Gregory G. Maskarinec: *The Rulings of the Night. An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts.* 1995, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 276p.

Review by Anne de Sales

An earlier version of this book was a thesis (University of Hawaii, 1990) that was reviewed in the columns of this Bulletin (n°3, 1992) along with several other studies of the last decade on shamanic oral literature in Nepal. Now that it has been reworked and published, the book deserves a review of its own.

Gregory Maskarinec has chosen to present a shamanic tradition among a community of Blacksmiths in Western Nepal through its songs. Echoing the way in which shamans invoke their ancestors in their ritual ouvertures, the author uses the introductory chapter to situate himself - in this case, in the lineage of Wittgenstein and other philosophers of language. The theoretical position that is stressed throughout the book may be summarised here. In the analysis of a social phenomenon, what is said is of primary importance: "Language is the most central social phenomenon...the primary means by which people are socialised... by which they participate in a society" (12). This principle is illustrated in shamanic seances which "affirm that reality truly is socially constructed through the medium of language. Consequently only words have any genuine effect on the world and its participants." (242). Therefore, in order to understand what a shaman is and what he does, one has to listen to him - to his public discourse and his songs, and not to his private conversation or the expression of his internal state, because the perspective here is sociological, and not psychological (15).

Moreover - and here comes a second set of propositions - one has to keep to what is said, and understand the texts within themselves, respecting the limits that they set. In other words one should neither step out of the tradition that is studied nor try to impose exhaustive interpretations from a so-called objective point of view. The texts contain everything there is to know.

Understanding tradition in this way means abandoning the *a priori* of classical Western philosophy whereby language denotes things in a world that it mirrors. For Maskarinec the shamans do not use

language to *signify* a reality different from this world but rather to *create* another reality. The idea is that shamanic words really generate a new world, in which shamans can exercise their power: "With his words, which are his power and his tools, he creates the illness, creates the body of the patient, and creates the world in which his patients experience relief" (193). Any study that shuns the text in favour of interpreting what is said would be condemning itself to see only irrelevance in shamanic action.

Whether or not one agrees on these principles, this is a clearly stated position. To the extent that it is inspired by ethnomethodology, this position adopts the methods of the ethnos in question. In this respect it is radically different from those underlying classical ethnographical descriptions in which the observer remains outside what he observes. And the premises here will be accepted *a priori*, since they underlie the presentation of the information.

The author's desire to show that shamanic texts are "carefully crafted to appear exactly a theology, pure, perfect, sacred and unchangeable" (117) determines the course of the book. The second chapter argues that the songs present a "comprehensive" and "refined" aetiology of all the possible diseases known of the villagers. The fourth chapter shows how these songs enclose the "stage directions" to be followed as the rites unfold - what the author calls the "reflexive character of shamanic speech and shamanic action", in the sense that one uses what is said to explain what is done. The idea that shamanic words are perfectly intelligible is recurrent in the fifth chapter on the subject of magic spells or *mantra*. Maskarinec shows that these spells, too often represented in the literature as meaningless gibberish uttered by charlatans, actually convey a deep meaning. The rhyming and rhytmic verses restore order by fighting entropy, "the true enemy of a shaman".

In view of the importance that the author rightly accords to shamanic literature, it is regrettable that the texts are presented piecemeal, as mere illustrations of the argument. Hardly any of the songs are given in their totality, and their local origin (the author worked in several villages and even several districts) and singers are rarely specified. The transcription of the songs is absent here (although it is presented in the thesis) , and notes and comments on the translation

are rare. For example, we do not know the original expression that the author translates as "Rammâ Jumratam [the first shaman] began to be possessed" (99), although it is known that in Nepali various images can be used to describe the phenomenon that anthropologists call "possession". What are these images here? No doubt the author knows them: this is clear from some of his other works, but we are here left in the dark. Although very rich, the material presented in this book cannot easily be used as a source.

It seems that what matters to the author is less to provide documents on the tradition that he studied, than to invite the reader to experience this tradition as far as possible, that is, within the limits of a book. This is also why he prefers to leave a text partly unexplained rather than to impose upon it an interpretation that he feels would be totalizing and would prevent the shamanic poetry from attracting the reader towards the world that it is made to create. The conclusion (chapter 7) is actually very explicit about the initiatic intention that guided the writing of the book. Similar to a shamanic journey, it aims at transforming the reader in the same way as the author has himself been transformed: "I too struggle to create a new world, where we no longer suffer from treating words as though they were pictures" (236).

It may be worth mentioning that Maskarinec transcribed in Devanagari thousands of lines that he recorded and translated during the six years that he was based in Jajarkot. Far from being a humble copyist, he completed his knowledge by learning these lines by heart. The author's mastery of his material is expressed in terms more reminiscent of the discourse of a shaman than of a social scientist: "By now I know more shaman texts than does any shaman in Nepal... It is this competence that permits me to write with a certain authority... with some assurance that I have got things right" (236). And a little later: "I have, it seems, gone further than most ethnomethodologists having not just uncovered native methods of constructing sense but applying those methods to help members make sense of their lives." (238).

It should be obvious that for the author it is only by trying to become a shaman that one may understand what a shaman is. From this point of view the exclusive distinction between the two roles that was made above becomes irrelevant. This is a debate that indeed lies at the

heart of the study of religions: is it possible to understand a belief without holding it? Or, on the contrary, is it possible to give a fair account of a belief that one also holds? But what to my eyes remains undebatable is the presentation of what has been chosen to be explained. The reader has no means of checking and discussing or even using the material presented here in different perspectives. The decontextualised presentation of dismembered shamanic songs renders this impossible. And it remains difficult to understand how the shamanic world of "literal metaphors" (167) is inscribed in the ordinary world of the community.

One cannot but agree with Maskarinec when he writes that shamans create (or at least "create") other worlds with their words, but the process of this creation deserves a careful description. Strangely enough, Maskarinec limits himself to Malinowski's perspective in seeing the song as a charter for action. Even in the interesting chapter devoted to "the Sound of Things", he neglects to analyse the way acts, words and objects are tied together in a shamanic seance to the point of forming a kind of ritual conglomerate where words tend to solidify. My own experience in a neighbouring area led me to see acts, rather than words, as the focal point in the ritual. There is no question that in the process of borrowing their shamanic tradition from the Magar, the Chantel gave scant attention to words, keeping the acts as the main bearers of the tradition. If this is definitely not the case in the situation studied in Jajarkot, it would have been worth stressing it.

Although the vectors of this shamanic tradition are mainly Hindu Blacksmiths, Maskarinec emphasises that "this distinct culture [is] often at odds with surrounding dominant cultures of Western Nepal" (75). There are, nevertheless, "rare, severely transformed appearance of classic [Hindu] mythology in the shaman's material" (40) as well as the possible influence of the Tibetan *chöd* ceremony on a specific ritual act in which the shaman is shown performing a sort of self-sacrifice (59). In the third chapter he attempts a sketch of the historical and cultural background of this tradition. The region is traversed by pilgrims on their way to Mount Kailash and is marked by important centres of Kanphata yogis, about whom many references can be found in the mythology studied. By contrast the presence of important Buddhist centres in the North (Jumla) is hardly mirrored by the songs in which

there are only rare mentions of lamas. Since these mentions are always negative, the author suggests that the shamans were somehow linked in the past to the practitioners of the Bon religion which was in violent conflict with invading Buddhism. While this is certainly an interesting line of inquiry, it is worth investigating the possibility that the implicit hostility may be derived from an association with the ethos of the Kalyala dynasty of Jumla, which carved out a strongly Hindu Kingdom in the ruins of the Buddhist Malla Empire.

The tradition presented here is also strongly reminiscent of what J. Hitchcock called Dhaulagiri shamanism, that is practised by the Northern Magar as well as by the Blacksmiths who live with them. Not only do the similar narrative motifs of the songs make this obvious but also the two ceremonies that frame the life of a shaman, his initiation and his funerals, that are described in the sixth chapter. These provide a mine of information of great comparative value.

This book is the fruit of an experience of which any reader will acknowledge the authenticity, and it has already been greatly appreciated, not least by the nation which hosted the research: the author was recently awarded the Birendra Academy Decoration, a distinction that until now has been extended to Toni Hagen and the late Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.