

Practice of Shamanism: Traditional Healing Practices and Contemporary Transformations in Khandacakra Municipality, Kalikot

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Abstract

This study explores the practice of shamanism from traditional healing practices to contemporary interpretations in Khandacakra Municipality of Kalikot, Nepal. Utilizing both primary and secondary data, the research examines the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing this transformation. The findings reveal that traditional shamanic culture is in practice in the community, with a significant portion of the population regularly consulting shamans. However, modernization, education, and global cultural exposure are driving changes in these practices. Contemporary shamanism, characterized by a blend of traditional and modern therapeutic approaches, is gaining acceptance, particularly among younger generations. The study highlights the potential for integrating shamanic practices with modern healthcare to provide a holistic approach to health and well-being. Despite challenges such as skepticism from the younger generation and competition from modern healthcare providers, there is strong support for the continued relevance of shamanic practices. This research contributes to the understanding of how traditional practices adapt to modern contexts and offers recommendations for sustaining these practices in the face of ongoing cultural and social changes.

Keywords: Shamanism, Traditional Healing, Transformation, Cultural practice, Skepticism

Introduction

Shamanism, an ancient practice rooted in long-established principles and customs, involves diagnosing, healing, and sometimes inducing suffering through interactions with spirits. Shamans, as described by Eliade (1989), develop unique relationships with spirits, allowing them to control these entities. Hutton (2001) defines shamans as those who, frequently at the request of others, make contact with the spirit realm while in a heightened level of awareness. They differ from other magico-religious experts such as mediums, witch doctors, spiritual healers, or prophets by employing distinctive methods. Shamanism is a pre-existing healing, psychotherapeutic, and spiritual tradition where practitioners enter altered states of consciousness, experiencing themselves or their spirits traveling to other realms at will. Despite its ancient roots, shamanism is often viewed as mentally deranged, psychotic, and charlatan (Walsh, 1989).

Major world religions incorporate shamanistic concepts with cultural variations. In Hinduism, various healing practices, including Yoga, seek to amalgamate one's true self (atman) with the Absolute (Brahman). Yoga generates inner heat, essential for shamans, and shares similarities with shamanism. Hindu yogis practice rituals and claim connections with the spirit world, leading to their super-individual status (Kothari, 1982). In Nepal, terms like "bhut lagne" or "bhooth lagyo" highlight the strong ties between bhakti, tantra, and shamanism. Yellow shamanism, influenced by Buddhism, involves rituals and traditions that believe in ghosts, spirits, hell, and heaven. Monastic leaders heal individuals using Dharmas (Samuel, 1993). Islamized shamanism, closely related to Sufism, involves healing ceremonies, cowrie shell-covered clothing, and working with genies (Wood, 2002). Christian shamanic beliefs involve healing in Jesus Christ's name, experiencing ecstasy, and the feeling of being in the seventh heaven (Hoppal, 2000).

Traditional shamanism is characterized by its indigenous roots, particularly in regions such as Siberia, the Americas, and parts of Africa and Asia (Hultkrantz, 2001). Historically, shamans acted as intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds, performing rituals to address illness, ensure successful hunts, and guide communities through spiritual crises. These practices were deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of the communities where they were practiced. Traditional shamanism involved various techniques, including trance states induced by drumming, dancing, and the use of psychoactive substances (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980).

Contemporary shamanism is experiencing a spiritual revival, focusing on personal transformation and healing. Traditional practices are reinterpreted for individualistic and therapeutic approaches. The New Age movement has influenced modern interpretations, popularizing shamanic practices for personal enlightenment and holistic well-being. Despite its decline due to modernization, urbanization, education, and rationality, neo-shamanism, a modern

system of seeking visions or healing, is growing. Neo-shamanism encompasses various beliefs and practices involving altered states and communication with a spirit world. Shamanism has undergone significant transformations in the contemporary era due to globalization, cultural exchange, and increased spiritual interest. This has led to the incorporation of elements from various traditions, often resulting in eclectic practices like neo-shamanism, which emphasizes personal empowerment and self-discovery (Smith, 1999; Guyer, 2000).

In psychology, shamans are primarily defined as those who claim to consciously manipulate their consciousness to access information not readily accessible. Shamans serve as psychotherapists, counselors, and healers, meeting the community's needs using their abilities. According to biomedicine, disease or pathology within a person's body causes germs to attack, while shamans believe that bad spirits take over a person's body, weakening it over time. The shaman attempts to demonstrate cognitive abilities by giving the client inner peace and quiet, having frequently experienced the anguish the person may be going through. Therefore, shamans are considered the finest healers of the human psyche. Hope, faith, peace of mind, trust, and emotional stimulation are characteristics that Torrey (1986) recognized as creating customer expectations. A shaman heals the client's mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being by instilling experience over time.

Thus, shamanism, a spiritual practice with ancient roots, has undergone significant changes from its traditional practices to contemporary interpretations. Historically, shamanism involved a range of rituals and beliefs aimed at healing and connecting with spiritual realms through mediators known as shamans (Dhami/Jhakri). In recent decades, the practice has transformed, adapting to modern contexts while retaining core elements of its traditional origins. This research proposal aims to explore the evolution of shamanism from its traditional roots to modern interpretation, examining how cultural, social, and global factors have influenced this change.

Research Objectives

Finding the structure and scope of ancient shamanic activities and their contemporary interpretations in Khandacakra Municipality is the main goal of this study. The following are the specific goals of the research, which are based on this overall objective: To identify the existing healthcare practices in Khandacakra Municipality.

1. To investigate the factors behind the continued use of shamanic treatments in Khandacakra Municipality.
2. To explore the knowledge and perceptions of modern interpretations of shamanism in Khandacakra Municipality, Kalikot, Nepal.

Previous Studies on Traditional Shamanism

MacDonald (1975) described shamans (Jhankris) as individuals who enter trances, allowing voices to speak through their bodies, diagnosing and curing illnesses, providing advice, and clarifying facts based on past events. According to Reinhard (1976), a shaman is someone who has the ability to contact the spirit world on behalf of their community members, travel on a soul trip to the spirit world, or become possessed by a spirit.

Paneru's (1980) study on traditional medical practitioners in Nepali rural communities highlights their significant role in health and family planning. The traditional, religious, and spiritual treatment system is trusted by villagers, and a well-trained, intelligent faith healer can provide more effective service than a technically better-trained modern medical doctor.

Miller (1979) studied faith healers in the Himalayas, stating that shamans (Dhamis/Jhankris) are complementary to priests and doctors. Priests serve various aspects of a person's life cycle and relationship with God, while Dhamis/Jhankris are credited with driving away illness or satisfying God. The concept of Dhamis/Jhankris is deeply rooted in Nepalese society, as they refer to Santosh Garnu. Villagers believe that they are necessary for maintaining health and avoiding misfortune.

According to Shrestha and Lediard (1980), Dhama/Jhankri can help with Nepal's population issue in a way that is both economical and culturally suitable. They found that these healers can improve family health and family planning by accelerating the acceptance of family planning. They also suggest that rural and remote areas have faith in indigenous healing practitioners, which can be encouraged to improve health conditions.

Anderson and Foster (1978) discuss the role of medical anthropology in human health, focusing on ethno-medicine and folk medicine from non-western cultures like Ayurveda, faith healing, and Chinese traditional medicine. They differentiate between personalistic and naturalistic etiologic considerations and highlight the hazards of these therapies and indigenous healers, including shamans. Hitchcock and Jones (1994) in their book "Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas" describe spirit possession as an altered state of consciousness resulting from the incorporation of an alien form with spiritual attributes, such as a superhuman form like a witch or god. People believe in spirit possession to explain the causes and effects of illness and misfortune. Shamans, part-time religious practitioners, gain intimate knowledge of supernatural beings through controlled states of ecstasy, trance, or possession, fulfilling the functions of doctors, psychiatrists, and priests in society.

Shamanism in Nepal

Wake (1976) highlights that hill people have always relied on their shamans for health needs, with a unique accepted role within their communities that new health posts struggle to

replicate. Achard (1983) suggests that patients in hilly Nepal will likely contact a local healer, Dhama/Jhankri, unless they live closer to the patient's socio-cultural status than the government-assigned health post staff.

Miller (1979) reveals that Dhama and Jhankris are complementary to priests and doctors in Nepalese society. Priests provide services to people, while Jhankris focus on spiritual causes and healing methods. Villagers believe that they need these healers for their well-being. Miller adds that Jhankris and physicians have different perspectives on the physical origins of illness and therapeutic approaches. According to a research by Judithane (1981), the health care system in the Chitre region of western Nepal consists of patients waiting in their homes for the majority of ailments and treating them with meals and natural treatments. Traditional healers such as Jhankris, Jhames, and Phuknes are consulted if the sickness continues. As a last option, district hospitals and health posts are often sought for severe and chronic illnesses.

Stone's (1976) study provides information about shamans (Dhama/Jhankri) practice in Nuwakot district. Even while western medicine is respected, the lack of integration with village life makes the inhabitants reluctant to adopt it. Service quality varies according to wealth and rank, and district hospitals and health posts are rarely used. Regardless of caste, age, sex, or financial status, Dhama and Jhankris respect everyone equally. Hofer (1994) studied the Tamang of Dhading District, focusing on ecology, subsistence farming, social structure, religion, and other aspects of the Tamang community.

Ethnic-Based Shamanism

Allen (1976) studied "Shamanism among the Thulung Rai" and explains how they believe in the treatment of the shaman. Jones (1976) in his research on "Limbu Spirit Possession and Shamanism" explores the definitions and activities of Limbu shamans, who serve clients as diviners, healers, and priests through possession and trance. Fournier's (1976) report on The Sunuwar Shamans of Sarba discusses spirit possession and shaman activities among the Sunuwar of the Tamba and Mauling River in Eastern Nepal. He identifies two types of shamans: Puimbo (male) and Ngiami (female), who are particularly helpful during illness caused by spirits and supernatural forces. Paul (1976) in his article on "Some Observations on Sherpa Shamanism", discusses Sherpa shamanism's competition with Western medicine in supernatural curing. He argues that Sherpa's attitude towards western medicine is based on the belief that diseases are caused by purposeful supernatural agents or unconscious agents of others.

Peter's (1998) study on Tamang Shamans in "Tamang Shamans, An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal", focuses on the role of shamans in Nepalese society. According to his explanation, Tamang shamans heal illnesses, ease mental stress, and mend strained interpersonal bonds within a family or village. Dougherty's (1986) case study of "A Woman Faith Healer Possessed by the Goddess Ajima" explores the belief in the goddess Ajima,

also known as the goddess of smallpox, and her role in faith healing in the Newar community. Ajima is invoked against disease and has a protective role as a mother.

Contemporary Shamanism

Shamanism is an attitude, discipline, and state of mind that stresses the loving care and concern of oneself, one's family, one's community, and one's environment; it is not an organized religion (Villoldo, 2007). Contemporary shamanism is a method for accessing realms beyond reality, understanding inner experiences, and developing trust in intuitions. It focuses on teaching techniques and providing healing sessions, with symbolic healing being a form of alternative spirituality. Successful healing relies on shared culture-specific symbols.

Harner (1988) used the image of an everlasting shamanic core to describe shamanism as a means of accessing the "otherworld." Because of his perspective, modern shamanism is adaptable and harmonious with different spiritual traditions. The idealized idea of the "noble savage," which portrays indigenous and ancient people as having profound spiritual insights and coexisting peacefully with nature, is another focal point of contemporary shamanism (Kraft & Fonneland, 2015).

Modern shamans are regarded as healers who possess special powers to glimpse spiritual realms that are invisible and obtain direction. Personal challenges can result in both physical and spiritual rehabilitation, according to Lévi-Strauss's idea of a wounded healer. Shamans and their clients develop a deep awareness of suffering via transformational experiences, which empowers clients to heal themselves. Shamans provide their clientele with real insight and sensitivity.

Despite the extensive literature on traditional and contemporary shamanism, there is a notable gap in research specifically focusing on the evolution of shamanic practices in Khandacakra Municipality, West Nepal. Most studies have concentrated on broader regional practices or specific ethnic groups, leaving a gap in understanding how these practices have adapted and transformed in this particular locality. By investigating the cultural, socioeconomic, and international elements affecting the development of shamanism in Khandacakra Municipality, this research seeks to close this gap.

Research Methodology

Selection of Study Area

The study was carried out in the Kalikot district, Khandacakra Municipality. This area was selected due to its socio-cultural and ethnic diversity, which provided a rich context for examining the evolution of shamanism from traditional practices to contemporary interpretations. The research covered one individual from each of the ten wards of Khandacakra Municipality, focusing on the evolution of shamanism.

Research Design

The research employed an exploratory and descriptive design to understand the existing problems and bridge future research projects. The study focused on the evolution of shamanism from traditional practices to modern interpretations. Data were collected from a sample of one hundred individuals within the research area to substantiate the study.

Sample Size

A random sampling procedure was used, employing the lottery method to identify one hundred households within the ten wards of Khandacakra Municipality.

Nature and Sources of Data

Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources. Through field surveys, primary data were gathered, offering up-to-date details on shamanic development. Secondary data were gathered from various published and unpublished books, journal articles, research reports, dissertations, and websites.

Tools and Techniques

The survey consisted of three parts:

1. Questions relating to demographic and socio-economic characteristics and perceptions towards shamanic practice.
2. Questions on traditional healing practices of shamanism and their modern interpretations.
3. Questions directed at faith healers about their shamanic practices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved checking, verifying, and tabulating the collected data. Mean values and proportion values were calculated and interpreted. Bar graphs and pie charts were used for data analysis and interpretation. A descriptive report was prepared, and concluding recommendations were drawn.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Informed consent was obtained from participants, and their privacy was maintained using pseudonyms. Data were not misused or manipulated, and the findings were made accessible to participants and the community for academic purposes.

Delimitation of the Study

The study focused on the shamanistic traditional practices and their modern interpretations in Khandacakra Municipality, examining the livelihood, belief systems, values, and practices of different castes, ages, and ethnic groups. The research was conducted within a three-month timeframe, including visits to various research locations and interactions with shamans and individuals involved in shamanism to gather primary data.

Findings and Discussion

Shamanism from traditional practices to contemporary interpretations in Khandacakra Municipality, West Nepal; The data collected from the field survey and secondary sources are analyzed to understand the current state of shamanic practices, the factors influencing their evolution, and the community's perception of these practices.

Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics

A framework for comprehending the development of shamanic activities is provided by the respondents' socioeconomic and demographic traits. The survey included 100 respondents from different wards of Khandacakra Municipality. The demographic details are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	55	55%
Female	45	45%
Age Group		
18-30	20	20%
31-45	35	35%
46-60	30	30%
61 and above	15	15%
Education Level		
No Formal Education	25	25%
Primary Education	30	30%
Secondary Education	25	25%
Higher Education	20	20%

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Occupation		
Agriculture	40	40%
Business	20	20%
Service	25	25%
Others	15	15%

The data indicate a balanced gender distribution among the respondents, with a majority falling within the 31-45 age group. The education levels vary, with a significant portion having primary or no formal education. Agriculture remains the predominant occupation, reflecting the rural nature of the municipality.

Traditional Shamanic Practices

The study found that traditional shamanic practices are still prevalent in Khandacakra Municipality. These practices are deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of the community. Table 2 summarizes the respondents' engagement with traditional shamanic practices.

Table 2

Engagement with Traditional Shamanic Practices

Engagement Level	Frequency	Percentage
Regularly Consult Shamans	60	60%
Occasionally Consult Shamans	25	25%
Rarely Consult Shamans	10	10%
Never Consult Shamans	5	5%

A significant majority of respondents (60%) regularly consult shamans for various issues, including health, spiritual guidance, and resolving personal problems. This indicates the continued relevance of shamans in the community.

Factors Influencing the Evolution of Shamanism

Several factors have influenced the evolution of shamanism in Khandacakra Municipality. These include modernization, education, and exposure to global cultures. Table 3 presents the respondents' views on the factors influencing the evolution of shamanism.

Table 3

Factors Influencing the Evolution of Shamanism

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Modernization	40	40%
Education	30	30%
Global Cultural Exposure	20	20%
Government Health Services	10	10%

Modernization and education are the primary factors influencing the evolution of shamanic practices. As the community becomes more educated and exposed to modern health services, the reliance on traditional shamanic practices is gradually decreasing.

Contemporary Interpretations of Shamanism

The study also explored the contemporary interpretations of shamanism in the community. These interpretations often blend traditional practices with modern therapeutic approaches. Table 4 summarizes the respondents' perceptions of contemporary shamanic practices.

Table 4

Perceptions of Contemporary Shamanic Practices

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	50	50%
Neutral	30	30%
Negative	20	20%

Half of the respondents have a positive perception of contemporary shamanic practices, viewing them as beneficial for personal transformation and healing. However, a significant portion remains neutral or negative, indicating a mixed reception within the community.

Role of Shamans in Modern Healthcare

The role of shamans in modern healthcare was another focus of the study. The findings suggest that while traditional shamanic practices are still valued, there is a growing acceptance of integrating these practices with modern healthcare. Table 5 presents the respondents' views on the integration of shamanic practices with modern healthcare.

Table 5

Integration of Shamanic Practices with Modern Healthcare

View on Integration	Frequency	Percentage
Support Integration	60	60%
Oppose Integration	20	20%
Indifferent	20	20%

A majority of respondents (60%) support the integration of shamanic practices with modern healthcare, recognizing the potential benefits of a holistic approach to health and well-being.

Challenges Faced by Shamans

The study identified several challenges faced by shamans in Khandacakra Municipality. These challenges include skepticism from the younger generation, competition from modern healthcare providers, and a lack of formal recognition. Table 6 summarizes the challenges faced by shamans.

Table 6

Challenges Faced by Shamans

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Skepticism from Younger Generation	40	40%
Competition from Modern Healthcare	30	30%
Lack of Formal Recognition	20	20%
Others	10	10%

Skepticism from the younger generation and competition from modern healthcare providers are the primary challenges faced by shamans. These challenges threaten the sustainability of traditional shamanic practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between traditional and contemporary shamanic practices in Khandacakra Municipality. Traditional shamanism remains deeply embedded in the community, with a significant portion of the population regularly

consulting shamans. However, the influence of modernization, education, and global cultural exposure is leading to an evolution in these practices.

The positive perception of contemporary shamanic practices suggests that there is potential for these practices to adapt and thrive in a modern context. The support for integrating shamanic practices with modern healthcare indicates a recognition of the value of a holistic approach to health and well-being.

Despite the challenges faced by shamans, there is a clear demand for their services, particularly in areas where modern healthcare is less accessible. The integration of shamanic practices with modern healthcare could provide a more comprehensive approach to health, addressing both physical and spiritual needs.

The study also reveals a generational divide in the perception of shamanic practices. While older generations continue to value traditional practices, younger generations are more skeptical. This generational divide poses a challenge for the sustainability of shamanic practices and highlights the need for efforts to bridge this gap.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of shamanism in Khandacakra Municipality reflects broader trends of cultural adaptation and integration. Traditional shamanic practices continue to play a vital role in the community, but they are evolving to incorporate contemporary interpretations and modern healthcare approaches. The support for integrating shamanic practices with modern healthcare suggests a path forward that honors traditional practices while embracing modern advancements. The conclusions of the study emphasize the possibility for shamanic activities to flourish in a contemporary setting and offer insightful information about the state of these practices in Khandacakra Municipality. Future research should focus on exploring strategies for integrating shamanic practices with modern healthcare and addressing the challenges faced by shamans to ensure the sustainability of these practices.

Recommendations

From the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. **Promote the Integration of Shamanic Practices with Modern Healthcare:** Efforts should be made to integrate shamanic practices with modern healthcare to provide a holistic approach to health and well-being.
2. **Address the Challenges Faced by Shamans:** Strategies should be developed to address the challenges faced by shamans, including skepticism from the younger generation and competition from modern healthcare providers.

3. Bridge the Generational Divide: Efforts should be made to bridge the generational divide in the perception of shamanic practices, ensuring that these practices are valued and sustained across generations.
4. Conduct Further Research: Further research should be conducted to explore the potential for integrating shamanic practices with modern healthcare and to develop strategies for addressing the challenges faced by shamans.

By implementing these recommendations, it is hoped that the evolution of shamanism in Khandacakra Municipality can be supported and sustained, ensuring that these valuable practices continue to play a vital role in the community.

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