

(witches)

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Himalayan Diary; where have all the witches gone?¹

One of the most puzzling problems in the history of western civilization is the reason for the decline in magical and witchcraft beliefs. Briefly the puzzle is that such beliefs seem to have declined before any viable alternative had been developed. It is not clear why people should have rejected the philosophical comfort and practical protection of magical activities when 'science' offered no theoretical or practical alternatives.² Not much headway has been made in solving this problem since Keith Thomas wrote. In this situation it seems worth approaching the problem from a different angle by looking at a contemporary example of a rapid shift from magical explanations and action to something else.

What is needed is an example which has been observed more or less continuously over a generation and in which there has been a rapid change in magical beliefs. Such a small case study can be made in the Gurung village of Thak (Gurung= Tolson) to the north of Pokhara in central Nepal. The village and its economy have been described in a previous publication and the general features of Gurung society have also been quite fully described.³ The changing situation in Thak itself has been described in a previous article in **Kailash**.⁴

When I first visited the village of Thak as part of fifteen months of fieldwork between 1968 and 1970, a flourishing magical economy was still in evidence. Alongside occasional visits by Lamas and Brahmins, as well as numerous small rituals for local godlings, and the activities of lower caste **jankris**, the magical world was served by a well known shamanic priest known as a **pucu** or **poju**.⁵ In his myths and rituals he carried on an ancient tradition of pre-Tibetan shamanic practice, brought down over thousands of years probably from western China.

The **poju** engaged in numerous rituals which were directed at warding off evil by divining the cause of misfortune and driving it away. The ubiquity, importance and variety of these rites can be seen if we briefly look at Ujising Poju's estimate of the frequency of his rituals in any one year. Many of the lengthiest and most complex, such as the **moshi tiba**, **ngonge sheba**, **mee le sheba** had been

¹ I would especially like to thank Sarah Harrison, Gerry Martin, the University of Cambridge and the Economic and Social Research Council for their support in the work upon which this article is based.

² For a classic statement of the problem, see Keith Thomas, **Religion and the Decline of Magic**, London, 1970, especially ch.22.

³ See Alan Macfarlane, **Resources and Population: a Study of the Gurungs of Central Nepal** (Cambridge, 1976); Bernard Pignede, **The Gurungs** (Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1993), trans. and edited by Sarah Harrison and Alan Macfarlane; Donald A. Messerschmidt, **The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village Society** (London, 1974). For a brief introduction see Alan Macfarlane and Indrabahadur Gurung, **A Guide to the Gurungs** (Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1992).

⁴ Alan Macfarlane, 'Some Background Notes on Gurung Identity in a Period of Rapid Change, **Kailash**, Vol.XV, 1989, 3-4. See also Alan Macfarlane, 'Identity and Change among the Gurungs (Tamu-mai) of Central Nepal' in ed. David Gellner et al. **Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom** (London, 1997).

⁵ For a longer account see 'A Guide to the Gurungs', 36-43 and Alan Macfarlane, 'Death, Disease and Curing in a Himalayan Village' in **Asian Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective** (Delhi, 1981)

performed two to ten times in the year, many smaller ones, such as the **chowb cheba** and **plogu waba** he had performed from twenty to fifty times each, others, such as the **patlu waba**, had performed in every house in the village. At a rough estimate, taking all forty or so of his major rituals, the **poju** must have performed well over three hundred rituals in one year in the central hundred households of my study in one year.

In the process of performing these rites over the years, and in active co-operation with the suspicions of villagers, a large number of 'witches' had been identified. I carried out a 'census' of people thought to be witches in 1969 with one experienced informant. In the sample hundred households, there were 23 suspected witches. Seven were not Gurung (Blacksmiths, Tailors and Magars), all were female except two, and they were most aged between forty and seventy.⁶ Thus on almost every occasion of misfortune and illness, witchcraft suspicions were reinforced. Every few days, except in the busiest planting season, small rituals against witches and other evil spirits were undertaken.

Thirty years later the situation has changed. Apart from the occasional ritual to protect a house (**di bar lava** - Gurung), the **poju**'s activities, like other traditional practices such as the boys and girls dormitories (**rodee**) and the traditional dance (the **ghato sheba**) have more or less disappeared. The change was already evident when I re-visited Thak in 1986, but it has been particularly rapid in the last three years or so. The **poju** family moved down to Pokhara over the 1980s and the last of them had gone by 1991. Since then their visits have been ever less frequent and when needed a **poju** for the neighbouring village of Taprang has to be summoned.

The present situation is shown by some impressionistic statistics of present magical activity. The lama is still called down once a year by eleven families to do the **lhu teba** (for general good future), people still employ the Tailor **jhankri** for divining on occasion and Brahmins occasionally do **pujas** for the richer families, but the vast bulk of activities overseen by the **poju** have disappeared. We asked a number of families how many times in the last three years they had employed a **poju** in rites other than the **di bar lava** and scarcely any had done so. Most had given up use of the **poju** and several quite aggressively so, suggesting he was a waste of time, money, and a deceiver. As for witches, most noted that they seemed mysteriously to have disappeared. Several informants half jokingly drew the conclusion that 'when the **pojus** went, so did the witches'. But all were agreed that witches, having been widespread, now seemed to have vanished. Of course, for a very long time it had been illegal to accuse someone of witchcraft, but this had not stopped suspicions, gossip and rituals. Now, it seems, witches are irrelevant; more practical worries, hail, the possibility of profitable emigration, loans and debts, fill people's minds. The whole world seems to have gone through an almost perfectly paradigmatic transition from magic.

Yet why has there been this change? Here we may consider a number of the conventional theories concerning the reasons for the fading away of magic put forward by other analysts. One of the most famous is that to be derived from Bronislaw Malinowski, namely that magic expands and shrinks depending on the degree of control people can exercise over their material and social surroundings.⁷ Malinowski noted that magical activities were particularly concentrated on highly important, yet ultimately risky, activities such as open-sea navigation. Others have frequently noted that magic is especially to be found where activities are unpredictable, for example when making butter or beer or other craft activities where, however well one performs, things still sometimes go wrong.

This theory would explain the decline in magical belief and activities in Thak in terms of a growing mastery of the natural world by the Gurungs. In one respect, and an important one, there has been a

⁶ These statistics are abbreviated from Pignede, **The Gurungs**, trans. Harrison and Macfarlane, p.476; appendix F. In that work gives a longer account of witchcraft beliefs among the Gurungs.

⁷ See, for example, B.Malinowski 'Magic, science and religion' in **Science, Religion and reality**, ed. J.Needham (London, 1925).

dramatic change, and that is in health. In 1968-1970, although the situation was not as bad as many societies, the villagers suffered from numerous minor and occasional major diseases.⁸ During the last thirty years there has been quite a dramatic improvement in health.

This is not, however, the result of health care provision in the institutional sense. There is now a Health Post in a neighbouring village, but villagers hardly ever use it, alleging that the relatively large staff and frequent supplies of medicine are of practically no use - there is seldom any medicine to be had, the staff are absent, and often they are given prescriptions and told to go and buy the medicine in Pokhara.

There are several hospitals in Pokhara, but again, though the villagers do try to use these and do use the medical stores, this makes only a marginal difference to their health. Endless stories circulate in villages of the inefficiency, corruption, lack of interest and incompetence of those working in the city hospitals. Whether these are basically true or not, it is clear that villagers feel that large sums of money are squandered to little effect. Very often villagers receive the same treatment as they might obtain in the health post, often without any proper examination, often pumped with inappropriate drugs, often told to go and buy medicine in the drug stores. It is possible that the hospitals save on average one or two villager's lives a year, at the most. But they can only provide marginal help in child care or delivery, and cannot deal with the thousands of minor ailments from which villagers suffer.

So what has transformed the health situation? There seem to be three major factors. Firstly, public health campaigns, the mass inoculation and injection of children against such diseases as smallpox, measles, mumps, have already reduced recurrent epidemics. Secondly, some improvements in the supply of piped water have reduced the incidence of enteric diseases, especially those affecting infants. There may be other differences, such as the greater consumption of tea.⁹ But for whatever reason, and it cannot be to do with other aspects of the diet which has conspicuously deteriorated in the last thirty years, or other environmental reasons, houses are no better, paths as dirty, dogs and fleas widespread, the fact remains that people seem generally to be less seriously ill and in particular infant mortality rates have dropped considerably.

The third change is the most important. People are not only less ill, but many perceive illness in a new way. This is the heart of the puzzle. Although the health-care services provided to them are very insufficient, villagers still believe that, ultimately, 'science' as it is sometimes termed, **can** provide a solution. Although the actual provision of pain relief is out of their reach or unsatisfactory, they do not blame the system of 'science', but blame its administration. In other words they 'believe' in western medicine, without either understanding **how** it works or being able to show that it works for them. Thus western medicine could be seen as the replacement of one set of 'magical' beliefs by another.

The changing situation can be encapsulated in two experiences. In 1969 when a person was ill I gave them an aspirin and they were also treated by the shaman. When asked what had cured them, they were in no doubt that it was the shaman. In 1998, the same double treatment was offered, but this time they were adamant that it was the western medicine which was most effective.

Yet the consequences are considerable. The whole of the previous system depended on the belief that most human suffering originated from the intentions of intelligent beings - godlings, **bhuts and prets**, witches. Western medicine locates the illness in invisible entities - bacteria, viruses, amoeba. Although the action of germs is largely not understood, what people do understand is that diseases are not caused by other human-like entities, evil thoughts and intentions. For whatever reasons, therefore, people now trust more in the efficacy of western medicines than the cures of the **poju**.

⁸For details, see Macfarlane, 'Death, Disease and Curing'

⁹For the revolutionary importance of tea as a medicine, see Alan Macfarlane, **The Savage Wars of Peace, England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap** (Oxford 1997), ch. 8.

All this is very strange if we remember the famous distinction of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, for while traditional curing explained to people both **how** an illness occurred (through the activities of evil spirits and witches) and **why** it occurred (because of previous events, the hatred of a witch or whatever) western medicine deals with the **how** but not the **why**.¹⁰ Why I should suffer and not another, why it should happen now and not tomorrow, all these questions are left unresolved by western bio-medicine. If, as some allege, the greatest invention of the twentieth century is the suspended judgment, the ability to say that one does not know the reason for things, although one hopes to do so at some time in the future, then the Gurungs have recently acquired this great invention.

At a wider level, the theory of the controllability of the material environment hardly works for the Gurungs. Despite the doses of foreign aid and Gurkha remittances, the villagers live in a less secure economic and social environment than they did thirty years ago. Their fields produce about half the crops, there are less than half as many animals, they have sold their gold, most are heavily in debt, attempts to earn income by waged work in countries such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere have generally bought little, if any, reward. The wealthy have moved to Pokhara, and those who remain work incredibly hard to keep themselves above the level of starvation. In 1997, for example, half of the rice and maize harvest was wiped out by hail in Thak and surrounding villages. These villagers, once proud recruits into the Gurkha forces, are becoming amongst the poorest people in Asia as they try to overcome the obvious fact that the enormously steep hillsides make village agriculture uncompetitive.

Scarcely anything else has been done to give them any sense of control over their lives. There are no metalled roads. The water supply is intermittent. The school is poorly equipped. Any feeling of control over their own destinies has been further reduced by a shift in the political structure. Ironically, the onset of 'democracy' has reduced democracy. Previously there were regular village meetings to discuss and decide village matters, where both men and women participated. Now, the Village Development Committees are bureaucratic organizations, consisting of a few village 'representatives' but in fact not answerable to the village. The major encouraging response to this has been the formation of 'women's dance groups', who raise money through dancing and use this for paths, school improvement and so on.

So, on the whole, apart from the inoculation campaign and decline in infant mortality and certain other diseases, there has been a considerable decline in the standard of living. People work harder as animals become more scarce, and their diet has worsened. Women in their thirties and forties are to be seen day after day carrying their own weight of straw, wood and fodder up or down several thousand feet, bare foot and sweating, on a diet of maize porridge (**pengo**), with no meat, few vegetables, and often not even able to afford **dahl** (lentils). It is not control of the world within the village, at least, that has reduced the belief in magic, though it could be argued that what they hear on the radio, watch on the one television set in the village, hear about through the village school, or see on their visits to Pokhara, may be important, showing that an alternative exists.

Another theory to explain the decline of beliefs in witchcraft and magic is that it reflects a change in social relations. There are two major varieties of this idea. One is that witchcraft reflects tensions in a society, it is a 'social strain gauge' in Max Marwick's famous phrase.¹¹ This would suggest that tensions have declined in the village. There may be something in this. Up to about 1970, all returning Gurkhas came back to the village and the jealousies and pressures between new wealth and the older families was quite considerable. Now such people retire to Pokhara and build large and beautiful houses alongside relative strangers. So the pressures may have been reduced.

The second theory suggests that where all good things come through personal channels, the gifts of

¹⁰E.E. Evans-Pritchard, **Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande** (Oxford, 1937).

¹¹ See M.G. Marwick, **Sorcery in its Social Setting** (Manchester, 1965).

friends and family and so on, it is only natural to assume that evil things will also flow along human channels - in this case along mystical channels originating in the hatred of enemies. The implication of this argument, originally suggested by Max Gluckman is that as a system becomes more complex, with the development of market mechanisms, money, bureaucracy and the State, so people will increasingly conceive a world where both good and evil flow from the endeavours of individuals, or impersonal forces.¹² Hence they will stop believing in personalized misfortune.

Again there may be some force in this argument. The tentacles of both market relations and the State, though far from dominant, have increasingly spread into the village. Gurung economy was fully monetized long ago, but now, as the village depends for most of its luxuries and necessities upon the outside market, importing all types of goods including rice and maize, it is clearly an extension of the world capitalist system. The collapse of some East Asian economies, or the fluctuations of the Nepalese rupee, affects these villagers almost as much as they do a factory worker in Kathmandu. Likewise with the building of the first government office in the village a couple of years ago and the appointment of two permanent government officials, a Secretary and Assistant Secretary, to the village, we can see the formal incorporation of the previously largely independent village into the Nepali state. In such a situation, where people can compare their experience with other villages and Nepali citizens as a whole, where they know how much of their lives is now dependent on the machinations of bureaucrats, traders, teachers, NGO's and so on, the significance of personal ties has probably declined.

These are all 'demand-side' factors, that is to say the need people feel for magical explanations. Equally important, and not entirely separate, are 'supply-side' factors. One of the main reasons why the **poju** left Thak, and other shamans are leaving many other villages, is economic. The increasing poverty of the villagers means that not only can they no longer easily afford to pay the annual traditional payment of millet (one **pothi** per household) but find it almost impossible either to pay the **poju** a reasonable amount for a particular rite, or to afford the main sacrificial animals needed for the rituals.

In 1968, a day's earnings for work in the fields, including food, was about ten rupees, and a large cockerel or small goat for sacrifice would cost about eight rupees. Thus one could buy the sacrifice with a days work. In 1998, a day's work earns thirty rupees plus two snacks, while a reasonable cockerel or small goat will cost at least three hundred rupees or more. Thus a sacrificial animal now costs the equivalent of ten days of hard labour. It is not surprising, therefore, that we have been told a number of times that what finally decided a person not to summon the **poju** was the knowledge that if the shaman recommended a sacrifice, the family could not afford it. Having talked to other **pojus**, who explain how they can no longer live on their traditional payments, educational and other costs for outstripping the small payments in kind they receive, the fact that a growing market for certain **poju** activities has opened up in Pokhara and further afield was an added inducement for the shamans to leave. So the **poju** family left one by one. Once they had gone, even if people needed a **poju**, often in an emergency, they was no-one available. Thus demand and supply conspired to move people towards non-magical solutions or at least passive hope that something better would shortly be available.

This Himalayan village is in some ways in the same position as those who increasingly abandoned magical and witchcraft explanations in Europe from the middle of the seventeenth century. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, there was little understanding of the real causes of diseases, for it was impossible until the time of Koch and Pasteur to isolate bacteria. Even by 1895, scarcely anything was known about the real causes of most serious diseases.¹³ Thus for two centuries people had faith that a solution would be found, even if it had not yet appeared. They **believed** in science as a method, before science had produced many tangible results. Likewise people in Thak **believe** in western technologies and knowledge, and still even have a certain wistful hope that **bikas** (development) will occur and

¹² Max Gluckman, **Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society** (Oxford, 1965), ch.6.

¹³ Macfarlane, **The Savage Wars of Peace**, 374

'democracy' will really emerge, against much of the present evidence of their eyes.

Their world is thus becoming increasingly disenchanting in the Weberian sense - with less interpenetration of the mystical and material - and yet it is becoming enchanted in another, this time the enchantment being the promise of western affluence and liberty. It will be interesting to see whether their faith will one day be rewarded and whether, if they ever reverse the rapid decline of the last generations, they decide to re-enchant their world, as is increasingly happening in the west, where 'New Age' faiths, including shamans, are all the fashion, just as, ironically, they disappear in Thak and other Gurung villages.

All of this goes to show how dangerous predictions are in the social sciences. After my first visit to Thak in 1968-1970 I wrote that 'If the economic situation deteriorates, and particularly foreign aid instigated health facilities decline, then the Gurungs will probably retreat to their own stand-by systems of ritual healing and herbal cures which have served them for so many centuries.'¹⁴ The economic situation in the village has deteriorated greatly and health facilities, while not declining, are scarcely better now than they were in the late 1960s when my statistics show that in the period 1965-9 some forty women and sixty-eight men from Thak **panchayat** visited the mission hospital.¹⁵ Yet the Gurungs have not retreated back into their former enchanted universe, they have become marginal members of the universe of 'rational' western institutions. But just as some would argue that they get 'education' without much enlightenment, 'democracy' without a noticeable increase in personal power, and 'bikas' without real development, so they get the promises of a new solution to the problem of pain without many of the tangible means to good health.

¹⁴Macfarlane, 'Death, Disease and Curing', p.128

¹⁵Macfarlane, 'Death, Disease and Curing', p.101