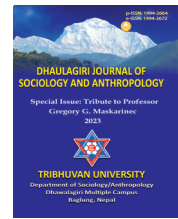


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Can Biomedicine be Considered as an Alternative Healing? Engaging with the Ideas of Gregory Maskarinec

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Abstract

In constant interactions with the select contributions of late Gregory Masakarinec, this paper analyzes the practices of shamanism as he had portrayed, mainly through his writings. While engaging with his ideas and portrayal, I will relentlessly engage with other relevant literature from different genre of medical anthropology which have dealt with health, illness and healing practices. Questioning the hegemonic presence of biomedicine in the field of health care, this article shows that even biomedicine can be considered as an alternative healing practice in typical social and cultural context of healing.

Keywords: alternative healing, biomedicine, shamanism

Introduction

Medical anthropological focus or rather the focus of anthropologists doing research in the areas of health, illness and healing has not been moving in a linear path, instead navigates through the upheavals on the way. Initially, their focus was not only on the study of what they often labeled as traditional and primitive societies and cultures but also on the traditional and native forms of healing practices. Along with the shift in anthropological niche from primitive/traditional societies, influenced largely by the encompassing of development in anthropological works, medical anthropologists also gradually began to pay more attention to biomedicine *per se*. I agree with Alter (1999) that even if such anthropological studies were on traditional culture or alternative healings, they began to make analysis through the eyes of the biomedical lens, ignoring the ontological

foundations on which the “internal logic” (Quinlan, 2011) of many of these “alternative healing practices” are based on.

In consideration of such reality, this article aims to engage with the ideas and practices that Gregory Maskarinec has forwarded in relation to the concepts behind the healing practices. It is developed aiming to participate in some of the queries that may be of interest not only to the academia but also to the actors involved in health care development and planning. How can we analyze different healing practices? Can we understand “alternative healing” practices as ontologically different than the others? Can we understand healing practices only through their internal logic? I do not claim that this piece of writing provides a complete set of answer to each of these queries. However, I will consider my writing is in the right direction, if it will inspire



some of the readers to take these queries as worthy to consider.

Methods

Information acquired through various sources have been used to build this brief piece of writing dedicated to Gregory Maskarinec. The initial intrusion I got into my mind was when I listened to him at his lecture at the then joint Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology (CDSA), Tribhuvan University while listening to his ideas about how to interpret reasonings behind the healing practices. Later on, his ideas again on rationality embedded with the healing practices in his interview with Subedi and Khatri (2022) made me delve further into this topic. Along with this, I would engage with his ideas, highlighted mainly in his book *The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Texts* (Maskarinec, 2000) and place alongside them with that of other scholars. Juxtaposing his ideas on logics behind the healing with that of the contributions of different scholars working in the areas of health, illness experience and healing practices, I have weaved this article.



Gregory G. Maskarinec at CDSA, TU

Discussions

While going through the writings and very few occasions of interaction with, rather listening to Gregory, I had some doubt about whether he had utterly internalized and respected the paradigmatic differences between alternative healing practices, such as shamanism in which his ethnographic

explorations had focused, and the biomedicine. That kind of concern situated compactly into my mind while listening to him on one occasion at the then joint Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology (CDSA), Tribhuvan University when he had quoted Marx (1843) in positing his theoretical perspective to comprehend shamanism- “Reason had always existed, but not always in a rational form”. A completely contrasting feeling came into me while going through his interview with Subedi and Khatri (2022:128) when he states that “no perceptions without conceptions”, which he regards as profound insights drawn by Marx from early phenomenological works of Kant, only in these four words. The difference between these two quotes, for me makes him able to move away from the western-centric cultural luggage of Marx, which the critique often put on Marx. And, thus, I can now safely state that Maskarinec had abundantly comprehended and respected the ontological uniqueness of shamanism. In his interview with Subedi and Khatri (2022) he reiterated this as one of the primary theoretical approaches that guided his journey to medical anthropology. Traversing through this approach, I would like to develop this brief piece of writing dedicated to Gregory. Along with this, I would engage with his ideas, highlighted mainly in his book *The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Texts* (Maskarinec, 2000) and juxtapose them with that of other scholars. Therefore, this piece of writing is not a book review *per se*.

The Rulings of the Night was primarily based on Gregory’s upholding of the Kantian idea of embeddedness of conception in each of the perceptions. Exploring the shamanic world, he not only finds meaning infused with mythical chants but also recognizes the semantic messages even in their mantras, arbitrary expressions and magical formulas. He doubts that everyone from the study areas may have adequate capabilities to realize the meanings behind such expressions and mantras.

Such an approach to view “healing practices other than biomedicine”, the phrase I prefer to use over the commonly used phrase of “alternative healing” believing that the latter phrase unnecessarily positions biomedicine at the center, unfortunately at the cost of the former. I am with this vision as it encompasses a relativist perspective, which is in line with the conventional major anthropological approach of “cultural relativism” (Herskovits, 1953) that regards each culture unique in itself and thus not above or below than any other culture. When we translate this in

healing domains, it becomes understanding the internal logics and respecting each of the healing practices equally. Therefore, this approach simultaneously reminds the anthropology folks that they have not to forget this fundamental anthropological standing while their focus or specialization is in health, illness and healing.

Getting back to Gregory, the admiration and realization of his knowledge was based on six years plus of his fieldwork in Jajarkot, Nepal that lasted till 1983. The extended fieldwork enriched him with a profound understanding of the local cultural context. Realizing the significance of such longer fieldwork, he questions the sufficiency of the practice of carrying out *mere* yearlong ethnographic fieldwork in his conversation with Subedi and Khatri (2022). His emphasis for such longer fieldwork is meant to grasp the complex realities of local cultural context. His exceptional toil of longer period fieldwork and subsequent analytical and writing journey had come up with the remarkable outcome of *The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts* in 1995. I have found refuge in the very book while looking for further ingredients to weave this essay, dedicated to Gregory, linking with the broader umbrella approach that he had remarkably pointed out in Kant's contribution.

His compilation of the Shaman oral text in the form of book, amidst others, as he also had acknowledged in the book as well (Maskarinec, 2000, p. X), helps not to be indifferent to these Shamans' extensive learning. He is with the firm belief that "significant anthropological discoveries can be found within universes of texts" and thus did not confine his anthropological explorations based on "the detailed study of a single village" (p.75). Writing their learning in the forms of Mantra and other ethnographic information, in Clifford Geertz's view (Geertz, 1993, p. 19), Maskarinec "inscribed" these Shamans' social discourses, eventually he had turned them from passing events into account which exists in their inscription. On top of this, I would add, such inscription had portrayed these shamans' thoughts and contents as legitimate form of knowledge which persisted over the locality from time immemorial.

One more novelty that a reader can find in his book is that he had extensively consulted and acknowledged the ethnographic materials and information that was recorded by another ethnographer, John T. Hitchcock few decades ahead of his ethnographic journey. I think this is another facet of ethnography that ethnographers can admire him. Nevertheless, this process may not

be smooth as the kind of information acquired by an ethnographer is based on his/her positionality and, thus, unique and subjective to the ethnographer's position and grasp (Dahal, 2023). Even in the case of Maskarinec, one can say that Hitchcock's inclusion/exclusion of certain kinds of texts in his compilation, off course, could have affected the pool of texts available to anyone, including Maskarinec. It does not mean that, Maskarinec's choice was curbed to the Hitchcock's collections only; his interpretation was largely based on the collections that he had made on his own as well. Moreover, one can innocuously say that interpretation of these texts is grounded in his understandings of local worldviews over and due to the six years long fieldwork.

Engaging with the healing Mantras and rituals of *Jhangaris/Jhakris*, the shamans, Maskarinec carries forward his arguments. He introduces (2000, p. 3) the readers *Jhangaris* as Himalayan shamans who obtain knowledge outwardly in oral texts to diagnose illness and offer treatment to disorders that trouble their clients. He clearly contrasts *Jhangaris* with that of *Dhamis*, the oracles, as both are often equated in general in Nepal. He acknowledges *Jhangris* not simply as another form of "shamanism" but as a set of typical persons with distinctive resources in their own specific circumstances (Maskarinec, 2000, p. 115).

Taking constructivist position, Maskarinec portrays that "shamans create the conditions they treat" (2000, p. 9). This is in parallel to the professional diagnosis of healing traditions such as biomedicine, which also posits the condition through various means of diagnosis and prescribes specific medication. The authority of shamans lies in healing the patients releasing them from their chaotic imbalanced condition to balanced orderly states. This is accomplished through the use of words of Mantras to create explicitly thorough discourses to "bring to life to spirits of the dead" (2000, p. 10). The power of mantra enacts in both ways of transforming the shamans themselves to the status of specialists having the power of curse and cures as well as the ability to make interventions to heal the condition, considered or presented as problematic.

The uniqueness of shamanic performance lies in its use of the blend of words, moves and things. Discontent with various social theories to make sense of such performance, he finally gets sanctuary in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), which let him view social situations as not readily available but rather actively constituted by the perpetual interactions of

the participants. He chose ethnomethodology as the prevailing grand theories in the writings that he considered misleading to understand caste or ill-fit to comprehend the fluidity of ways of life and practices of the shamans (Maskarinec, 2000, p. 233). Nevertheless, he traversed through the analytical journey with the help of the ideas and theories of some other scholars (Subedi and Khatri, 2022, pp. 128-129). Such theoretical blending also abetted him to understand what he regards as the puzzle embedded in extraordinary and even mysterious events.

As distinct healing trajectory shamanisms comprises of typical way of causation of distress. These shamanic etiologies do not attribute all grievances to equivocal ethereal explanations. Precision lies in their attempt to identify the sources and effects of afflictions that cover a spectrum ranging from the virtuously physical to the wholesomely metaphysical, transecting the natural and uncanny domains (Maskarinec, 1992). Shamans make symbolic healing, to go with Sidky (2009), by raising beliefs and expectations in his patients in line with their societal understanding of health and illness by bringing into play complex psycho-social factors, evocations, dramatic symbolic imagery, metaphor and enactments.

The healing profession also heals these shamans' social situations. Maskarinec (2000, pp. 194-195) states that becoming a shaman transforms an individual's identity, both of his public and private selves. Equipped with the ethnomethodological lens, he contemplates that shaman texts are much more than sets of technical maps or fixed cosmologies, rather in their learning and using shaman texts, they create altered relational possibilities in society, and thus acquire novel identities and new "selves". Through their application, demonstration, and participation precisely in the shamanism activities, they simultaneously convince patients and audiences of their validity as specialists having expertise in distinct way of healing.

One typicality of these shamans is that they are not only shamans but are engaged in different everyday activities as their fellow villagers. Their practice of shamanic acts contributes to taming their relations with their fellow villagers. Otherwise, they would have been in powerlessness situation mainly due to their lower social location in hierarchical caste society as most of the shamans are from blacksmiths community. The shamanic healing capability truly elevates their status in their social realm. This is why, Maskarinec reminds us that Jajarkot shamans often

identify themselves as shamans rather than referring to any other social locations they belong to. Along with such typical projection of shamans, he portrays them as situated amidst other nine alternate specialists ((Maskarinec, 2000, p. 73), including the local health post workers, locally called "doctor", an officially designated biomedical practitioner in the locality.

While listening to him and gazing at the onset of *The Rulings of the Nights*, it seems that he had constantly emphasized the impoverished material condition of the locality in which shamanism flourished and has been continuing. This might give little space for the readers whether he has sufficiently acknowledged the paradigmatic distinctness of Nepalese shamanism or not.

Gazing through what Maskarinec reiterates and emphasizes in my concluding remarks, I would like to highly admire him for recognizing and appreciating the ontological differences in therapeutic practices. In fact, acknowledging his commitment and expertise in shamanism, late King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev coroneted him with highly esteemed prize Birendra Pragyalankar in 1981. His commitment to medical anthropology mainly and through this to global health can be seen through his contribution to shamanism.

Conclusions

He is successful in presenting shamanism as a psycho-social process of healing enacting on the foundation of unique ontological ground via the differential portrayal of the human body, life, ailments and healing. Embodied with the differential explanatory model (Kleinman, 1980) to look at the internal logic for understanding (Quinlan, 2011) health, illness and healing, it is not only unique but also a mainstream healing trajectory among the plural medical practices prevalent as a practice in a typical impoverished context of Jajarkot. Along with its privileges of enjoying the mainstream status, shamanism simultaneously pushed biomedicine and all other healing trajectories at the alternative spectrum in the plural medical context of the then time Jajarkot area.

Therefore, the significance of distinctness of shamanism lies not only for the people and institutions involved in influencing and formulating public health policies, both at the national and global scale, in this era of the commodification of healthcare services and the medicalization of health problems (Dahal, 2022), it is imperative to pay attention to the ontological

differences of traditional healing practices with that of the biomedicine. One more final note, it would be interesting for future research, both in academic and public health parlance, how the situation is unfolding these days in the locality where Maskarinec happened to explore such typical healing practices.

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