

Life-Journeys: Rai ritual healers' narratives on their calling

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When I tried to elicit life-histories (*jīvanī* or *jīvan kathā* in Nepali) among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal, most respondents did not understand what I wanted. Conversations typically led to a factual account of kinship relationships, and often ended up in a nostalgic listing of prices during times when a buffalo could be bought for two rupees. Such difficulties have also been described by other anthropologists (e.g. Rosaldo 1976, Frank 1979, Hoskins 1998: 2) and they point to the fact that different concepts of personhood or individuality and different concepts of genre have to be taken into consideration. Hoskins, for example, reports a tradition in which identities and biographies are formed around objects (she calls them 'biographical objects'), thus producing a more indirect way of telling stories of personal experience. Clearly, the idea of one's life as a well-organized story of becoming is a cultural construct. It is useful at this point to distinguish between the more comprehensive 'life histories' on the one hand and ordinary 'life stories' on the other. The latter are much more widespread and have been characterized as stories which (a) make an evaluative point about the speaker, and (b) have extended reportability (Linde 1993: 21ff). Such stories may be quite short and can be part of larger discourse units, i.e. conversations, reports, etc. However, as Linde points out, like any story they imply features of coherence, and the principles of such coherence are culturally variable. In the life stories about professional choice discussed by Linde it is mainly temporal continuity which underlies the tellings. I will argue that movement through space is an important principle of coherence in the personal narratives considered here.

Though the telling of individual life-histories is not a common practice among the Kiranti of east Nepal, among their shamans and tribal priests there is a typical way of narrating 'how I became a ritual healer', and so these narratives may be considered to make up a distinct genre. These stories tell of a process of becoming which usually begins in childhood and extends up to the state of initiated ritual expertise

(e.g. Sagant 1976 on the Limbu; for a typical *jhā̃krī* story from another context see Macdonald 1987). While they are individual and often very personal stories, they display a number of common traits on the level of both style and content. There is no specific term for such narratives in the Mewahang language but, following Bauman's definition of a genre as an "orienting framework for production and interpretation of discourse" (Bauman 1992: 53), one can recognize pragmatic conditions which allow one to speak of an indigenous genre.

In this paper I will consider some of the stories I recorded among the Mewahang Rai in the Arun Valley, east Nepal, between 1987 and 1991. This group, which is termed a 'subtribe' in the literature, belongs to the larger ethnic unit called Rai who are speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language belonging to the Kiranti family.¹ Although the stories were all recounted to me as an ethnographer, a fact which has influenced the form of presentation in some ways (e.g. the insertion of explanatory remarks), my impression is that this situation has had only a limited effect on the overall content of the narratives. A closer look at these accounts shows that, despite all the variations, there are certain recurrent features which indicate that these narratives are subject to some degree of cultural standardization, especially because of the claims to authority which are connected with their telling.

The Rai have a very rich and complex oral tradition, called *muddum*, which is the embodiment of an ancestral way of life, and so it is of crucial importance that the oral texts of ritual experts are transmitted in an authentic manner (see Gaenszle 1998 and forthcoming). Because a competence in ritual speech is only inherited by some descendants of former experts, and not by all, the signs of a calling have to be publicly displayed and acknowledged. It is for this reason that to tell how one received one's calling is of more than personal relevance. Claims to ritual competence can be contested, and so it is important to convince others of the authenticity of the initiatory experience.

I will try to show that the ritual healers' narratives on their calling are both highly contextual (i.e. personal accounts of what really happened) as well as textual (i.e. possessing distinct formal and stereotypical features). The narration of journeys is of particular importance: journeys through the jungle, journeys up the mountains, journeys up and down the valley. A crucial part of the stories is the telling of dreams, and these dreams are invariably about journeys: searching journeys, journeys to the ancestral divinity, journeys to the sky and underworld. Interestingly, the dream journeys relate directly to the ritual journeys the shaman undertakes for the

¹ For details on the ethnographic context and conventions of transcription, see Gaenszle (2000). Terms from Mewahang Rai ritual language are marked by M*.

benefit of his clients.² I will argue, therefore, that the journey is a central metaphor for the stories of becoming and transformation, both in personal narrative as well as in ritual contexts.

However, although the stories tell of a process of individuation and stress the healer's personal qualities, it is important to note that this process is guided by external forces. Thus, agency in this kind of life story is minimized, because most of the actions that are recounted are beyond the control of the teller. This raises questions about the role of individualism and individual autonomy, which has been a heavily debated issue in South Asian anthropology.³

1. Journeys through the landscape

The first example is the story of Jokhmare, who was aged 46 at the time of recording (in 1991). He is both a shaman (*makpa* in Mewahang and *dhāmi* in Nepali) and a tribal priest (*ngo:pa*) for the *waya nāgi* ritual (offering to an ancestral snake deity), and he has a good number of clients.⁴ However, there are some in the village who doubt his inherited competence (*sakhau*), because Jokhmare's father's brother is also a well-known ritual expert, and, according to local concepts, only one can be legitimate. However, Jokhmare himself claims that his *sakhau* derives from his mother's brother, and this is also a topic in the following story:

So I became a shaman in the following manner: Back then I did not know anything and lived an ordinary life. Then I dreamt that I flew.

After lying down to sleep, someone sprinkled me with water. I fell asleep and began to fly. A voice said to me: "Over there you have a stone, this is your deity, go and fetch it!" And the voice continued: "Become a shaman!"

Then I took some ginger⁵ in my hand and began to fly up to the source of the Sankhuwa River. After arriving there I continued to fly to China. There I arrived at a river, and I sat down. I fell unconscious (*nūngwa ma:khedā*).

² On the notion of ritual journeys in the Himalayas, see Allen (1974), and the contributions by Höfer, Oppitz, Pettigrew and Gaenzle in Bickel and Gaenzle (1999).

³ See, e.g. Dumont (1980), Östör *et al.* (1982), Beteille (1986), Mines (1988, 1994). This discussion, it should be stressed, focused mainly on the Hindu person.

⁴ The duality of ritual roles is common among Tibeto-Burman speaking groups in Nepal, and it is now common usage to call one a 'shaman' and the other a 'tribal priest'. However, both roles have shamanic features (such as initiatory crisis, the practice of ritual journeys, possession, and drumming).

⁵ Ginger is a necessary tool to go on ritual journeys.

I flew back to the house, and I remembered that I had to get up the next morning.

“Don’t get up! First finish dreaming this dream!” This an old man said to me. And so I continued sleeping. Then again he spoke to me: “If you wake up, don’t speak to anybody. Go then, and fetch your deity, this stone!” ...

I went to look for the stone, and in fact at dawn I eventually found it. I went straight to it and grabbed it, and in that moment I started to become very hungry. I went home, I was very calm, and then a great anger came over me. “I have to worship this. If you take a deity into your house, you have to pay reverence to it.”

Jokhmare’s account begins with this episode about his first encounter with the divine power. Typically, it is an external voice which gives straightforward commands and advice, and these lead the initiate to travel in search of his deity. The first journey leads up to the head of the Sankhuwa river, a common destination in the ancestral *nāgi* cult, but also all the way over the Himalayan mountain range into China. In ritual journeys which form a part of shamanic séances, the destination is often ‘Lhasa’, and it is possible that this is alluded to here. Finally, the stone is found in the nearer vicinity, but the location is not specified.

Jokhmare continues his story by telling of how he gave the stone away to his maternal uncle. Obviously he was not ready yet. But then he started to lose his mind again. He lived through a time of repeated crises. He speaks about the hardships of making a living as a cowherd, with little to eat. Again he has a vision in his dreams—he sees a bunch of feathers. Again he later finds them in reality, and again he gives what he has found away to his maternal uncle, rather than keeping it himself. The situation becomes worse: Jokhmare does not sleep regularly, has no appetite, roams around, and gets into fits of anger. His relatives consult oracles and come to the conclusion that through his maternal uncle he has inherited the power to shamanize. It is only after his wedding that he eventually accepts his fate:

Then in the year vs 2022 or 2023 [1965/66] I lost my mind again. It was the month of Asar, and we were planting millet. I was busy carrying the seedlings. Already before that I had temporarily lost my mind, but this time the true shamanic nature came out for the first time. I went up to the high meadows (*lekh*). You probably don’t remember. The mother of my father was still alive. I arrived up there at Jimbore’s cowshed (*goth*), and he was in the process of milking the cows. I said to him: “Grandfather, give me some milk! Over there is a deity, I have to fetch it.”

He mixed water into the milk and cooked it, but I had to go empty-handed.

I remained up there for three days [wandering around]. Eventually Jimbore went down to his house, the one up there, and said to my people: “Go up there and get your son!”

So they sent someone up, and eventually I came down again. As I recognized my house, I started running down the hill. My [paternal] grandmother said: “Where have you been? You smell of forest, of leaves, where have you been all the time?” And she comforted me. While I was wandering around, not even my *topi* had fallen down. Nor were my clothes torn. I had not lost anything.

Some time passed, and after I had married, a voice said to me: “Make yourself a drum (*dhyāñiro*)!” And so I made a drum and began to hold séances. Only then did I become human again. My body became light and agile, and I began to have an appetite again. Before, I had stopped eating rice, and only leaves tasted good to me. So then I held séances. The village elders (*pasung*) taught me one or two words, but actually I did not need any elders. I learned it by myself. In my dreams (the deity) instructed me: “Say this, say that!” So I dreamt.

In the daytime I held a *dewa puja*, then at night I held a shamanic séance. My first client household (*singkhong*) was that of Suntale. Some days later they had also heard about it over there in Tamku. “He has lost his mind and, after chasing away the spirits, become a shaman.” So the word spread.

After that we began to have some grains in the house, it grew well (*saha*). If I think about it, we did not have anything to eat before that. Our rice plate was only that big, made from wood. Then I began to hold shamanic séances and to worship *nāgi*, my relatives have already forgotten about that. This is what I experienced, that’s all.

This is an almost classic description of the shamanic initiatory crisis. Jokmare roams around up in the mountains, in a confused state of mind, eating nothing but leaves and smelling of forest. This is the typical assimilation to a forest being, a way of becoming part of the “wilderness” (cf. Hamayon 1990: 439ff). Interestingly, the story does not say much about the subjective experience during these three days of wandering about. It mainly tells of his interactions with other people. This may be due to the fact that the initiate does not remember this phase, as is often the case, and that what really happened is then reconstructed from others’ accounts.

The story then recounts the return from the forest, the return to normality, and the beginning of the shamanic career. Typically, the narrator stresses that he did not

need any teachers. It is the deity itself which acts as instructor. This underlines the power and authority which has now been achieved. A powerful shaman does not need a guru, his only teachers are the deities (*guru deutā*). Thus, the narrative covers the crucial period of the shaman's life: this is how he became someone special and unique. Everything after that is derivative of this period.

2. A dream journey to the sky

Sitane is a priest (*ngo:pa*) for the *Sarandew*⁶ ritual who inherited his competence (*sakhau*) from his father. When he was in his early twenties his father, Phulmare, who was an assistant in this ritual (called *bhāgimi*) in the beginning, took him along to the jungle and taught him how to pluck the 'flowers' (actually certain green leaves) for *Sarandew*. This is a very important task, because the success of the ritual hinges on the purity of the flowers, and therefore the assistant is often considered to be as knowledgeable as the priest himself, or sometimes even more knowledgeable. Later on he started dreaming about flying to the sky, which indicated his proclivity for priesthood:

I first started plucking flowers in the year VS 2015 [1958]. I had just married your aunt [father's sister].⁷ My father had already been plucking flowers for a long time, but then he sent me. Was it on the field of Panere or at some cowsheds? In any case, one morning my father came at the first cock-crow and said: "Ey eldest son (*jeḥā*)!" "What's happening?" "Come on, go and pluck flowers!"

What kind of flowers he meant I did not know at that time.

"Well, the flowers for Sarandew you have to pluck." I didn't understand what my father was saying. "Come with me, I will show you," he said.

Interlocutor: Was that in a dream or while you were awake, uncle?

That was while I was awake. Back then I did not have dreams yet. Then we started off, and I carried a bag which he had given me. We went down to Bakluwa, and in fact there was a flower meadow.

"Come on!" he said and kept on going ahead. "Go and wash yourself!" he said. I washed myself, my head and my feet. Then he said: "Go ahead, over there are flowers."

⁶ *Sarandew* is an ancestral deity which is associated with the drying rack above the domestic hearth. It is also called *Sargadew* (N. 'deity of heaven'), which is also an epithet of the mythic ancestor Paruhang.

⁷ Here the narrator was addressing my assistant.

He showed me what the flowers look like, how they are named, and where they are found. “There is a *seyengbung*, pluck it! And these are all *simmabung*, take two for yourself and four for the water containers (*kalas*), one each.” So he explained.

I counted, first I plucked those for myself and then those for the water container. I remember how I was astonished. [I thought]: So this is how it is!

This section gives a straightforward account of the teaching situation. Even though Sitane had not yet received initiatory dreams, he is instructed by his father to pluck the flowers for the Sarangdew ritual. Again, the story is about a journey, not a very long or far-reaching one, but a journey through the local forest, usually down to the riverside.

Eventually, Sitane started to have dreams. This is described in the following account, which is a narrative about not one dream but recurrent dreams, which all anticipate the action in the ritual:

I dreamt about plucking flowers. I dreamt that I flew, and I didn’t see any kin down on earth: parents, brothers, wife, all had become enemies. I leave the ground and fly around. But you have to come down and take a rest after some time. So I flew to this ridge over there and sat down.

Then I thought to myself: “Well, these are my parents, my younger brothers, my uncles and nephews; I have to go down.”

“He’s coming down there!” my brothers, my uncles, my parents shouted.

But as I was alone I began to fly towards Korongda, passed the Kulung ridge, made a few circles and flew higher. My parents, all had become enemies. “But these are my parents, my brothers,” I thought, “I have to come down.” And they got closer, shouting: “He’s coming down there!”

Being alone then, I flew from this sharp rock; I circled around three times. The enemies had formed a circle around me. Like ants (?) all had become enemies. But as I circled around I could deceive them. So nothing happened. I thought my parents were about to reach me, since they shouted: “He is coming circling down there!”

As I saw that my parents had become enemies, I realized that I could no longer stay at this place. I climbed up the sharp rock and flew off. But in my dream I had only two bundles of flowers on my head, and in my hands I held the water vessel and mugwort leaves.⁸ Nevertheless I flew away like this. [...]

Then you get to another place up there. There is this *ghorapu* (M* ‘horse guard’), and this *sapkūmi tayami* (M* ‘dog’), as they are called. So now there are these guards (N. *pāle*) on the path (watching over) whoever passes through there. The duck and the pigeon—I realized that they really do exist. I went on and came to a whole crowd of pigeons; it was like a bazaar. The offering of grains is a great offering; you have to scatter it [for them to eat].

Then one goes on to the Village of Ducks (*hasaten*), as it is called. There you take the seeds of the fern (M* *lolobung*), but first you say only its ritual name (*do:psù nùng*). While showing the offering, you take out the seeds and give them, and then you have to pass through quickly while the duck is swallowing them up. Otherwise these guards will not let you pass. So one has to go on by giving gifts of flowers.

As we⁹ go on, following the way to the shops (N. *dokān*), we come to a horse which is tied at the bottom of a banyan tree. It’s huge! There you have to offer the rice grains. “O Horse, don’t kick, don’t use the whip. I am going to the shops to buy *saya*, to buy *rùrù* for the *sakchami chekhama*.”¹⁰

[Then Sitane arrives at the place of the watchmen (N./M. *pa:lepu*) and the doorkeepers (N./M. *dhokapu*) who sit with their rifles. Again he presents his offerings of flowers and recites the ritual words in order to get through.]

Then we arrived at the shops. There you have to use another language. The flowers we have carried along with us are only an offering of the ritual names. Up there the deity has his own [flowers], his own altars (N. *thān*) and water vessels (*garuwa*)—it’s all on a shelf (N. *almāri*) on the wall. On the shelf are the flowers and they keep shaking. When you get there you ask yourself whether this is possible. When you see these flowers, the ones you have brought yourself seem like nothing. But those you present as an offering.

“Just as I have collected the flowers, so I give them to you, O Shopkeeper Lord, Astrologer Lord, Brahman Lord, Newar Lord, Merchant Lord! (M*

⁸ These are in fact the paraphernalia used in rituals during the journey.

⁹ Interestingly, here the first person plural inclusive is used: it is not only an individual experience, but one which can be had by anybody.

¹⁰ The terms *saya* and *rùrù* refer to the vital head-soul; *sakchami chekhama* is the ritual name of a proto-clan, a unit called *same*.

pasala-hang-o, dokana-hang-o, jaisi-hang-o, bahuna-hang-o, newara-hang-o, baniya-hango). To buy the head-souls, to buy the life-souls I present you the offering of such-and-such *same*.¹¹

Saying this, I showed the offerings up there [...]

[In this way the priest presents one offering after the other: offerings of rice, banana leaves, the hind leg of a deer, etc. After the offering has been accepted, he enters the palace in order to do the crucial divination (*bongbo*). He enquires in a similar fashion whether the clients possess head-soul and which deities are causing trouble, naming one possible afflicting agent after the other. When the responsible superhuman agent is named, again the trembling comes. After the divination, Sitane recounts the return journey as experienced in his dream.]

Once again this account is characterized by a close interrelationship between the dream experience and the ritual procedure: the incipient priest dreams the whole ritual journey just as it is experienced in the actual ritual performance. He passes through exactly the same stages and acts as in the ritual: travelling to the deity, passing numerous obstacles, presenting offerings, and speaking the proper ritual words. Sitane's dream discourse begins as a personal account, but it increasingly becomes a description of the standard features of the priest's journey, seen from his own perspective. It may be because he is addressing an ethnographer that the narrator seems to move away from a dream narrative, and towards a normative account of the ritual. However, Sitane finishes his story by saying that this is what he dreamt. It should be emphasized again that here reference is made for the most part not only to one particular dream but to dreams which appear again and again, even after the priest has begun to perform the ritual regularly. So what is being recounted is not only a singular experience, but a recurrent one, and the dream vision is not only a personal one but one that any priest of *Sarandew* would have in a similar manner.

Typically, a fundamental experience of the novice is the experience of flying. In the dream, even the plucking of 'flowers' in the jungle is done while he is flying. At first, it is a stunning experience which confuses him, as he realizes that his family members are attempting to follow him. In this he sees proof of their animosity, and he turns away toward the divine, thus separating himself from his kin. This might be interpreted in psychological terms as a metaphor for the process of individuation: compared to his ordinary relatives (most of whom have no *sakhau*) he is

¹¹ In ritual contexts, persons are only referred to by the ritual name of their *same*-group, i.e. their proto-clan.

something special, and he now becomes aware of his particular disposition and his inherent powers.

The dream journey requires passage to take place through numerous gates, and in fact this is equally part of the ritual. The priest has to have a proper knowledge of how to act and what to say. He hears the incantation in the dream, i.e., the deity 'puts it in his mouth'. The ritual words have the effect of passwords: only if he utters the right formulae do the guards let him through. In this manner he proceeds upwards, passing one level after another, and approaches the deity, just as he does in the ritual itself.

Once the priest has arrived at *Sarandew's* residence he communicates with the deity. He not only presents the gifts but also asks whether the offerings are accepted, whether the head-souls of the household will in fact be strong, and which superhuman being causes any disturbance. The answer to these questions is given through a mild but unmistakable trembling, which is possible because of the *ngo:pa's sakhau*. In other words, the deity temporarily 'possesses' the priest, and by thus replying to his questions the two engage in a dialogue. Again, this applies to the dream as well as to the ritual.

3. Conclusion: Life-journeys and the question of agency

Most of what could be observed in the two examples given above was also found in the dream narratives of other ritual experts which cannot be included here. These accounts generally relate memories of the first dream experiences that indicated and confirmed the healer's calling, and frequently these memories are embedded in an autobiographical context, containing details about the person's age, the situation in the family at that particular time, and so on. But once they have started to relate the dreams the narrators tend to give rather standardized accounts, often in the first person plural, of journeys to the other world and encounters with the deity. This indicates that the dreams are not seen as private and singular events, as products of the individual mind, but are instead conceived of as being sent by the ancestors,¹² as an activation of the inherent *sakhau*, and therefore they are a recurrent phenomenon. This is how priests dream.

Though the two examples are quite different in style and content, there are several obvious similarities:

(1) *The journey*. The novice is always on the move, travelling in order to meet his deity. In our examples the initiates undertake journeys through the forest, up the river to its source, even to a foreign country (China), and to the upper world of the

¹² On similar religious meanings of dreams in a different ethnographic context see Jedrew and Shaw 1992.

sky. While many journeys are undertaken only in dreams, some have been experienced in real practice: Jokhmare did in fact roam around in the forest or on the high pastures in a trance-like state of consciousness, and Sitane regularly goes on a tour to search for flowers. Travelling is an essential mode of being for the ritual specialists, who leave familiar ground behind to venture into the transcendent, divine sphere. In order to do this they have to know the proper path, and it is this that is 'shown' to them in the dreams. Only such a capacity to go on journeys, which has been acquired in visions and through proper knowledge of place-names, enables the ritual practitioner to get in touch and communicate with the divinity.

(2) *Dreaming and ritual.* Apparently there is an intrinsic relationship between the dream consciousness and the waking consciousness. We have seen that the dream journey clearly relates to the ritual procedure: one could say that the dream encounter with the deity provides the pattern for ritual action. What has been seen in the dream has to be enacted in practical reality. For instance, a *bhāgimi* dreams of 'flowers' waiting to be plucked at particular locations. But the ritual texts influence the dream experience likewise. Thus, for the priest the reality of dreaming and the reality of waking are not essentially different but rather two aspects of the same reality. Each aspect reconfirms the other. And it is this superior kind of knowledge which is the basis of priestly authority.

(3) *The tools.* Ritual objects used in the performance play an important part in all narratives: the stone as manifestation of the deity, the drum, the 'flowers'. They are often 'shown' to the novice with a more or less explicit invitation to take them and use them for sacrifice. The tool creates a particular bond between the priest and his deity. As it has been given, or shown, by the divinity it thus provides the capability, but also the obligation, to make offerings in future times. The tools are crucial for the undertaking of ritual journeys: without them the officiant would be vulnerable and helpless.

(4) *Knowledge.* Of equally crucial importance is the knowledge of the ritual language, the ritual names and formulae. The ritual specialist is able to proceed on his path only if he knows the proper words, and unless the offerings are named in the proper way they cannot be accepted by the deity. This knowledge is transmitted by the deity, who either tells the novice what is to be said or puts the ritual words directly into his mouth. In any case, the novice hears the sound of the ritual incantation in his dream and, even if some expressions still have to be learned, the basic competence in ritual speech provided by ancestral forces (inherited through *sakhau* and given by *secimang*) has already been received. Thus, the initiation which is experienced in the dream results from the peculiar relationship between the novice and the deity. It is the divine force itself, the *secimang* or *guru deutā*, who transmits

the knowledge and, though a human *guru* may also be involved, he is seen as playing only a minor role.

Returning to the issue of life history, one may raise the question: Why is the journey such an important and distinctive feature of the story about becoming a ritual specialist? What is it about the novice's movements which makes them so crucial for ritual expertise and competence? Obviously, the journey is a powerful experience. The reason for travelling is the encounter with the deity which is located at places outside the inhabited village area. In order to meet the divinity, one has to leave familiar ground and venture into the 'wilderness' of unknown territories. The narration of such an experience possesses a high degree of coherence: it is structured as a succession of places. But at the same time the textual coherence of this kind of narrative has a moulding effect on experience: the story is not simply the expression or representation of an event but it contributes to the structuring of the experience in the first place (cf. Mattingly 1998). In this perspective the dream journeys, the physical journeys, the ritual texts, and the initiation narratives are all closely interrelated: they all deal with a transformation of experience in terms of a text of spatial movement. For the initiate, I would argue, the special significance of the journey lies in its 'decentring' or 'off-centring' effect:¹³ he or she cuts off the ordinary links to relatives and neighbours and moves to a different space—typically, he flies, which ordinary people cannot do. In this way a different perspective on the known world is achieved: rather than looking out from inside, now one can look in from outside.

One is tempted to interpret this as a form of individualism: the ritual healer is expected to be a person who has acquired special attributes, a strong and unique character, and a personal style, after going through a crisis during which he turns away from his immediate kin and encounters beings of a different reality. The social role of the healer, who mediates between the ordinary world and the world of ancestors, provides a space which is somewhat removed from everyday life. This, we have seen, can be taken literally: the healer moves through a larger space, he is acquainted with a mythic landscape with which ordinary people are only vaguely acquainted. Thus, in spite of numerous differences, one could draw some similarities with the South Asian ascetic whom Dumont has described as an 'individual-outside-the world' (Dumont 1980). This is not the place to take up such a complex controversy, but it should be stressed that individualism in these contexts must be

¹³ The term 'decentring' is sometimes used synonymously with 'decontextualization', i.e. the processes which turn discourse into text (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990: 72 [fn. 2]). However, I prefer to use this term for a particular psychological effect which texts can have on experience.

seen as a culturally circumscribed ideology of personhood, which has to be clearly distinguished from psychological phenomena such as individuality or individual autonomy (a distinction which is often blurred, e.g. Mines 1988, 1994). In the case of Mewahang healers, it is evident that becoming a unique ritual expert is not seen as a matter of individual choice. Quite to the contrary, no matter what psychological reasons may be involved, it is generally regarded as being due entirely to external forces. Agency in these autobiographical stories is largely located outside the narrator. The novice generally takes no responsibility for his action, but only follows the will and instructions of deities. In this way, it is precisely the claim to non-agency (or patiency) which legitimizes the claim to individual power and ritual authority.

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