffirming their kinship bonds with one another and with their ancestral spirits, as well as asserting their own positions within the descent group.

Nangy Laha is worshipped inside the house, but there is no specific *puja* room. The *Phombo* leads the ceremony. A *torma* is placed against one wall; or else rice is piled up in the shape of a mountain, to represent this god. After offering the god *chang*, holy water (*jangli*), and burning incense (*sasing*), the *Phombo* begins pounding his drum and starts to shake and shiver and calls on the god and clan ancestor spirits to come from Simraungadh. Again, each place the god and ancestor spirits must traverse is named in turn, until their presence is finally announced in the room. The *Phombo* sacrifices a cock and sprinkles the blood on the *torma*. Next, the head of the household who is hosting the rites kills a chicken and scatters its blood on the *torma* as well. Finally, members of other houses who have brought a cock, each according to age, are permitted to sacrifice their birds. The god and ancestors are then sent back and the assembly sits down to a feast of chicken, rice and abundant amounts of *chang*.

The Devlinga found themselves confronted with a dilemma concerning the blood sacrifice ritual when they converted to Buddhism. Here again we encounter a similar tension expressed in the *Tharshyo* rites performed by the Thungba. According to local Jirel tradition, as noted earlier, men from the Devlinga clan are credited for going to Tibet and bringing Buddhism to the Jiri Valley. After conversion, clan members were in contention over the issue of blood sacrifice. Some sided with the *Phombos*, insisting that sacrifice was necessary, whereas others sided with the Lamas, who opposed the practice. The issue was never resolved because the *puja* to *Nangy Laha* stopped about 15 years ago, upon the death of the last Devlinga *Phombo*, the only one permitted to perform the rites for the clan. Devlinga still raise a cock in honor of their god, but instead of killing it they sell it and offer the money gained to charity. Offerings are made to *Nangy Laha* at harvest time, and he is invoked during life-cycle ceremonies.

Cheramjo Worship

The Garchiga worship *Cheramjo*. The Garchiga are a sub-clan, but Garchiga elders do not remember the clan from which they broke off. They report that the split occurred as a result of a marriage by a clansman with a Chhetri female. This was how the Garchiga, which means "newly made family" was formed.

Cheramjo, glossed "holy snowy mountain," is associated with *Gouri Shankar*, by Jirel informants. This mountain has twin-peaks, the higher peak is said to be a male deity, while the lower one is said to be a female deity. *Gouri Shankar* refers to Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva and to Lord Shiva himself. *Cheramjo*, however, are Jirel deities in other contexts, not Hindu ones, and they were originally associated with a mountain in Simraungadh. That *Cheramjo* has become affiliated with *Gouri Shankar*, Hindu deities, is yet another example of the syncretic nature of Jirel religious beliefs.

The Garchiga worship these deities inside their houses. They hold the *puja* on the first full moon night of November. Unlike the Deppa clan, they do not conduct any activities on behalf of these deities on other full moon nights. As with the other clans, the same family must host the ritual for three consecutive years.

A *Phombo* and his assistants perform the *puja*. On the day of the *puja* they paint a picture of the mountain on a wall near the sleeping area. Then the *Phombo* offers *chang*, and holy water, and burns incense (*sasing*). At the beginning of his performance, he calls the god and goddess to come to the *puja* place. Then a series of chicken sacrifices follows. First they sacrifice a cock and scatter its blood and then hens are sacrificed and their blood

scattered. When asked about the significance of cocks and hens sacrificed, Garchiga elders explained that the number of cocks sacrificed must always exceed the number of hens, saying that this is how it has been done traditionally. The group then prays for health, fertility of their crops, and good fortune in the coming year.

The Garchiga call on *Cheramjo* when ever someone is sick, and when a child is being born; but they do not paint the picture of the deity on the wall on these occasions. Offerings are also made to this deity in a first-fruits ceremony during harvest time, when the first of wheat and maize are brought in.

The Worship of *Chyomu*

The Serba, Thurbido and Chungpate clans worship *Chyomu*, a female deity to which we have already referred when discussing the clan rituals of the Thungba. *Chyomu* is a goddess also associated with a mountain, *Gauri Parbat* (Mountain of Shiva's wife). Some informants believe her to be the same as the female deity worshipped by the Garchiga. The Serba clan's worship of *Chyomu* is similar to that practiced by the Thurbido and Chungpate clans. The *puja* ritual is held on either the first full moon night of November, or January. Again, as with the other clans, the family that organizes the ceremony is obligated to do so for three consecutive years.

Preparations for the ceremony begin with the brewing of a great quantity of *chang*, and then all clan members and other guests assemble. A *Phombo* and four assistants conduct the rituals. The *Phombo* is required to ritually bathe and abstain from eating meat for three days before the ceremony. The activities are conducted inside the *puja* room and women are allowed to participate because *Chyomu* is female. At night they make one large *torma*, called a *solbo*, out of 28 kgs. of rice to represent *Chyomu*. Four small *tormas*, called *choyupa*, are made to represent other mountain deities. Altogether about 40 kgs. of rice are used. Coins are placed near these *tormas* and they are coated with *ghiu* (clarified butter). Later, the *Phombo* offers *chang* to the gods and burns incense, while the relatives and guests eat and drink *chang* all night long. In the morning, when the sun rises above *Gouri Parbat*, with its glistening rays revealing the goddess's blissfulness, the *Phombo* begins his performance beating on his drum and uttering his prayers. He calls on the goddess and ancestor spirits to come from Simraungadh. When the goddess and ancestor spirits arrive, he shivers and shakes and announces that the goddess has arrived. Serba rites do not involve sacrifice of animals because *Chyomu* does not eat meat or drink blood. After asking for good fortune and fertility for the clan, the *Phombo*

cuts the *torma* into small pieces and distributes these to clan members and guests. These are eaten along with large amounts of *chang*.

The Serba no longer conduct their clan god rituals. *Chyomu's Phombo* priest who lived in Yersa village died about twenty years ago, at which time the *puja* was terminated.

Conclusions

In traditional Jirel society, the assembly of clansmen to worship their *kul devata* was in fact an overt expression of their common identity as members of their respective descent groups. The act of worshipping clan gods and ancestor spirits is linked to Simraungadh and the elite Kiranti, mentioned in the Hindu epics, *Ramyaana* and *Mahabharata* (cf. Bista 1980:33), whom the Jirel claim as their ancestor.

In addition, these events were a means for families to enhance their status and prestige in the community through the hosting of a large *kul devata* ritual. Because the Jirels are subsistence farmers, only a few households could produce the kind of surplus to host such feasts. Hosting such an event demanded the commitment of considerable amounts of time, effort, and resources, and only rich families were able to afford organizing clan god worship, which they took on as a social obligation.

In the past, the difference between the rich and poor, among the Jirels, and consequently the ability to hold such large feasts, was mostly determined by the amount of landholdings. This excluded everyone but the wealthiest Jirel clansmen from hosting such events. Consequently, it was they who accrued prestige and merit and good karma for undertaking the enterprise. In addition, these *kul devata* rituals also had a significant economic function in the context of traditional Jirel society, i.e., it operated as a mechanism for the reciprocal distribution of the surplus generated by large landholding families. The wealthy obtained merit, prestige, and good karma; and the poor received food; and the clan gods and ancestors were pleased. The clan god rituals thus served as what anthropologists have referred to as a wealth leveling mechanism (cf. Lavenda and Schultz 2000:124).

This form of food distribution in the context of rituals is to be understood in terms of the traditional way of life in agrarian self-sufficient villages of Nepal, as described by Shrestha (1997). In the past, communities such as the Jirels were based on mutual interdependence and a system of reciprocity involving the basic necessities. Certainly economic inequalities did exist, mostly in the ownership or access to land, and those without land depended on the landowners for their existence, working as tenants, sharecroppers, or servants, in a client-patron relationship. This was

certainly a source of tension and stress, but the mutual dependence and sense of community served as a common bond among them. In times of emergency, those who had the means would help those in need. The wealthy hosted rituals, such as the ones described above, during which they shared their resources with the impoverished. Events such as these occurred frequently enough to be an important economic mechanism for redistribution (cf. Shrestha 1997:81).

Traditionally, poverty was seen and treated as a community problem, rather than one associated with individual families, although it was they who bore the brunt of it. With "development," which is largely defined in materialistic terms, involving such indicators as "per capita income," "energy consumption," "resources use," and "literacy," poverty was transformed from a communal or collective problem into one of personal deficiency and individual failure (Shrestha 1997:81; see also Hamill et al., "Some Socio-Cultural Consequences of Transportation Development in the Jiri Valley, Nepal," in this volume).

With the new economic ideology, the wealthy have come to believe that their affluence is the product of their own cleverness and economic rationality, and hence have absolved themselves of any obligations and responsibility toward the poor (Shrestha 1997:81). Currently, in Jiri one is likely to find these "economically rational" folks more ready and willing to invest in satellite dishes and television sets, rather than helping a needy cousin who is unable to afford the cost of the ambulance fee to take a sick child to Kathmandu for treatment. Thus the extinction of clan god worship among the Jirels, marks not just the loss of what someone would call a "quaint cultural tradition," but it is also a profound indicator of changes in the socioeconomic, political, and ideological characteristics of Jirel society as a whole.

Note

1. Although not all of the rites we are about to describe are performed any longer, the present tense will be used for the sake of uniformity. Today few clan elders remain who remember the rituals in all their detail. For this reason, the information presented may appear somewhat cursory and sketchy; however, the data are sufficient enough to reveal the salient features of these rituals.

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