

REVIEWS

Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts by Gregory G. Maskarinec. Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 55. Cambridge (Mass): Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 1998. Distributed by Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-60795-3. xii + 695 pages, English and Nepali indexes.

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This sort of study is rather unfashionable among most anthropologists, and not greatly favoured by a number of publishers. Significantly, *Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts*, written by an anthropologist, came out in an orientalist series.

Contrary to what the word 'Nepalese' in the title suggests, this is not an anthology of materials collected in various parts of Nepal, but an edition of over 160 texts of varying length that the author recorded from shamans (referred to as *jhākri/jhāgrī* or *rammā*) belonging to the Kami caste of blacksmiths in the Jajarkot area of far western Nepal. Typologically, the texts can be subdivided into (a) public recitals that explain the origins of the world, its inhabitants, and their afflictions, and describe the shamanic methods of intervention, and (b) short whispered formulas, called *mantar* (*mantra*), that are couched in a rather esoteric language and serve the purpose of making shamanic intervention efficacious. Their critical edition—the fruit of intensive work over two decades, about eight years of which were spent in the field—fills a gap in our knowledge of the culture of those groups whom past legislation classified as untouchable, and is of considerable methodological and comparative relevance for the study of Himalayan rituals concerning healing, possession, exorcism in general, and shamanism in particular. This is all the more the case since, in the meantime, the Jajarkot tradition of shamanism has turned out to be part of a larger, regional complex that includes Kham Magar shamanism further to the north (well known from the works of M. Oppitz, A. de Sales, and D.E. Watters), and has been shown to have been influenced by the concepts and practices of the Kānpaṭā ascetics. In as much as the shamans of Jajarkot have developed a poetically very elaborate idiom and a demanding textual culture, in which 'twelve years of training' (required for mastery of the complete text repertoire to be learnt by rote) is a standard qualifying formula, the book also provides an important source for the linguist and the more theoretically interested student of oral tradition.

Since the conceptual basis of both the institution as such and the rituals in which the texts are performed was the subject of his inspiring earlier monograph *The Rulings of the Night* (Madison, 1995), in his Preface the author contents himself with a rather parsimonious outline of Jajarkot shamanism and concentrates, in the comments and annotations, on the interpretation of the texts. In grouping the material in seven chapters, which are further subdivided into 'sets', he follows thematic criteria, such as 'treating life crises', 'witchcraft', 'stories of mythical heroes used to treat social disorder', etc. The numbered texts are presented synoptically, with the original in Devanagari script on the left and the line-for-line translation on the opposite page. Annotations, of which there are many, contain detailed glosses, comment on problems of exegesis, justify a translation, and include variants of the texts in question. However, they give only sporadic consideration to prosody, textual pragmatics, and performance, and refrain from dealing with the broader comparative context, such as the Indian background or relevant sources on other areas of Nepal. The book concludes with detailed, bilingual indexes.

The use of Devanagari characters, instead of standard transliteration, as well as the organization of the contents, can hardly enhance the book's accessibility to the general reader. The texts are treated without any detailed description of their ritual context or of the manner of their performance. And since not only the annotations, but also the brief introductions to each chapter, are grouped together towards the end of the book in a section comprising a total of 237 pages, working with the volume, which weighs over 2 kg, proves rather cumbersome. For example, the reader who wants to know more about the word *māphī*, which occurs on p.175 but is not given in the Nepali index under *m-*, has to turn far too many pages before he finally finds the gloss on p.435 in an annotation to p.26. The indexes, printed in three indented columns, are somewhat over-organized; a simple alphabetical order of the entries and a fairly exhaustive glossary of the local or text-specific vocabulary would have been more helpful for quick reference.

A glance at the language of the texts reveals how tremendous a task Maskarinec set for himself. First of all, the colloquial language of Jajarkot shows a number of deviations from the word morphology and, it seems, even from the grammar of standard Nepali. There are also words that are unknown in the latter. Besides occasional intrusions from Hindi and Kham Magar, the vocabulary also includes terms that are either lexically meaningless or part of the professional jargon of the shamans, such as *barja mukhā* for 'domestic pig' and the like. Names borrowed from the epic and Puranic traditions and adopted for divinities of the local shamanic pantheon often appear in conspicuous confluences, such as *Gaurā Maiśarā* [*< Gaurā + Maheśvara*], 'The Pale All-Skilled One', *Sītā Pārvatā* [sic] or *Sītā Rāvane* [sic], etc. In addition, the texts abound in specifically shamanic or mantraic permutations. (The question of the extent to which such permutations may derive from caste-specific sociolectal deviations, a kind of 'untouchable talk', as is known in other parts of the country, is not raised by the author.) Obviously, due to an inextricable push-and-pull of esoteric intent and prosodic constraints (conditioned above all by parallelism), a considerable portion of the vocabulary appears 'distorted' in one

way or another: (a) *bancaro* ('axe') > *bancāryā*; *jumrā* ('louse') > *juharā*; *gāgrī* ('water pot') > *gagārī*, etc.; (b) jingle-words become separated by tmesis, or certain words are provided with a second, artificial jingle member to form a compound; (c) place names are 'suffixed' with *-ra*, *-la*, *-rila*, while in other instances suffixes and postpositions are elided; or (d) certain words and phrases of disputed or unknown meaning cannot be derived from local or standard Nepali, and some of them may well have been invented to imitate Sanskrit, as Maskarinec presumes.

Interpretation is further complicated by a considerable number of morphological fluctuations, often within one and the same text and/or in one and the same informant's pronunciation. (Some of these problems with morphology seem to result from the field method. Rather than relying entirely on tape-recordings of spontaneous performance, Maskarinec collected the majority of the texts in dictated form; this quite unusual way of reproducing their texts must have increased the shaman-informants' uncertainty regarding pronunciation and spelling.) One gains the impression that in the constitutio textus with the help of (sometimes rather helpless) informants, it is some kind of 'generic override', namely the autodynamics of the built-in tendency to exploit the potential of phonological and other equivalences, that produces a number of irritating quasi-paronomasic and quasi-paronymic 'variants'. Thus, *māthi* ('up', 'above') in one passage occurs as *māthi* (= ?) in another. The problem with such 'variants' is that, on the one hand, not all of them can be deemed nonsensical, and, on the other, not all of the nonsensical ones can be brushed aside as spurious simply on the grounds that they do not fit the context at all, or at least not as perfectly as their apparently correct alternatives would. For example, when *sāth*, 'with', is unexpectedly replaced by *sāt*, 'seven', due to its contamination by *pāt* in the preceding line, it is the adherence to the rules of form (prosody) that lends authenticity to the alteration (cf. pp.5, 412). Nor can authenticity simply be denied to surprising corrections which are proposed by the performers themselves during an interview. This is the case when a sudden insight prompts the informant to revoke what was established in the original transcript and emend, say, *laijāū*, 'take away', to *raijāū* [*rahijāū* < *rahanu* + *jānu*], 'remain', possibly under the influence of the first occurrence of the verb *rahanu* in one of the preceding lines, but in any case in violation of the context (cf., e.g., pp.109, 489). Quite correctly, Maskarinec preserves such 'variants' in his transcript and follows the performer of the text in question in spelling, e.g., *Rāmā* (< *Rāma*, the name of the epic hero), even though *rammā*, 'shaman' (a word of Kham Magar origin), would make more sense in the light of the context and also tally with other informants' interpretations (cf. p.412).

The dilemma the ethnographer faces throughout the work of reducing oral enunciation to writing—namely whether one should regard as authoritative what the individual informant spontaneously produced as text or what the informant commented (completed, emended, or left open) on what he had originally produced as text—is intimately linked with the quest for adequate translation. What should the translation render in those cases where the informants are unable to explain a meaning or where their own exegesis is at variance with the context? Is the translator entitled to make a given text more meaningful than it is for

those who perform it and/or listen to it day by day? And how should his rendition come to terms with the specific phraseology, including the numerous permutations, of the text in the source language?

One cannot but agree in principle with Maskarinec when he claims (p.x) that the translation of such texts should respect, as much as possible, certain structural and poetic properties of the original, and that accuracy must not entail an all-too-pedantic rendering. The fact remains, however, that where accuracy ends and pedantry begins depends on the translator's quite individual decision. One can resort to a 'technical', that is, a more textual translation that remains close to the original in order to make its wording transparent, and requires (except for idiomatic expressions) a more literal rendering, along with some unavoidable bracketings and other diagraphs in the text of the translation and additional explanations in the notes. (This method appears to be expedient for texts in little-known languages in general, and for texts with a high frequency of aesthetically conditioned linguistic deviance in particular.) Otherwise, one chooses a more contextual translation which is stylistically smooth and tends to be literary rather than literal, but conceals the problems of interpretation and even the fact that it results from a transfer from one language to another. Maskarinec decided in favour of the latter, and thus certainly to the benefit of the philologically less interested reader. Yet, since he gives so much weight to what he interprets as context, his translation, however carefully thought out, eloquent, or even indeed poetically pleasing, often comes close to paraphrasis or runs the risk of rendering the 'spirit' rather than the 'content' of the texts. A few examples may illustrate the difficulties.

1. The rendition of *kāmna lāgyā* by 'began to be possessed', rather than by 'began to tremble', seems to be too 'flowing' a translation which also results in a loss of imagery (p.176, line 178). First, the verb *kāmnū* ('to tremble', 'to shake', 'to shiver') does not denote a shaking of the body exclusively as a sign of possession; it is also used with reference to shivering with cold or fever. Second, in this reviewer's experience at least, a trembling or shaking of the shaman's body does not necessarily imply full medial possession (which would be *āngmā caṛhnu*) in all cases.
2. Because the jingle-word *rammā-tammā* (for 'shaman') is dissected in *rammāko lai jāū*, *tammāko lai jāū* (p.181, line 312, see also note 656), a 'new meaning' had to be found for the second member, and the phrases are translated as "... come with this shaman, come with this 'he-man'", in order to preserve the rhyme ('shaman' + 'he-man'). While this is an artful solution, whose auxiliary character is rightly stressed by the use of quotation marks, one cannot help wondering, first, why the imperative *lai jāū* is rendered here by 'come' and not (correctly) by 'take', as is the case in the next line (313), and, second, whether the twofold insertion of 'this' is absolutely required by the context.
3. The translation of *ana jana sana puna raina kāṛ* [*kāṛ*] as "here there which wherever no where [sic] arrows" (p.521) strikes the reader as an example of artistic bravura, but its philological reliability hinges on the (unanswered) question of how the author succeeded

in finding an approximately adequate interpretation for the first five words, which are otherwise lexically meaningless. Was it suggested by his informant, or did he deduce it from the context via his own hermeneutic efforts?

4. Contextual freedom appears to have been employed even more extensively when one finds

*tel ra candan, telauri [sic] bāt
āū bhāi kaṁs, viprālīkā sāth*

rendered as:

“Oil and sandalwood, oily dissembler,
come, brother demons, with this trembler!” (p.523).

It is obvious that the pairing ‘dissembler’ + ‘this trembler’ attempts to render the end rhyme in *bāt + sāth*, but less clear what justifies translating *bāt* (‘matter’, ‘thing’, ‘talk’ in standard Nepali at least) as ‘dissembler’. Equally puzzling is the translation of *viprālī* as ‘trembler’. This word means ‘shaman’, we are told. It evidently derives from *vipra* which in Nepali and Hindi denotes ‘priest’, ‘Brahman’, but does not connote, to this reviewer’s knowledge, ‘trembling’. Did Maskarinec choose ‘trembler’ just because shamans usually tremble when in an ‘ecstatic’ state, or did he find this rendering justifiable in view of the Sanskrit etymon of *vipra*, namely *vip*, ‘to tremble’, ‘to shiver’? The former solution would border on *Nachdichtung*, but would still be acceptable with some reservations, while the latter, as an etymologizing rendition, would be acceptable only if present-day Jajarkot speakers are aware of the etymological meaning, which is presumably not the case. The suspicion that here the author may have ‘imported’ an alien, artificial meaning into the text in order to complement his informants’ exegesis, appears to be substantiated by what he writes about the principles chosen for his translation in a short remark in the Preface (p.xi, second paragraph).

The treatment of numerous verbs creates some confusion, not least because the characteristics of the language of the texts are not sufficiently explained in the Preface. It is only on p.407 that the reader is informed that, in Jajarkot, third person verb forms are also used in the second person, and that the author takes the liberty of substituting the latter for the former whenever he finds this appropriate with regard to the context. Thus, while in one place *khāin* is translated as ‘you ate’ (p.184, line 403), even though standard Nepali *khāin* is feminine third-person plural (which may also be employed as an honorific for the third-person singular), elsewhere Maskarinec follows the latter standard Nepali rule in rendering such verbs as *kalāin* and *jilāin* (p.97, line 6). Be that as it may, it remains obscure why in several instances not only person, but also mood and tense are treated as interchangeable. For example, while the hortative-permissive in *mai japna pāū* is translated, as one would expect, by ‘may I recite’ at first, in the following lines the same verb form is suddenly rendered in the imperative, thus *bānaū* [*bādhū* / *bādhaū*] becomes ‘bind’, instead of ‘let us bind’ or ‘may I bind’ (p.3, line 57 versus lines 58-69). Peculiar, too, are *mārū* (hortative) = ‘I kill’ (indicative) and the rendering of a number of future tense verbs, such

as *tārūlā*, *pārūlā*, *jāūlā* [*jāūlā*] etc. either in the imperative or in the hortative mood (p.432, and pp.61, 180-182, 184, respectively). Such substitutions do not always seem to be unavoidably necessitated by the context. At least it is questionable whether *ḍoro deūn* [*diūn*] *paṇḍit*, for example, should not be rendered by ‘may the paṇḍit show a path’, rather than by “show... a path o paṇḍit” (p.278, line 126).

As some of the shamans are (nowadays) literate, there even exist a few local manuscripts of dictated texts, but Maskarinec does not tell us to what extent he has adopted these shamans’ own orthography, and why his spelling does not follow more consistently colloquial forms and local pronunciation. For what reason has the Sanskritic *jñān* been preferred to *gyān*, or have rather archaic spellings such as *lāgyā*, *sāryā*, *bhālyāle*, *jāvas* etc. been selected over *lāge*, *sāre*, *bhālele*, *jāos*? The transliteration renders an unconvincing ‘synthesis’ of the orthographies of R.L. Turner and the Royal Nepal Academy; moreover, the alternation between *w* and *v*, e.g., in *Bhagawatī* versus *Bāsudev* or in the ‘hybrid’ *Juvāleswarī* does not appear to be entirely consistent with Turner’s method (referred to on p.xi).

Such critical observations should not be permitted to detract from the immense value of this book. Indeed, no other oral ritual tradition of Nepal has so far been recorded in comparable textual detail and studied with comparable empathic competence. Many anthropologists still care little about *how* texts in their entirety say *what* they are to convey, and treat oral material, if collected integrally at all, as something simply to be exploited for short illustrative quotes or for summaries in support of a thesis. Unlike them, Maskarinec did not shy away from responsibility under the comfortable pretext that documents of this kind are ‘basically untranslatable’ and even resist being suitably edited in a written form. The admirable amount of work invested in this publication has laid a secure foundation for further research.