



## The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of "Villagers' Beliefs" in Nepal

Stacy Leigh Pigg

*Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 2. (May, 1996), pp. 160-201.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0886-7356%28199605%2911%3A2%3C160%3ATCATCT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M>

*Cultural Anthropology* is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/anthro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of “Villagers’ Beliefs” in Nepal

Stacy Leigh Pigg

*Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Simon Fraser University*

In the mid-1980s, I was in Nepal looking at the formation of a “national culture” through interethnic relations in healing. I learned soon enough, though, to simply tell people there that I was studying *dhāmi-jhānkris*,<sup>1</sup> shamans. This deceptively simple tactic for dealing with people’s curiosity always produced a gratifying response. First a chuckle, and then a comment. One way or another, this comment would focus on the oddness of a person from a “developed country,” a *bikasit deś*, trying to know about this most “Nepali” phenomenon. “So what have you decided?” I would be asked by a laughing stranger, “Do you believe in dhāmis?” Or, even funnier to them: “Have you become one yet?” Sometimes my statement elicited a story. “I don’t believe in shamans myself”—always this introduction—“But one time I saw a shaman in [insert name of remote place in the mountains] who did the most amazing thing [insert elaborate description of the shaman’s magic feats and/or miraculous cure]. Now how can that be explained?” Another response was, “Of course, our shamans really do work. They cure people in a ‘psychological’ way.” In the rural area of eastern Nepal where I lived I was often told, “Well, you’ve come to the wrong place then. The dhāmis around here stink.” And then I would be instructed about a place that was more “remote,” more “traditional,” or more “backward,” where the shamans really “know.” My closest friends in this village sometimes asked me, “What use is it to someone like you to learn about these things? So much trouble for you, and you’ll just go back to your country where there are doctors everywhere.” My Nepali colleagues at the university were polite, even gracious, to me about my work, but I knew that some of them considered research on shamans to be arcane, irrelevant to Nepal’s real problems, and symptomatic of a pervasive Western romanticization of Nepal (Fisher 1987; Mishra 1984). Taken together, these reactions made me wonder just what it is about a U.S. woman’s interest in dhāmi-jhānkris that demands a response.

In Nepal, nowadays, your attitude toward shamans communicates who you are. My interlocutors said quite a lot in their few words. If you can laugh about

dhāmis, then you do not take them too seriously. If you can find them fascinating, then obviously you do not see them every day. If you can explain what they do, then you cannot be fooled. If you know the difference between good and bad shamans, or know where and to whom their knowledge is valuable, then you know how to make the complicated judgments necessary to deal with these healers. What people said in response to my declared interest in dhāmi-jhānkris revealed little about how likely the speakers were to actually call a shaman when sick. Nor did they shed much light on why shamans are so important as ritual specialists and healers in Nepal, or on why their power is compelling for most Nepalis. The responses I got indicated, quite simply, how a person chose to position himself or herself in relation to my connection to Nepal, as that person perceived it. I was taken to represent modernity.<sup>2</sup>

Nepal is not the only place where shamans are caught up in the meanings of modernity. In the world at large today, it is possible to be a person who is “interested in” or “not interested in” shamans. You can engage in research on shamans from any number of angles in order to explain what they do, how they do it, and why people turn to them. You can ignore them, on the assumption that they are an arcane feature of disappearing cultures. Or you can buy the experience of being a shaman’s apprentice by signing up for tours and workshops. Shamans figure in the Western imagination as objects of science, obstacles to science, and alter images of science.<sup>3</sup> Shamans, taken to represent “tradition” (or sometimes “premodern” worlds), have long been handy symbols in the construction of “modernity.”

Though I did not realize it at first, it was when I talked to people in Nepal about dhāmi-jhānkris that I was most deeply involved in the participant side of the activity we call participant-observation. These conversations were a juncture where my “I”—my self, my social identity, and my situated interests—was inserted most seamlessly and completely in an activity of importance to many people in Nepal. It mattered to them to talk about whether shamans can be believed, and who believes in them. The activity in which I found myself participating involved representations of self and other, in ways I will go on to explain. As I busied myself documenting people’s beliefs for purposes of scholarship I came across many people who were questioning their own and others’ beliefs in the name of science. They did so while explicitly recognizing the importance of these very same beliefs in local identity. This led me to think about the role of skepticism in the construction of cultural meaning and the role of cross-talk in what appears to be shared or dominant understandings (cf. Tsing 1993). It led me to question what counts as “culture” in conventional anthropological description. The cross-talk about belief also drew my attention to the processes that were constructing “belief” as an object of debate for Nepalis in Nepal.

In this essay I consider why so many people in Nepal are so interested in talking about who believes what. Some of these people claim that they have a modern consciousness by associating “belief in dhāmis” with a distinct “other” who is traditional. Who does this, why, in what ways, and to what ends? Still

other people embrace shamans as necessary and indispensable, but at the same time bad-mouth them in a constant tirade of skeptical criticism (as Stone 1986 has also noted). What is the nature of this skepticism, and what is accomplished through it? Is the skepticism expressed by the people most intimately involved with shamans a measure of the effects of “modernization”? Quite a number of the people I knew oscillated between these positions, adopting different stances depending on the context. What does this tell us about the lives of these people and the politics of identity in Nepal?

By being someone “interested in dhāmi-jhānkris,” I stumbled upon an arena of Nepali society where the social differences created by modernity were especially at issue. There are overlapping reasons why shamans would be at the center of these concerns about identity. One cluster of reasons has to do with the way modern notions of progress infuse specific development objectives. An aim of development in Nepal is to introduce “modern medicine” (also known as “biomedicine,” “allopathy,” “Western medicine,” and “cosmopolitan medicine”).<sup>4</sup> In the everyday logic of development practice, “modern medicine” is positioned as the eventual replacement for existing modes of healing. “Modern medicine” thus has to combat healers like shamans. In Nepal, shamans perform rituals that placate spirits or foil witches; they generally do not give medicines or manipulate the body itself.<sup>5</sup> Their association with spirits and rituals makes them especially potent metaphors for tradition in juxtaposition to the “science” of “modern medicine.”

Shamans are salient figures, as well, in the wider cultural politics of development in Nepal for an altogether different set of reasons. Seen from the perspective of the rural people among whom I lived, shamans and “doctors”<sup>6</sup> symbolize the relations between a local village world and the cosmopolitan modern world. This *social* meaning comes in part from the ways illnesses themselves are connected to place and identity. Shamans deal with problems people have because of who they are and where they live. (Spirits are attached to specific sites or social groups; witches are members of the local community.) Their divinations and rituals deal with the contingent forces working on contextualized persons.<sup>7</sup> The kinds of illnesses doctors treat, in contrast, are said to be “of the body,” common to anyone “who bleeds when cut.” Doctors’ treatments address illnesses that are understood to be universal and independent of context. Whereas a shaman’s actions always evoke a social context, the doctor’s medicines suggest the existence of a generic individual. The sources of these healers’ knowledge is associated with social spaces as well. Shamans learn “secrets” through apprenticeships and dreams, while doctors have the kind of systematic, public knowledge instilled in schools. Shamans belong to a world of local and personal relations, while doctors clearly belong to the institutions of a cosmopolitan modernity. In short, shamans mean something in both modern narratives and local understandings. Paradoxically, as I will try to show, this makes shamanic healing central to Nepali experiences of modernity.

### The Idea of Modernity

Discussions of “belief” in Nepal are part of a much broader process through which local and national concerns intersect with global cultural circulations. To look at the meaning of “belief” in Nepal is to also explore the social life of the notion of the modern, in both its local manifestations and its translocal consequences. In talking about the modern here, I am concerned specifically with the vision of identity and difference embedded in the narrative of modernization. This narrative posits a rupture, a break that separates a state of modernity from a past that is characterized as traditional. Tied to the idea of progress, then, is an idiom of social difference, a classification that places people on either side of this great divide. Modernity, in this sense, is quite literally a worldview: a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness.

The contours of this world look different depending on the angle from which they are seen. In societies that can claim to be the home of modernity, this narrative of difference is used in myriad ways to construct a traditional “other.” In Nepal, though, it is the modern that is “other.” From the point of view of this small, marginal, and impoverished country, modernity is somewhere else—India, perhaps, or China. The question, for many, is how to bring modernity here, and whether it is possible to be “here” in Nepal and be “modern.” “Compared to the advanced countries of the world, we are lagging about a half to a full century,” wrote a contributor to an internet discussion of Nepal’s problems, expressing a widely shared sense of despair over Nepal’s ranking as one of the world’s poorest countries (soc.culture.nepal, 1994). In fact, development institutions are among the most important forces brokering ideas of modernity through specific projects of modernization (Adams 1995; Escobar 1995). Nepalis experience modernity through a development ideology that insists that they are *not* modern, indeed that they have a very long way to go to get there. This message has different implications and certainly different meanings for people variously positioned in Nepali society.

How, then, are we to understand the import of modernity in Nepal? Modernity is a slippery object for cultural analysis because the discourse of modernity produces the very differences that it seems to be about (Latour 1993). The dichotomy between tradition and modernity makes sense only within the narrative of modernization. We therefore have to bracket the terms “modern” and “traditional” in order to make them objects of analysis. This is not easy. Consider how anthropology has variously positioned itself within and against the modernization narrative. Again and again, these terms creep back into our vocabulary in self-consciously apologetic scare quotes, even though, for the most part, it is thought best to avoid these labels all together. This avoidance of tainted adjectives merely evades the problem the discourse of modernity poses for cultural analysis. It will not do to look the other way simply because we now find the traditional-modern dichotomy problematic. Whether or not this dichotomy serves us well in social analysis, the fact is that these terms are thriving in the world we aim to describe and interpret.

We need, then, to track the terms of the discourse of modernity as people adopt, deploy, modify, and question it. To do so requires shifting attention from the *content* of social representations to their *use* in historically specific contexts, for it is one thing to point to the dichotomous terms characteristic of this discourse and quite another to consider who brings these categories of difference to bear on the world, through what practices, and to what effects. What at first glance appears as an ever more widespread repetition of these supposedly "Western" categories turns out to be a complicated chain of displaced differences.<sup>8</sup>

It is futile to try to map the boundaries of the modern, for these boundaries are redrawn every time the idea of modernity is asserted. Where, then, can anthropology begin to tackle the question of modernity? If we restrict ourselves to the description of particular social forms identified as modern we fail to address the powerful hold the idea of modernity has in a global social imaginary. But by addressing the ideological significance of modernity we are caught, by default, replicating the traditional-modern distinction and with it the presumption that modernity is quintessentially Western. Ethnography offers a strategy for dealing with this conundrum of position because, beyond discovering that there are "other" and "many" modernities, it can be a method for tracing the situated practices through which modernity is asserted while making evident the displacements such assertions produce.

Though the idea of modernity appears ubiquitous and enduring, it is not the same everywhere and at all times. We can recognize its origins in a particular historical milieu, and we can trace how it has spread through powerful ideological and political mechanisms, but we must also be cautious, as Rofel has warned, "of creating unified readings out of local Euro-American practices and allowing those to overpower interpretations elsewhere" (1992:93). Too often, I think, we treat modernity like a robust and noxious weed whose spread chokes the delicate life out of other meanings. The strategy I employ here is to delineate points of view from which the modern and the traditional are visible. Though one aim of my ethnographic analysis is to show how the categories of modernity have indeed permeated the common sense of Nepali villagers, I do not mean to suggest simply that "our" modern ideas are taking over "their" local ones. Rather, I want to draw attention to the formation of *junctions* at which it becomes possible to communicate (or appear to communicate) across social contexts through various versions of modern dichotomies.

The question of villagers' beliefs is one such juncture. As modern social dichotomies meld with local common sense in Nepal, they also establish connections to people and places beyond the locality. This dynamic is not easily captured in the familiar inside-outside trope of anthropology. When "culture" is understood to consist of contextually dependent, situated meanings attached to places and their resident people, ideas and sensibilities are taken as features of cultural identity. In the case I discuss here, this would lead us to sort out "modern" from "Nepali" cultural orientations and to try to determine who has which

and to what degree. We would end up finding “modernized” and “traditional” Nepalis.

An alternative conception begins from the premise that a locality (such as a Nepali village) is itself a translocal (or transnational) space. Locality is constituted in and through relations to wider systems, not simply impinged upon by them. We are more accustomed to noting this for economic systems—for instance, in discussing the organization of peasant household production in its relation to capitalism and markets—than for systems of signification. Through what sorts of relations do ideas, images, meanings, and ideologies become globalized? What is the relation between processes of localization and processes of interconnection? These questions are much harder to pose, let alone answer, when we look at the construction of meaning. In theorizing these relations we are caught between wanting to recognize the integrity and coherence of culturally distinctive points of view and acknowledging the impossibility of delimiting “a” culture in the face of overwhelming evidence of the cross-currents in which these points of view are positioned.

One step away from the reification of discrete cultures is to inquire into the processes that make and sustain distinctiveness. “Instead of assuming the autonomy of a primeval community,” Gupta and Ferguson have argued, “we need to examine how it was formed *as a community* out of the interconnected space that always already existed” (1992:8). By focusing on the production of difference, we stay mindful of the social relations that position people. What makes the point of view of Nepali villagers different from other perspectives in Nepal and elsewhere? More importantly, who recognizes this difference?

A second step involves looking afresh at how distinctive points of view are brought together. If difference is to be problematized by looking at how it is produced, it is equally important to ask how particular conjunctures come into existence.<sup>9</sup> Attention to the formation of locality also requires attention to the formation of the cosmopolitanism that transcends localities and mediates them (Robbins 1992).<sup>10</sup> This relation between differentiated locality and mobile cosmopolitanism is precisely the relation I address here. It seemed to me to be at the heart of the cultural tensions brought to the fore in Nepal by the discursive effects of development. The idea of the modern generates a sense of difference while at the same time holding out the promise of inclusion in a global cosmopolitan culture. To understand what this means in Nepal, it is important to realize that modernity is not cosmopolitan by definition. It has come to be so in the world we live in today. The question is, how?

This question forced itself on me when, living in Nepal in the mid-1980s, I met many people who described themselves and others in the modern terms I thought anthropological relativism should counter. I began to ask what they meant and why these categories would be compelling to them in the first place. Tracking the idea of the modern through its uses in different social sites, I found a cosmopolitanism, a kind of cultural transitivity, being produced out of the displacements the notion of the modern creates. This is a process better shown than explained. Take, for instance, the question of belief.

### The Discourse on Belief

Both the Nepali word *biśwās* and the English word “belief” have several connotations. (Both English and Nepali are used in the discourse on belief in Nepal.) There is a slippage in the connotations of *belief/biśwās*, both within and between the two languages. These words can indicate trust and confidence in another person, or faith and conviction in a general proposition. The word *biśwās*, however, most often conveys faith in another person rather than adherence to abstract principles. I will return to the subtleties of translation later. For now, it is enough to note that a range of meanings fall under the umbrella of “belief.” It follows that the question of belief is a different question for different people. Eavesdrop for a few moments with me and you will begin to see the many ways in which the question of belief arises.

#### *Scene I: Bhojpur Bazaar, May 1987*

“The only thing that separates a shaman from people like you and me is a drum!”

The occasion for this remark was a courtesy visit I paid to Mr. Rai, an official in one of Bhojpur’s health-related government offices. We sat sipping tea in his third-floor office, me sitting demurely in my respectable go-to-town sari and he behind his massive glass-topped desk. I had just told him that my research in the nearby village of Chandithan concerned how villagers understand the relation between dhāmi-jhānkris, shamans, and hospital medicine. Having grown up in a village in a neighboring district, he told me, he understood how villagers think.

“When the ‘traditional’ person is sick,” he intoned, “he thinks that *deutā lāgyo*, that spirits have come clinging. He thinks that it is things outside the body that make him sick. The villager thinks that spirits and ghosts have afflicted him. If he has ‘appendicitis,’ ” Mr. Rai continued, pressing his hands over his lower right abdomen to emphasize his point, “all he knows is the pain he feels in his belly. He goes to a dhāmi. The dhāmi claims to see spirits. His ‘diagnosis’ comes from a divination [*jokhānā*]. It could be anything—*kul pitra*, *buḍeni śikāri*. The dhāmi doesn’t learn which spirit it is from the symptoms a person has, you see. Shamans claim to see things that an ordinary person can’t see.”<sup>11</sup>

And that, Mr. Rai asserted, was an authority a dhāmi claimed on the basis of the ritual symbolism of his drum, called a *dhyaṅgro*. Shamans receive the *dhyaṅgro* from their spirit familiars, usually in a ritual with their teacher-guru. Beating this drum, they call their spirit familiar and send it out “looking, searching” for visions of the forces bringing misfortune on ordinary people. Mr. Rai’s thumbnail description of local healing practices, I thought, was a reasonable summary of what happens. And Mr. Rai was right about something else, too. A shaman is just a person with a ritual implement. The question is, to whom does that make a difference?

*Scene II: Kathmandu, 1980*

Ramesh Shrestha and Mark Lediard had a vision, and it was inspired by anthropology. They were fed up with the way traditional Nepali practices were ignored in development plans. They, with others, spearheaded an innovative program in the late 1970s aimed at training dhāmi-jhānkris in modern health ideas. They argued that because every village has dozens of shamans while very few have functioning health posts, shamans should be trained as health outreach workers. Why not enlist them to distribute condoms and pills for the Nepal Contraceptive Retail Service? This small program was launched in a climate hostile to such suggestions. For years health officials and doctors had regarded shamans as an obstacle. In *Faith Healers: A Force for Change*, Shrestha and Lediard make their case:

Belief is central to an understanding of who the *dhāmi-jhānkris* are and why they might play a catalytic role in population work. The *dhāmi-jhānkri* is a healer whose techniques are rooted in a spiritual rather than a microbiological concept of disease. While Western medicine tests for germs and microbes, *dhamis* and *jhānkris* search for the spirits, ghosts, and gods whom they see behind disease. This apparently irreconcilable difference in outlook has caused many foreign-trained government health professionals to dismiss the faith healers as quaint anachronisms whose strange ways will give way in time to the new system they hope to extend to the rural areas. [1980:9]

Shrestha and Lediard know their audience of “foreign-trained government health professionals” very well indeed. For these professionals, shamans are a reminder of the immense chasm separating the realities of Nepal from the better, more modern, developed society their training is supposed to help bring about. You might want to wish these shamans away, Shrestha and Lediard tell them, “but in the meantime there is this stubborn problem of *belief*; the *dhamis* and *jhānkris* believe in spirit possession, and the villagers believe in the *dhamis* and *jhānkris*” (1980:9).

*Scene III: A village house, along the trail between Bhojpur Bazaar and “Chandithan,” May 1987*

“It’s just like your people’s doctor,” the dhāmi informed me with a sly smile. “First comes the examination, then comes the treatment.”

It was past midnight and he was about to begin the curing phase of his ritual. In the four or five hours up to that point, the dhāmi had built his altar, beat his drum, sung his songs, begun to tremble, and allowed his spirit to choke out through his voice a long divination for the household that had sponsored him. We had consumed several bottles of millet liquor, discussed “whether there are shamans in America,” and laughed as a young man, during a break, grabbed the shaman’s drum and began to parody a shaman’s trance by giving a thoroughly obscene and comic divination. The ritual was almost complete. The “examination,” as the dhāmi jokingly referred to the divination, had revealed that a witch of unknown identity had harmed the family by planting a *bhed*, a wad of sorcery,

against the woman. This is serious stuff; it can kill, people say. And so the dhāmi had organized his counterattack.

The dhāmi asked that a brass plate, a brass water vessel, and a cup of yogurt be brought to him. He mixed the water and the yogurt, pouring the liquid back and forth between plate and pitcher.

“Look! See for yourselves. Nothing here but water and yogurt!” he announced. Then he proceeded to seal the water pitcher with a piece of paper.

“If there are any doubters, this is your last chance to check,” he challenged the onlookers one last time to see if he had planted anything inside as he sprinkled vermilion powder on the paper seal. Silence.

He picked up his drum, instructed me to turn on my tape recorder, and began to sing his mantra softly. A few minutes later, he signaled to me to stop taping. Leaning over to the woman, who sat cross-legged near his altar, he pressed his mouth against the skin of her belly. He sat back, spitting what he had sucked out of her onto the plate. It looked like a piece of chewed up meat. He murmured mantra over the sealed water vessel, then, uncovering it, slowly poured its contents into the plate. A dozen heads bent in close to peer at it. At first it seemed there was nothing in the cloudy water, but slowly as it settled an indistinct whitish lump floated to the surface.

Gingerly, the dhāmi fished it out. As one, the hushed crowd inched closer.

It proved to be a tiny bundle of cloth bound together by hair. The dhāmi carefully picked it apart bit by bit, allowing the woman to confirm that indeed the cloth came from her blouse, her petticoat, and her skirt (*lungi*). He had found and deactivated the harm the witch had sent.

This was the most theatrical performance by a shaman I had ever seen. Sucking out bhed was common enough, but the flourishes reminiscent of a stage magician seemed to suggest that this dhāmi was working too hard to prove something. I wondered, of course, how much of this performance was for my benefit. This particular dhāmi had, in our few encounters, been keen to impress on me that he had been to college in Kathmandu. He had also alternated between shunning me and peddling magic spells. I did not trust the air of cunning he had about him. That particular night I was aware of an unusual amount of secret whispering between the dhāmi and a few of the people present. I suspected a plot. Still, some of my trusted friends in this area sometimes called this dhāmi, and they thought he was one “who knew.” When I inquired a few weeks later, I was told that the woman from whom he had sucked out the bhed had “improved a bit.” Had he been putting on a show? In the final analysis, all I can say is what everyone in Chandithan says: Who knows?

*Scene IV: Same house, a few hours later*

“Biśwās . . . belief. Biśwās *chaina bhane* . . . if you don’t believe.”

The raised voices woke me. I had drifted asleep, stiff, cold, and uncomfortable, not long after the dramatic extraction of the wad of magic. A Chhetri man,<sup>12</sup> fashionably clad in a navy blue polyester track suit, stood in the doorway as the others reprimanded him for what apparently had been a disparaging com-

ment. This shaman's theatricality had not gone unnoticed, it seemed. The man must have insinuated that the dhāmi faked his show—a common enough accusation. Others leaped to the defense of the dhāmi. He was, after all, an invited guest. And is it wise, in any event, to get on the wrong side of someone with this power? Anyone who can undo witchcraft can probably also do it.

The dhāmi had been out of the room when his reputation was sullied. Walking in on the exchange, he smirked, "I asked if anyone wanted to check the water to see for himself. What does he think I do? Go around stealing people's clothing?" He shrugged. "Bīśwās cha bhane cha, chaina bhane chaina" (if there's faith, there's faith; if there's not, there's not).

The man in the track suit ducked out of the house, leaving the others to sit, smoking and drinking, continuing the talk that filled up the breaks between the dhāmi's exhausting sessions with his drum.

"It is not as if we have some kind of contract obliging us to deliver our services," the dhāmi's assistant declared, implying that no one, as a result, has a right to complain about what they do or do not do.

"If the spells work, they work; if they don't, they don't" the dhāmi added. A chorus of voices echoed the dhāmi's truism: "That's right, that's right. If it works, it works. . . ."

"When a person is suffering on the verge of death, the dhāmi's help is a comfort. It is a good thing," another voice chimed in.

"It isn't as if we have some 'license,' " stated the dhāmi. "The government gives them—" he pointed with his lips in the direction of the clinics in the Bazaar, "a budget." Shamans, he implied, are not obligated, like the government's health institutions, to provide services to the public. They certainly are not on salary. He was bitter.

"No. The way it is for us, we just get called on to go to people. When it turns out well, then good, but if it turns out badly, we get called scum. Not just by one person; no, everyone starts calling us scum."

"Worse than scum," piped up his disgruntled assistant. "Asshole. Asshole, they call us. 'What does that asshole know?' they say."

"That's right 'What does that asshole know?' they say," echoed the dhāmi, resentful of the unjust accusations he endures. "People say 'he came, he fumbled around with whatever, walked off with the payment, and it did no good.' "

"Well, you shouldn't be so surprised when that happens," a critical voice in the group retorted, no longer putting up with the dhāmi's pious claims to innocent sacrifice. You cannot blame people for talking badly about shamans, he implied. "After all, you dhāmis do go around saying that you can cure people and taking the payment for it."

"How on earth am I supposed to be able to know whether someone can be cured?" the dhāmi snapped back. He was both indignant and sincere. As many people, shamans and their clients alike, pointed out to me, shamans "aren't god." They can't do everything. And it is no secret that they are fallible.

“Listen,” the dhāmi continued, frustrated, “it’s like this—it isn’t as if we have a ‘license’ to show to you.” Again he alluded to the difference between the voluntary, personal help offered by shamans and the world of officialdom.

“Humphh!” said the critic, shooting back an angry retort about the unworthiness of dhāmis.

“Fine. And why then do you people keep calling us?” the dhāmi challenged him, his voice rising in anger. “You have no right to ask us to come to you. Fine. If that’s what you think. Just leave us out of it. When you are in need, just go there.” It is clear that he meant the hospital, a half hour down the trail. “Leave us out of it. Why should you put your faith in us?” He paused to let his words sink in. Others tried to calm him down. But he was mad.

“No. No need whatsoever to show respect to dhāmis. It is not your granting of respect, my child, that makes us worthy of it. We don’t care. Call me. I’m not at your beck and call. I might or might not go to you,” he threatened. Then, more quietly, he said, “The way it is, is this. I go to my kin and my friends to blow my spells only in the hope that it might perhaps do some good.”

“It is a question of finding a dhāmi who can do the job,” a peacemaker suggested. Some dhāmis have the power and the spells for problems that others cannot deal with.

Sensing he had gone too far, the critic tried to make amends. “Listen, brother, listen to me. Please listen a minute. When we speak of dhāmis, let’s face it, some know, and some don’t know. It’s not just you we’re talking about. There are other dhāmis in the world—”

“Some know and some don’t know,” interrupted the dhāmi, mocking the oft-repeated truism about dhāmis. “Right. That’s why I have nothing to say to you people.”

It had gotten out of hand, this fight. Voices rose up with conciliatory reassurances.

“You can’t promise anything, brother, of course not. If it works it works, if it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.”

“Just look how many ‘operations’ doctors do,” the woman who had been the victim of the witch pointed out, “and still people die.”

That, everyone felt, pretty much summed it up. They had all had one version or another of this conversation many times before. They turned back to the ritual work remaining to be done.

### **Dialogues, Real and Imagined**

What connects these scenes? Neither the dhāmi nor his clients read books published in Kathmandu about enlisting “faith healers” in development efforts. Mr. Rai does not, as a habit, attend shamanic rituals taking place down the trail from his home. The planners who design programs that incorporate “traditional medical practitioners” do not pause to wonder whether villagers actually follow shamans’ advice, much less imagine the sorts of interactions that really take place in these encounters. Linking these places and people, though, is a social order organized around national development. Mid-level bureaucrats in the

provinces are supposed to implement among villagers the development agendas set in Kathmandu, Geneva, Washington, and New York. Looming in the background of each of these scenes is an image of “modern medicine” as scientific, valid, and efficacious—whether or not the minds in the bodies it treats believe in it.

The speakers in these scenes use the notion of belief in shamans to different ends, and they do this from very different positions. Mr. Rai comments from close-up on the mindset that keeps villagers calling on shamans. He wants to use his local influence to debunk shamanic authority in order to promote a more rational kind of healing. Shrestha and Lediard draw on a similar observation about shared understandings. From a distance, though, the mindset described appears as the “stubborn problem” of culture itself. They want bureaucrats to stop regarding culture as an obstacle and to start using it as a tool for development. By contrast, the arguing villagers are thrashing out issues of skepticism and trust in the immediacy of interpersonal relations. They do not sound very much like Shrestha and Lediard’s “villagers,” who are supposed to believe unreservedly and unreflectively in dhāmis. Yet voices would not have been raised and tempers would not have flared if these people had found dhāmis and their healing powers as easy to dismiss as Mr. Rai does. For them, the dhāmis’ authority can neither go unquestioned nor be dismissed.

And what does this particular dhāmi have to say for himself? Before the argument even took place, he had already anticipated the skepticism of his audience. He knew he battled witch-magic in a place where his clients also trot down the trail to buy medicines in the Bazaar, where relatives who think shamans are deceivers preying on people’s superstitions may have just flown in from Kathmandu, where sophisticated local people invoke science to evaluate shamans’ powers, and where an anthropologist might even show up to document his every move. “Even the Miss believes me,” this shaman had said that evening, invoking the anthropologist from a “developed country” to bolster his authority.

All the utterances in my examples are fundamentally dialogical. They are oriented toward listeners, both hypothetical and real. What is said already anticipates responses that might come from various perspectives.<sup>13</sup> Discourse on belief is saturated with the social context. Bakhtin calls the cacophony of social voices in language heteroglossia, by which he means that

there are no “neutral” words and forms—words and forms that belong to “no one”; language [is] shot through with intentions and accents. . . . All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. [1981:293]

The discourse on belief “tastes” of many disparate contexts for Nepalis and is “populated” by intentions both close at hand and far away. Voicing it and hearing it, people are immersed in the socially charged life of words. The scenes I described above are connected (if I can mix my theorists) in the “heterogloss-

sia” of an *international* “imagined community” (Anderson 1983).<sup>14</sup> This “imagined community” of posited interlocutors has come into being through Nepal’s national project of development. This project links a transnational narrative of modernity to local concerns about status and mobility.

### A State of Development

For Nepalis, modernity is not an abstraction. It is an idea rendered meaningful and concrete through their involvement with the ideologies and institutional practices of development. The salience of development in Nepali national society cannot be overemphasized: the idea of development grips the social imagination at the same time its institutional forms are shaping the society itself.<sup>15</sup> There is, of course, a history behind this national obsession with development. Nepal became involved as a state in postcolonial world politics without having been (directly) colonized.<sup>16</sup> A political upheaval in 1950–51 overthrew the Rana oligarchy, ushering in a state that legitimated itself through its declared mission to modernize Nepal.<sup>17</sup> This new phase in Nepali national politics coincided with the postwar emergence of the international development apparatus. For four decades, state expansion has worked hand-in-glove with foreign aid in the mission to develop the country. The post-1950 policies planted many entirely new features in the social landscape—ranging from roads to foreign development advisers, from schools and hospitals to tourists, from media images to commodities. In the process, a sense of a national society was built. Being Nepali means seeing yourself as a citizen of an underdeveloped country. Most people over the age of 30 recall quite vividly both the degree of change and the experience of realizing that they were “underdeveloped.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, specific development policies, programs, or institutions are not the source of all social changes in Nepal. But in popular consciousness *bikās* (development) describes anything new and/or foreign. Being modern is being *bikāsi* (developed).

The intense development activity since the mid-1950s has had some tangible structural effects. First, patterns of connectedness changed. A hill population that had always traded, intermarried, and migrated became more mobile, in new ways and in relation to new places. Especially important was the opening of the Tarai (the flat land between the hills and the Indian border to the south) to colonization. The hills and the Tarai have become increasingly interconnected. In general, development, whether in the form of roads or schools, has intensified the influx of nonlocal ideas and things into hill villages. Second, the civil service has burgeoned and the government presence in the countryside has expanded through “offices” for agriculture, health, education, and development administration. Development is an industry in its own right in Nepal. It requires bureaucrats, foreign advisers, office staff, professionals, extension workers, program directors, project coordinators, trainers, trainees (who are often paid for participating), interviewers and survey enumerators, secretaries, drivers, and tea fetchers, both within His Majesty’s Government and in international aid organizations. The middle-class that has emerged in the last four decades sustains itself in large part from development-related employment. At the same

time, subsistence farmers (estimated to be 80–90 percent of the population), who increasingly depend on the employment of one or more family members as a source of cash, look to jobs as rural school teachers, agricultural extension agents, village health workers, vaccinators, and office “peons” as possible local sources of income. It is important to understand that people in Nepal, at all economic levels, have a more immediate interest in the job prospects development activities offer than in the actual improvements development programs are supposed to bring. It is better to deliver development than to be its target.

In rural areas, *bikās* is associated in people’s minds with social mobility.<sup>19</sup> There has emerged in Nepal a new kind of status that is correlated with economic advantage but not reducible to it. Being cosmopolitan, being a relatively “developed” kind of person, is a form of cultural capital.<sup>20</sup> It is both a requirement for entry into other economic spheres and a result of participation in them. In hill villages, farming families attempt to place at least one member outside the household sphere of production.<sup>21</sup> Circular migration between a hill home and distant employment is especially important.<sup>22</sup> People measure prosperity no longer just in terms of labor, land, and livestock but also in terms of connections to a wider economic sphere.<sup>23</sup> There is a continual peeling off of *some* people from all local social strata into different levels of the cosmopolitan economic sphere. These people remain connected to those who stay behind in the village.<sup>24</sup> Though economic pressures force people into pursuing alternate sources of livelihood, what they gain from such activities is not just cash. An added payoff, even for the most disadvantaged, comes from becoming a more cosmopolitan person. This in itself has value.<sup>25</sup> Thus the socioeconomic changes of recent decades not only extend existing stratifications but also introduce a kind of marbling of cosmopolitan status into village society.

Whatever its economic dimension (and empirical research on this point is called for), the social salience of “being developed” or “being cosmopolitan” is striking. Being cosmopolitan means having the capacity to understand the ways of other places, to make a living away from the village, to be mobile. A cosmopolitan sensibility has a practical value, in that it enables one to manage in a wider world.<sup>26</sup> But more than this, it has a kind of symbolic power.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, the cosmopolitan-local distinction resonates for people whose livelihood is simultaneously rooted to land and enmeshed in larger, transnational economies. People in Nepal talk about this distinction through the idioms of “understanding” and “carrying loads.” Cosmopolitan people say of others that “they don’t understand” (*kurā bujhdainan*) or “they lack awareness” (*‘conscious’ chaina*), while villagers imagine “developed places” and privileged economic positions as a life of “not having to carry loads” (*bhāri boknu pardaina*) or “not having to walk” (*hidnu pardaina*).<sup>28</sup>

The rural area I call Chandithan, just outside Bhojpur Bazaar in the eastern hills of Nepal, is an example of the social enigma that is the “modernizing village” now emerging in Nepal.<sup>29</sup> With but a few local radios, no newspapers, only a small local market, and the nearest road a two days’ walk, it was in many ways a self-contained world in the mid-1980s. Yet because it lies a mere hour’s walk

from the district center, its people have access to offices, a high school, clinics, a veterinary clinic, a photo studio, a place to buy machine knit sweaters and plastic buckets, and other amenities of development. (For most of the world, Bhojpur Bazaar would be a small village itself, but in the Nepali hills such places are concentrations of amenities and sophistication.) From the perspective of the most cosmopolitan of the urban elite, they are “villagers”—the kind of people in need of development. From the perspective of even more remote and isolated areas of the country, they are sophisticated cosmopolitans themselves. Situated as they are, they themselves are intensely concerned with their place as villagers in a national society oriented toward modernization—with all that entails. A discourse on belief is produced in this social context, refers to it, and is used by individuals to maneuver within it.

### The Mythologies of Modernization

“It will never work to lecture villagers. That won’t keep them from calling dhāmis,” a nurse in Kathmandu reasoned. She was critical of what she saw as the authoritarian way many health workers scold villagers about their beliefs. She had a different approach. She tried to convince people to let go of harmful beliefs by engaging in a dialogue with them. She explained:

When I was working at a clinic here in Kathmandu there was a woman who would come with her baby. None of the other women would speak to her; none of them would sit next to her. They ostracized her entirely. I asked why. It turned out to be because her other babies had died. They believed that if she saw their babies, she would cause them to fall ill.

I nodded. The idea that the spirits of dead infants cling to their mother and prey on other babies with whom she has contact is common throughout Nepal.

“And, seeing that, what did I do?” she continued. “I went straight over to that woman and sat down next to her. I gave her my own son, my own baby, to hold. I let her hold and play with him while I chatted with the woman!” she smiled, “Those other women were astonished. They saw that I had risked my own son to be kind to this woman. Later they asked me, ‘weren’t you afraid’ and I said, ‘No. That woman has done nothing.’ I showed them with my own example that these spirits could not harm their children. That’s how people have to be educated,” she concluded.

We were sitting at the back table in K.C.’s, a trendy restaurant in the heart of Kathmandu’s tourist district. Over cappuccino and lemon cheesecake we discussed the difficulties she experienced as a nurse working with people whose ways of explaining illness were often at odds with the kind of care she was trying to provide. She had seen a lot of misery, experienced a lot of frustration, and had thought a great deal about her own role.

“I’ve been to the village. I know what it is like,” this urban woman told me, explaining that part of her training included several months working on a health team that toured hill villages.

“We arrived in this one village and saw a man who was on the verge of death. We *knew* we had the medicines to cure this man. But when we offered to treat him, he refused our medicines because a dhāmi had told him not to take them.” She paused to let this sink in.

“But it turned out that one of the men in our team was from a village himself. He simply asked to borrow a dhyāngro, a drum, from a shaman.” She chewed a bite of cake. “He sat down next to the sick man and started to beat the drum. Then he began to sing, you know, to call the spirits. And then he was trembling, shaking, the way dhāmis do. And he gave a divination instructing the man to take the medicines.”

“And so he did,” she smiled. “That man was cured. Other villagers flocked to the guy in our team, begging him to treat them because they were so impressed with his power as a shaman.”

She was telling me this to illustrate the way health workers can “really” reach out to the people they are trying to help:

So we stayed in that village for a couple of weeks. And when we were packing up to leave, the guy on our team showed the villagers that he wasn’t really a dhāmi after all. What he did was, he just started shaking and speaking in that strange way dhāmis speak when they are giving a divination. But he had no drum, and he hadn’t called the spirits.

She knew I had lived in a village long enough to know that the drum is essential to call the spirits. It is the spirits who make the shaman’s body tremble and who use his voice to choke out their messages. “At first, the villagers were absolutely astonished,” she continued. “They were angry with him for fooling them. But he pointed out that we had cured their neighbor. This calmed them down. And so they realized,” she smiled, “that shamans shouldn’t always be believed.”

Her story left me feeling slightly dizzy, for I had just flown into Kathmandu a few days earlier from Bhojpur. My head was still full of the voices of the villagers / *knew*, people who talked frequently about charlatan dhāmis, rarely took one at his word, and generally sought to deal with serious illnesses with as many treatments as possible. I found her story clichéd and unconvincing. I wondered what this tale would sound like told from the sick man’s point of view. But my nurse friend was utterly sincere. This was an incident from which she had formed her conviction that talking with villagers is more useful than blaming them. Like the advocates of training programs for shamans, she positioned herself against those elites who would simply condemn villagers’ ideas as superstitions.

Whatever she may have intended to say to me through this personal story, her account draws on the very same tropes of modernity that generate disdain for the superstitious “other.” Discursively at least, it remains connected to them. So conventional was her representation of this encounter, the story practically told itself. Lévi-Strauss once said that it is not people who tell myths, but myths that tell themselves through people. In this case, the narrative of modernity speaks through her perceptions of what she saw. A structuralist reading of her story is

provisionally useful as a tool to pry open the seamless surface of its plot. It draws attention to how oppositions are being used to assert a certain kind of order.

At the outset, the nurse's story asserts the difference between the health team and the people she identifies as villagers. Implicitly, Nepal is portrayed as a divided society in which educated people like the health professionals travel to villages as if they were going to a foreign country with alien customs. It is precisely the neatness of this opposition that makes the mediation of the cosmopolitan man who was "from a village" necessary. In a second mediation, the forms of shamanic healing are used as a tool by the forces of its opposite, "modern medicine." The resolution of the story, in which "villagers realize that shamans can't always be believed," is a third mediation. "Modern medicine" overcomes shamanic healing by absorbing it, bringing villagers one step closer to a cosmopolitan understanding. The story is organized around the premise that cosmopolitan and village points of view are entirely different. They can be brought together in various ways, but they never blur or mix.

The story, of course, further reinforces this difference by portraying a conflict between two therapeutic approaches, presented as mutually exclusive options. The story is narrated as if the members of the health team always and only rely on "modern medicine" while villagers always and only rely on shamans. "Modern medicine" and shamanic healing are here emblematic of the broader differences in sensibility and outlook of different kinds of people.

The perfect symmetry of this social distinction is what makes a further distinction between knowledge and belief appear so clear. The health team knows more than the villagers. The health team knows that the sick man will either live or die, depending on whether he takes the medicines they have. The villagers simply hope that he will live. The health team also knows that their man is impersonating a shaman for the villagers' own good. The villagers do not know that the performance is false or that it is in their own best interest. As the story unfolds, the villagers receive two revelations: first, the divination that authorizes the taking of medicines; and second, the truth that the man they thought was a visiting shaman was in fact a fake. The health team's knowledge is doled out to the villagers. This is an economy of knowledge, in which one group holds the resources and controls their circulation.

The ruse on which the story pivots does not trouble the health team. For them, we gather, it is unremarkable that a shaman can be impersonated. That spirits choose certain people, descend on them, take hold of their bodies, and make them tremble, that this relationship allows these people to see what ordinary people cannot see and gives them power to communicate with the world of the unseen—if these fundamental truths are denied, then all shamans are, one way or another, performers. The foundation on which shamanic authority rests is not the "knowledge" villagers think it is, but the "belief" modern people know it to be.<sup>30</sup> The villagers, then, in the view of the health team, are doubly deluded. They can be made to believe in a false shaman because they falsely believe in shamans in the first place.

The villagers were at first suspicious of the health team's medicine, the story hints, because it was unfamiliar. Its undeniable efficacy later convinces them. The story implies that this village will never be the same again. This, then, is a story of an encounter, a skirmish in the battle to bring "modern medicine" to villages. Stories about "introducing modern medicine" in Nepali villages share these two motifs: that "modern medicine" is entirely new to villagers and that villagers are astonished by its wondrous efficacy. It is important to grasp that these notions can appear plausible *only* from the modern point of view, a perspective that stories of medical progress themselves sustain. It is circular. Modern certainties are confirmed through experiences that are already organized from the perspective of the modern observer. Thus it is possible to assert decade after decade that "modern medicine" is coming to villages in Nepal for the very first time. Thus it seems, likewise, that the efficacy of "modern medicine" should be readily apparent despite the fact that actual medical services in Nepal are so inadequate. Neither of these basic assumptions makes sense from the point of view of villagers. They never see "modern medicine" as entirely new; they only see it as more or less accessible. Nor do they find it remarkably efficacious or always desirable ("Look how many operations doctors do, and still people die"). In villages, people do not tell stories of their wholesale conversion to "modern medicine."

Yet I consider the nurse's story to be every bit as "Nepali" as villagers' stories. Its structure, particularly the way it organizes points of view, conveys something very specific to present day Nepal. The health team are "people who understand." They identify themselves as such merely by referring to others as "villagers." Villagers are by definition people who have not (or at least can seem to have not) been transformed by the social changes of the past decades in Nepal. They reside on the other side of the modern divide. In order for the position of "people who understand" to exist there must be a credulous "other." Differences among actual villagers must be effaced. In the nurse's story, all the "villagers" interpret the man's illness in the same way; all have utter faith in what shamans tell them; all are duped by the impersonation of the shaman; and all are equally grateful, in the end, to the health team. These moves are made again and again in modern portrayals of "villagers' beliefs."

Still, what makes the story (and the situation it describes) intriguing is the way the modern dichotomies seem to wobble even as they are asserted. As the grid of modernity is used to make sense of an interaction between a health team and villagers, the problematic ambiguities of this organizing frame become exposed. Who, for instance, is this man "from a village" who can so convincingly imitate a shaman? Perhaps he really was a dhāmi who was hiding this fact from his fellow health workers. Who fooled whom and who exactly was educated in the process? And what of the tale's implication that "modern medicine" can eventually triumph over ignorance and superstition? In order to do so, scientific knowledge must become enmeshed in the very superstitions it opposes (Prakash 1992). To make an impression on the villagers, the health team involves itself in shamanic rites. Their strategy for teaching villagers about the value of "modern

medicine” involves getting villagers to transfer their (supposed) awe toward shamans to medicine instead. In the process, medicine is presented to villagers as simply another form of magical power.

My commentary on this story has taken me some distance from its teller’s intention to share with me an event she really witnessed. I have drawn attention to both the dichotomies and the ambivalences evident when an event is interpreted as a sign of a transition from tradition to modernity. The health team’s interpretation of the event at the time, as well as the story she came to tell about it later, are representations. It is important to keep in mind that however much these representations draw on the imaginative tropes of the modernization narrative, they are enacted, as social practices, in a context that can never possibly fit perfectly within modern categories. What is more, this context includes other social agents who have their own ideas about things.<sup>31</sup>

### Tradition in Development

The notion of “villagers’ beliefs” plays an important role in international development thinking at present. In the 1970s, development rhetoric began to focus more on people and less on abstract economic models. Slogans such as “meeting basic needs” and “putting people first” spawned interest in “culturally appropriate development” and “indigenous knowledge.” There was a sense in development circles that programs had to be tailored to specific places. Research began to be carried out on “existing knowledge, attitudes, and practices,” and “social feasibility” studies began to be incorporated into the planning process (Escobar 1991). Most development professionals now would say that the “beliefs and customs” of the target population need to be taken into account for programs to succeed.

In development discourse, the word “traditional” always signals a world of shared and unquestioned beliefs. This is the realm of habit, rather than reason.<sup>32</sup> “Beliefs” are always associated with a group identity and taken, usually, to be a feature of ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> Even Shrestha and Lediard, whose advocacy for working with shamans was based on acknowledging that villagers do indeed have a perspective, objectify “belief” as a kind of collective mental prison in which villagers are trapped:

As indicated in various social science studies, it has long been established beyond doubt that these people [shamans] possess the means of directing villagers to adopt any behavior which the practitioners see as right for the people (as ordained by the Gods who are seen to control the everyday affairs of this universe). [1980:27–28]

It is not surprising, then, that when Stone asked rural health workers, “In what ways is local culture important in primary health care?” they responded by listing the “wrong beliefs” of villagers. As a further example of the way “cultural factors” are understood in health development, she cites a national report on Primary Health Care (PHC) in which

illiteracy, superstition, social evils, and poverty are all listed together as one of eight basic health problems in the country, equivalent to items like malaria and malnutrition. Likewise, in PHC flow charts showing relationships between national health problems, it is common to see “ignorance” (measured as a literacy rate of 19 percent) grouped with “poverty” and linked by arrows to the ominous categories of disease, malnutrition, and underuse of health services. . . . [Stone 1986:297]<sup>34</sup>

In the implementation of development in Nepal, wider trends in international development attitudes take certain concrete forms. From Geneva and New York come policies and program designs with slots in which “local ideas and practices” are to be inserted. Accordingly, Nepali development functionaries use a language of cultural difference to pinpoint and describe the mentality of the target population. At the same time, these Nepali development workers are concerned to distinguish themselves from villagers, for it is precisely their status as “people who understand” that qualifies them for jobs in the development sector. Where the international development discourse on culture intersects with an emerging Nepali idiom of social differentiation, “villagers’ beliefs” emerge as an object. This object can be perceived only from a distance. Up close, everything changes.

### Subject to Objectification

“That time,” the man they called Kulo Muni said, “I spent a lot of money on shamans.” Gopal (my companion in conducting a series of interviews) and I had come to ask him to recount for us his family’s experiences with illnesses. Kulo Muni responded eagerly with a long, sometimes comic story about what he referred to as “my big illness.” We sat on the porch of his ramshackle house, under the framed photograph of his son in India.

“You know how it is,” he shrugged, turning his palms outward. “A dhāmi shows up and says ‘Give me a chicken to cut for the ritual and I’ll cure you right now.’ And that’s how the money goes.”

“What did the dhāmis say was afflicting you?” Gopal asked.

“Oh, dhāmis!” Kulo Muni rolled his eyes with mock exasperation. “They say you are going to get better. What else are they going to say?”

Gopal persisted. “No, I mean, did they tell you which spirit had come clinging to you?”

“Yeah. They said *deu lāgeko*, there was a spirit clinging to me, and they said they would cure me.” He chuckled. “I gave to the dhāmis what I should have been feeding my own children.”

Kulo Muni does not fit the picture of the credulous villager painted by development elites. They say that villagers, ignorant and filled with superstitions, need education so that they will stop throwing away precious resources on useless rituals. Kulo Muni says of himself, “I gave to the dhāmis what I should have been feeding my own children.” It is impossible to know whether he says this because he has been influenced by the modern criticisms of shamans or because villagers are just deeply ambivalent about their reliance on shamans. What is

clear is that Kulo Muni, like everyone in Chandithan, sees himself not as a passive believer but as an agent with a reflexive awareness of his own actions. “Villagers” may be objectified in a discourse that distances them from a modern space, but actual villagers live in a space that is shot through with modern narratives. They must find subject positions for themselves within or alongside the objectifying discourse of modernization.

Their contact with modern discourse takes many forms. Most importantly, schools systematically instill the message that local knowledge needs to be replaced with modern ideas, especially the idea of science.<sup>35</sup> More indirectly, they are surrounded by numerous development education campaigns intended to familiarize rural people with things like oral rehydration therapy, cataract surgery, tuberculosis treatment, and vasectomies and tubal ligations. These messages do indeed make people aware of these “foreign” development things. They also serve to inform villagers about what modern people think and do.

People’s interactions with development offices and institutions further confirm their impressions of modern attitudes. The people I knew in Chandithan expect to be reprimanded for calling shamans when they go to a clinic or a health post. “How can you expect us to help you when you’ve waited so long to bring the child?” a frustrated health worker says angrily when examining a severely dehydrated infant. “I suppose you’ve been around to three or four dhāmis before coming here!” villagers find themselves accused. Sometimes they snap back, “Of course I went to a dhāmi first; it seemed like a spirit was clinging to the child” or “Yes, I went to the dhāmi and now I’m coming to *you*.” People recalled a similar antagonism toward shamans on the part of the doctors in the British Army. “The doctors used to get angry when dhāmis would practice,” a Nepali former Buckingham palace guard told me in his impeccable English. “But sometimes soldiers went to the hospital and wouldn’t be cured. In those cases the doctors would allow the dhāmis to treat patients.” Chhema, recalling the three years she spent with her military husband posted in Malaya, told me there was a requisition form they had to submit to get permission to have a dhāmi perform a sounding in the family quarters. And, as I was told by the man everyone called the Major, there would always be dhāmis in the British Army because “if they recruit 10,000 of our boys, two or three hundred will be dhāmis.” Even the Major conceded that “it is true that dhāmis are called upon in the army. But the doctors, you see, get angry. They say people should forget about that stuff, that they shouldn’t pay attention to it. The British doctors say people shouldn’t pay attention to dhāmis. Still, our people call them.”

In myriad ways, people learn to see themselves as they understand others to be seeing them. “The Americans,” declared one man authoritatively to a group lounging about on a dhāmi’s porch when I showed up, “say dhāmis are no good, that they know nothing. The Soviets, though, have a different opinion. They say shamans do have knowledge and that they should be respected. Isn’t that so, Miss?”

The question of belief is not a simple one in Chandithan. People there are aware—some more than others—that they are considered backward from a cos-

mopolitan point of view. They know that calling on shamans is taken as a sign of that backwardness. They know that villagers are said to believe blindly, credulously in shamans. What is more, some people there say about themselves and each other many of the same things that are said about them in the objectifying discourse of development. They declare loudly and often that they “don’t believe” in shamans, they call notions about ghosts “superstitions,” and they urge their families to travel to the Bazaar or even Kathmandu for medical treatment. These attitudes are widely understood to be appropriate to people of a certain status (school teachers, for instance). They are also widely and cynically viewed as ways people put on airs by claiming to be “people who understand” among “people who carry loads.” Modern ideas do not come exclusively from outside the local community, but are expressed within it by the cosmopolitan people who are also local.

People in Chandithan often criticize useless shamans and overly trusting patients, much as the modern commentary on belief does. Yet in the local context these comments mean something more, because those who make them call shamans themselves. Kulo Muni can laugh at his foibles and scoff at greedy shamans when he looks back on his “big illness,” but when he does so he also alludes to the needs that bind sick people inevitably to shamans. People in Chandithan criticize, evaluate, and judge shamans even while they call on them regularly. For every person that swears a certain shaman saved her child’s life, there is someone who will grumble that the very same shaman is ineffectual. Everyone knows this. They talk about shamans and they talk about their talk about shamans, because the question of belief comes down, in a sense, to the problems their *unquestioned* assumptions about healing, knowledge, and illness pose for them. The ground of shared assumptions, of culturally constructed meanings, generates its own debates and doubts, independent of the modern criticism of shamans. I will return to this point in the next section. What I want to highlight here is that skeptical village talk about shamans takes many forms. In what follows I try to sort out these forms by looking first at the critical cynicism tied to close involvement with shamans. I then consider the ways modern criticisms of belief in shamans influence local people.

### Knowing Who Knows

“Dhāmīle ke bhancha bhancha?” (What does it matter what shamans say?) This dismissive little remark can be heard often in Chandithan. Is the slight skepticism it conveys a symptom of “modernizing” forces that are undermining traditional institutions?

It would have to be, if we interpret this society according to the modern narrative of progress. This narrative already tells us that the traditional villagers of Nepal “believe,” stubbornly, as Shrestha and Lediard would have it, in shamans. Any expression of doubt would be a sign that this belief is eroding. On the other hand, if we follow ordinary people as they interact with shamans, we see that people are always scrutinizing “what shamans say.” Those anthropologists who have written about the interactions between shamans, as specialists, and ordi-

nary people report that an interpretation of an illness and decisions about therapies emerge out of a process of negotiation and bargaining.<sup>36</sup> Sagant (1987), for instance, argues that the diagnostic divination offered by a shaman is merely the starting point for a collective dialogue that produces an interpretation of a misfortune. A divination can matter only after the community decides what it means. Stone has emphasized the ways clients exercise control over dhāmi-jhānkris:

Once a client group expresses interest in the services of a *jhankri*, a delicate bargaining—over what will be done, what is needed for a ceremony and how much it will cost—occurs between client group and healer. Village clients of Dhungagaun explained to me that during this negotiation, it is important to ‘please’ the *jhankri* or ‘keep him happy,’ while not unduly straining one’s own resources. During one such negotiation, a village man remarked to me: “If we give in too quickly he will not respect us and then we cannot be sure he will do his work well for us.” Interestingly, in cases where a demon or other malignant spirit is involved in an illness, a parallel kind of bargaining takes place with the spirit over what animal will be sacrificed, what else will be offered, how soon, etc. But now, the healer and the client group are on the same side against the spirit, who will have been summoned by the *jhankri* and directed to possess the body of the patient through whom it speaks. Again, the *jhankri* and clients express the need to ‘please’ the spirit while not yielding too much or too quickly to its demands. [Stone 1986:300]

Though people assert that it is the shaman who has the power to heal, she notes, “the client nevertheless knows that he or she holds the key to the whole process, namely the ability to influence the personal relationship with the healer” (1986:300). Negotiation, reinterpretation, and critical back talk are part of the process through which people work out solutions to misfortunes.

Finding a shaman who “knows” is one step. By definition, shamans are people who know (*jānne mānche*). Unlike ordinary people, who are deaf-mutes (*lātā-murkhā*) in these matters, shamans have insight into an unseen dimension of the world through their ability to see spirits, hear their voices, communicate their desires, and persuade them to release their hold on bodies they are troubling. Some shamans, however, “know” more than others. I asked one dhāmi in an interview why this is the case.

“It is according to the spirit familiar, the *deutā*,” he replied. “Some have *deutā* that can enable even great cures and they are able to deal with the most serious illnesses.”

“It is like having ‘source-force’ in an office,” Gopal added.<sup>37</sup> “Some connections are more highly placed than others. The higher your contact in an office, the more you can do.”

People with problems form hunches about what is going on, and then seek out the specialist who might have the ability to help. To find a shaman who “knows,” people must frequently consult several who do not. Shamanic mediation is fundamentally problematic. First, the spirits on whom the shamans depend for their insight are not entirely reliable. They are said to lie sometimes, and in any case they never “speak clearly” in divinations. Second, it is all too ap-

parent to the people who live and work everyday with these shamans that they are only human. Many are the ways a shaman's interventions can go wrong. Even dhāmis themselves theorize about their limited ability to cure only some people some of the time. No wonder, then, that the question of belief in shamans is often on people's minds.

"Dhāmis can make mistakes," Chhema concluded. She had just returned from a visit to her brother, where they had recently found out that decades of misfortune in his family was the result of an inaccurate divination given some 30 years before. "You can't tell what is afflicting a person just by looking at him. Dhāmis have to make their guess. 'Perhaps it is this, maybe it is that,' they say. They aren't god, they're people just like you and me."

But realizing she might be giving me the wrong impression, she continued, "Your doctors have to examine a person too. If doctors could just know right away what the problem was, they wouldn't have to use their 'degree.'" ("Degree" is the word used locally to refer to stethoscopes and thermometers.) "Doctors have to investigate, and dhāmis have to investigate too."

People look to performances themselves to make judgments about shamanic mediation. Some shamans are widely acknowledged to be "more fun to watch." Yet people are critical of shamans they think are masking shaky ritual knowledge with energetic performances meant to dazzle. "It is not the show that counts," one man stated firmly, "it is the *riti* [ritual, spells] itself which must be big." People distinguish between what the shaman does "himself" and what is done through him by spirits. When Gopal helped me transcribe and translate tapes I had made of divinations, he often explained portions of these highly complex and enigmatic utterances by saying "that is the dhāmi speaking in his own voice" to distinguish from the words of the *deutā* coming through the dhāmi's voice. I asked him if we should go back to the dhāmis with the tapes to clarify the many ambiguities. "If we did," he replied, "they'd just make something up. It wouldn't help us any."

This equivocal fusion of shaman-as-human and shaman-as-spirit-vehicle raises two questions. How, under these conditions, do people form their judgments about dhāmis? Quite simple, I was told, "if it works, then the shaman knew. If it doesn't work, then you find another shaman." More specifically, "if a dhāmi shows your divination and gets your illness exactly right, then you believe him," I was told by many people. Typically, a divination includes a description of the symptoms afflicting the person in question.<sup>38</sup> Gopal was very keen on testing shamans in this way. He often told people that the thing to do was to ask a shaman about people one knows far, far away. "Then when you eventually go to visit them," he would say eagerly, "you can check out the divination point by point."

Gopal's plans to systematically verify shamanic reliability also touches on the second question, which is whether a shaman could pretend to be giving a divination without the spirit actually being present. "Definitely not," Gopal told me once, toward the end of my research, when I put this question to him. "No one could possibly fake the trembling for that many hours. It is physically im-

possible.” But he conceded, “the shamans may add on a little extra energy of their own, though.” Anyone can act like a shaman for five or ten minutes, everyone insists, but no one could fake it for an entire night.

The local shamans in Chandithan look rather unconvincing when people compare them with the purported powers of shamans of other times and places. Western folklorists might find in contemporary Himalayan shamanism the great Bon tradition of ancient Tibet, but to the jaundiced local eye they are sad examples of a devolved ritual force that no longer exists. In Chandithan, at least, there was a strong feeling that there must be better shamans elsewhere, in China perhaps, or Malaysia. My interest in meeting local dhāmis sometimes prompted passionate discussions of shamans “who know” that turned, inevitably, to the superior, but lost, knowledge of “shamans from before,” *uhileko jhānkri*.

Shamans from before could sunder boulders, cut chickens outside the house while sitting inside, and transport objects from far away. They could fly. They knew how to cure tuberculosis and smallpox. They could fight off attacks from other shamans with magic spells. “They could see ghosts, *bhut-pret*,” Chhema told me, “as clearly as you and I see other people. But nowadays all they can do is guess.” So why are contemporary shamans unable to perform these feats?

That was in the Satya Yug, the era of perfection. Everything then, the crops, the livestock, everything was better.

Nowadays all the shamans care about is making themselves more important than other shamans.

They’ve lost the knowledge because every guru holds back one or two mantra from his apprentice so that the student will never become stronger than the teacher.

Dhāmis used to have power but now they’re just in it for the money.

The dhāmis used to do everything. After the hospital was built they gave up making their own medicine and they’ve forgotten all their knowledge.

In the Satya Yug, the *deutā* took care of people. Nowadays the dhāmis go off with their friends, get drunk, and forget to light incense in honor of their *deutā*.

When people insist that authentic shamanic power no longer truly exists in their village, they position the shamanism of the here and now in relation to an absence—the absence of the best (or truest) shamanic power. Local dhāmis are being compared to something that is not there. These contrasts serve a purpose. When someone expounds on the difference between the golden age of the Satya Yug and the degraded order of the present era, the Kali Yug, or tells of the feats of a now dead shaman, this talk shows that the speaker is ready to recognize a truly powerful shaman, should he ever meet one. Through stories of displaced or absent shamanic power ordinary people establish themselves as discriminating witnesses to shamanic performances. Why is it so important to do this?

It has to do with the tension between cultural legitimation and practice. Recall that the dhāmi we watched earlier had retorted to his critic, “It is not your granting of respect, my child, that makes us worthy of it.” Shamanic power comes from spirits; the spirits choose the body of the dhāmi and enable him or her to perform divinations and cures. Anyone can tell you this, because this is the explanation that legitimates the entire conceptual system; it is not the shaman who is powerful but the spirits who intermingle in the human world. Dhāmis must be taken seriously because spirits must be taken seriously. This is quite straightforward.

In practice, though, people are concerned not with shamanism in the abstract, but with the skills of the particular shamans on whom they can call. Calling on a shaman, confiding in him, trusting him—for the time being—is what grants that shaman authority. There must be a “someone” to make this judgment. The pervasive skepticism toward shamans reminds all concerned that it is possible to withhold belief. In the end, that is what makes shamans truly believable.

In fact, lay people and dhāmis alike often affirm to each other that “there has to be *biśwās*” for a dhāmi’s rituals to be effective. Though this truism sounds very much like current North American popular wisdom about the healing powers of a positive attitude, I think people in Chandithan mean, quite specifically, that the granting of trust is the social precondition for requesting a shaman’s help.

If it is disbelief that makes belief possible, then skeptical cross-talk about shamans is not necessarily a sign of cultural shifts due to change. Indeed, skepticism of one sort at least appears to ground the dynamics of shamanic healing. In this sense, doubts about shamans are as important to this system of meaning as belief in the existence of the spirits with whom shamans “play.” But if skepticism is part of the belief system, so to speak, then how do these villagers understand and take part in a discourse of modern skepticism? If talk about “shamans from before” who “really knew” establishes the speaker as someone who can tell a good dhāmi from a bad one, what does it mean to discredit shamans all together?

### Modern Believers

“You’ve been here doing research for a year now,” Badri, the man who ran the tuberculosis-leprosy clinic, said in respectful tones. “Tell me, please, what advice do you have for us?” We were talking, of course, about the difficulties of reaching villagers with “modern medicine” when they continue to prefer shamans. I demurred at his request for “advice,” pointing out that he himself had a decade of experience in this kind of work. As part of his job he goes into schools to educate students about tuberculosis and to talk to them about dhāmis. He explained,

I don’t believe in dhāmis myself. But dhāmis probably don’t do any harm, and people are going to call them no matter what we say. The problem is that people use both kinds of treatment, so they never really know whether it was the dhāmi

or the medicine that made them better. What I always tell the kids is that the dhāmi is just a regular human being. It is possible that dhāmis really do work, through some kind of "hypnotism."

He recounted a performance by an Indian stage magician he saw in Kathmandu whose act included hypnotizing members of the audience.

"But dhāmis nowadays are just in it for the money anyway," he concluded. "There used to be dhāmis with real powers, but not anymore." He grinned, and shrugged. "But I can't go around as one individual criticizing dhāmis like this. People would just say I was crazy."

Here is a cosmopolitan, mid-level development professional speaking. And as we can see, the skeptical formulations he draws on are very much like those widely heard in the nearby village. He might assert that his attitudes are different from those of "villagers." He would, I think, draw a distinction between "traditional" villagers and the ones, like himself, who are no longer, in some palpable sense, really "of" the village in quite the same way. This social difference matters, even while it is impossible to separate exactly one kind of person from another when they must live cheek-by-jowl in the boondocks. Asserting the absolute difference between cosmopolitan and village sensibilities, Badri positions himself firmly in the modern camp by declaring, "I don't believe in dhāmis myself."

The skepticism inherent in interactions with shamans is hard to distinguish from this kind of blanket assertion, with which people signal their familiarity with modern sensibilities. Evaluation of shamans as a situation-specific judgment gives way almost imperceptibly to a stand taken on shamanism as a whole. Many people slide easily from one to the other as they appropriate cosmopolitan discourses while coping with the spirits, ghosts, and witches only dhāmis can really deal with. Talk about shamans who "know" intermingles with abstract discussions of what shamanism "really is." As I've already noted, what people in Nepal understand as the "modern," or "scientific," skepticism toward shamans has become familiar to nearly everyone in places like Chandithan.

For some of these people, it is extremely important to establish oneself as cosmopolitan. These people declare that they "don't believe in shamans." Often when they saw me witnessing a shamanic ritual they seemed to worry that I might associate them with such practices. "We Nepalis are very superstitious," they would say in a tone somewhere between apologetic and regretful, making it clear to me that I should know that they recognize these practices for what they are, even if they are still involved in them. At first I was taken aback by the way some people in Chandithan seemed often to be answering challenges that I had not put to them. Over time I saw that many people anticipated cosmopolitan criticism of village practices as a matter of course, for they lived all the time in the midst of cosmopolitan criticism (on the radio, in offices, when they traveled as "hicks" to the city, when their town-dwelling sons and daughters came back home). They are in imaginary dialogue with a perspective associated with a cosmopolitan-modern-Western-scientific point of view. Their formulations are

a response to what people in “developed countries” are assumed to believe: that shamans are illegitimate, irrational, and ineffective.

The best future for upwardly mobile individuals lies in becoming a modern Nepali qualified to deliver development. They need to distinguish themselves from the “village” that has been constructed, through national development discourse, as the obstacle to development. For those few who actually leave the village, this separation is easier to accomplish. For those who are unable to leave, being a cosmopolitan villager requires juggling contradictions. If you are cosmopolitan, even if you happen to live in a village, you should believe (or, should I say, know) that shamanic power is a chimera maintained by irrational “beliefs.” Yet if you reside in a village where spirits lurk and witches harm, and if you are a member of a family whose lineage gods (*kul deutā*) sometimes afflict people when crossed, then like it or not you are involved in a society where shamans are necessary. It is not so easy to dismiss the healing work of shamans out of hand when you have been surrounded all your life by the evidence of their actions. It is not merely that, as Badri puts it, “everyone else says” that shamans matter. It is impossible to live in a village without being involved with shamans. These ritual specialists are also old friends, neighbors, and relatives.<sup>39</sup> They are indispensable in a family’s attempts to cope with misfortune and illness (could you tell your sick mother, after all, that she must not call a dhāmi she trusts?).

In this context, some people attempt to reconcile these contradictions by making ever finer distinctions between what is and what is not credible about shamans. Gopal and Kedar Sir, the school teacher, were eager to explain this to me:

We ourselves don’t put our faith in dhāmis. But we call them, and the reason is that if someone is “serious” sick the dhāmi offers solace. We call dhāmis to give the sick person “sympathy.” Someone who is sick can get so worried they have a “reaction” to that worry. And to offer solace to that person we call a dhāmi.

They were not alone in their theories of how dhāmis can be useful. Other people commented:

When deutā are clinging to people, the dhāmi’s treatment works. But these illnesses that people here say are caused by ghosts and witches—those don’t really exist.

Dhāmis really do work. But it doesn’t have anything to do with the deutā. They do it through “hypnosis.”

What dhāmis do is make people feel better. It is a “psychological effect.” The rest is just a bunch of tricks they picked up from Indian magicians.

By identifying something that counts as “real”—hypnosis, for instance, or psychological effects—these comments recover legitimate ground for shamanic practice. At the same time, explanations of what shamanism “really is” distance speakers from dhāmis and the associated “village” mentality by rejecting the su-

pernatural basis for shamanic practice. The “belief” that other people have in shamans is simply a misapprehension of how shamans actually heal.

Clearly, only people with comparatively high levels of formal schooling construct complex explanations of what shamanism “really” and “in fact” is. These explanations rest not only on the ability to use English words like “psychological” and “hypnosis” but also on the adoption of an equally alien distinction between “magic” and “scientific fact.” Explanations of this type do not need to be proffered by anyone and everyone in Chandithan, however, in order to matter there. The cosmopolitan villagers who say shamans work by “psychology” say this to other villagers. Hearing these assertions in conversation after conversation from the most cosmopolitan people among them, people come to understand that this is what cosmopolitan people say. It is understood as a characteristic of an elite, cosmopolitan social identity. Talking about what is believable about shamans involves speakers in ongoing local conversations about shamanic power while at the same time signaling that the speaker is different, more cosmopolitan, than other villagers.

A blanket claim “not to believe in shamans” always positions the speaker at a remove from local village concerns. This is because shamans are uniquely qualified to deal with problems particular to locales and local communities. They chase off the ghosts that lurk in certain spots, they negotiate with the lineage deities, the *kul deutā*, to whom people are tied, they fight off the malicious supernatural attacks of neighbors who are witches, and they counter the unintentional effects one person’s envy has on another. Shamans are enmeshed in the particularities of situated village lives. Claiming “not to believe in *dhāmis*” is possible only for someone who can also plausibly claim to have somewhere else to go. In a sense, then, no one stops believing that spirits and witches cause illnesses. Some people are simply able to move to places where these beings are fewer and less troublesome.

A claim “not to believe in *dhāmis*” implies, as well, a confidence in another system of healing, “modern medicine.” It posits universal bodies amenable to its treatments, whoever they are, wherever they live, and whatever they think. It is mobile. This makes it the appropriate medical mode for cosmopolitan people, people whose mobile selves cross many local contexts.

For the people who stay put, the skepticism that signals a modern rejection of traditional beliefs leaves them with two alternatives. You can recognize that you need *dhāmis*, because your world is the village, and simply understand that modern outsiders will criticize you for this. Or you can construct yourself as someone who knows *dhāmis* are unnecessary, because you identify with the mobile universality of modern science, but understand that you live among people who continue to find solace in *dhāmis*. No one in a village in Nepal can entertain the erasure of *dhāmis* all together. One way or another, everyone who remains connected to a village must find a way to be a “modern believer.”

### **Even More Discourse on Belief: “Blind Belief” and “Superstition”**

There can be no such thing as a “modern believer” if being modern is equated with having only rational, scientifically based knowledge. Villagers, as

we know, are said to be “superstitious” by their elite critics. Elite Nepalis interchange the English word “superstition” with the Nepali word *andhabīśwās*, and they use these terms most often to refer to ideas about ghosts, spirits, witches, and dhāmis. These are the main *andhabīśwās* of villages. It was when I was around people in Chandithan as they had dhāmis foil witches, or chase off ghosts, or placate spirits, that people sometimes became self-conscious. “You must think we are *andhabīśwāse*.”

But people use the word *andhabīśwās* in some different senses as well. The first time I heard one of these other usages I found it so weird I was sure I must have misunderstood. I began to pay closer attention to people’s use of the word, and to experiment by using it myself in the ways they did. I have asked educated, urban Nepalis about these phrases. They say that the villagers have misunderstood the meaning of a difficult, unfamiliar word. I am reluctant, though, to dismiss as ignorance and illiteracy the points people in Chandithan were making. I think that they have taken a word used to denigrate them and found a way to appropriate its meaning to create a space for themselves as modern believers. To show this, though, takes some explaining.

A compound word, *andhabīśwās* translates literally as “blind belief” (*andha* means “blind”; *bīśwās* means “belief”). I was taught, just as Nepalis who learn English are, that this word means “superstition.” Most of the time it does. But in Chandithan, people expressed other, related ideas with this word. For instance, Chhema explained to me that “when you have tried every possible remedy, and none has worked then you become *andhabīśwāse*.” As she went on to explain, what she meant was that a person in this situation becomes so desperate for a cure that he or she will try anything. This is “believing with one’s eyes closed.” In yet another context, I heard people declare that *ma dhāmiko andhabīśwās garchu*, “I am blind to belief in dhāmis.” One day, when Chatra Lal had infuriated Gopal by claiming he had nothing whatsoever to do with dhāmis, Gopal had later complained to me that he was “stuck up.” In their conversation, Gopal prefaced his challenge to him by saying “You say you are blind to belief in dhāmis [*tapāile dhāmiko andhabīśwās garnu bhayo*], but what would you do if you meet up with a spirit?” In these cases, *andhabīśwās*, the oft-heard, put-down, denigrating superstition, has been turned on its head. No longer the kind of unthinking belief attributed to villagers, *andhabīśwās* is in these usages the self-righteous certainty of a cosmopolitan sensibility. By dismissing dhāmis out of hand, modern people become *andhabīśwāse*.

It is possible that this usage is a fluke of a small local speech community; it is possible that one person twisted the word in this way and others picked it up as a manner of speech. I cannot claim that these appropriated uses of the word *andhabīśwās* are widespread in rural Nepal, because I was never really able to find out. Yet even if this usage is a local oddity, it is worth thinking about the logic that makes this appropriation possible—and meaningful—for these speakers. Learning to use the word *andhabīśwās* with people in Chandithan, in the ways they used it, was what alerted me to the connection between belief and villagers’ relation to the “modern.”

To understand the slippery meanings of *andhabīśwās*, we must turn again to the meaning of *bīśwās* in Nepali and its relation to the English word “belief.” I noted at the outset that “belief” can mean faith in another person or the conviction that something is true. The notion of “belief” is ambiguous in other ways as well. As Pouillon puts it, an assertion of belief is “paradoxical in that it expresses doubt as well as assurance” (1982:1). An assertion of belief acknowledges by the very fact of its assertion (i.e., as a speech act) a world of alternative points of view.<sup>40</sup> Assertions of “belief” stake out speaking positions in a dialogical context. Even as an assertion of belief puts forth certain convictions, it relativizes them. This is true of the anthropological notion of “cultural beliefs” as well. The concept of culture-as-belief arranges competing certainties in a relativistic frame. “Belief” marks identities by positioning the believing subject vis-à-vis others.

In English, “belief” usually conveys something about the identity of the believer by saying something about his or her state of mind. Nepalis, though, treat *bīśwās* as a quality of the connection between people. *Bīśwās* generally connotes trust and is used most often to talk about social relationships rather than sets of ideas. The Nepali word *bīśwās* stretches across the same ambiguities as the word “belief.” Yet the language inflects the word in some different ways. It allows speakers to indicate degrees of belief along a sliding scale.<sup>41</sup> *Bīśwās* communicates a position, more or less permanent, more or less amenable to change. *Bīśwās* also implies judgment in Nepali. Any statement of belief shows that the speaker has made a discriminating choice among the possibilities. *Bīśwās* is a measured response, pointing always, by its assertion, to the space between the believer and that which is believed. It is only in cosmopolitan discourse that *beliefbīśwās* is used to define identities by reference to minds and their contents.

As we have seen, in development contexts workers refer to the “wrong beliefs” of villagers. In the odd, occasional usage of some of the people I knew in Chandithan, *andhabīśwās* appears, in contrast, as a very different kind of “wrong belief.” It is belief that is without judgment. In one sense, believing with one’s eyes closed is the excess of putting faith in anything and everything. In another sense, being blind to belief is believing so stubbornly in one thing that one is closed off to all other possibilities. Both believing too much and believing too little are unwise and injudicious. The *bīśwās* that people in Chandithan understand themselves as having, and the kind of *bīśwās* they value, is a *bīśwās* based on careful judgment. To be a believer, then, is to be a conscious agent, a thoughtful acting subject—very much like the rational knower in the discourse of modernity.

Someone else might be credulous but not me, people in Chandithan say, in effect. *Bīśwās* signifies for them the ability to discriminate between shamans who are credible and those who are not. People who can do this can never be credulous. They are able to simultaneously assert that they are not the credulous villagers of cosmopolitan representations and still consult shamans for cures. The belief in one discourse blurs into the *bīśwās* of another. People in

Chandithan are making themselves into “modern believers,” people who believe in shamans skeptically.

Neither this nor any such skeptical trust is inherently modern. It is modern *only by implication* in a social context in which “blind belief,” “superstition,” “wrong beliefs,” and “ignorance” are equated with the “backwardness” of “tradition.” Earlier I pointed out that skepticism toward shamans is integral to dealings with these healers. I also cautioned against leaping to the conclusion that expressions of skepticism are something new in Nepal, indexes of an inevitable transition from the beliefs of “traditional cultures” to the transparent knowledge of modern rationality. But we have to consider yet another twist. This very notion of a progressive transition away from belief has currency in Nepal and elsewhere. It has become a familiar interpretive frame. What makes skepticism “modern” is the fact that this skepticism can be—and often is—interpreted as such by others.

### Conclusion

That rural people are seen as credulous, naive, and superstitious by city folk who proclaim themselves modern is hardly uncommon. In Nepal, the chasm between the rural majority and an emerging urban middle class is indeed widening. The figure of the credulous villager helps mark a difference that the new elite is particularly concerned to emphasize. Yet the discourse on belief in Nepal does not boil down to the familiar dynamics of urban-rural and elite-peasant dichotomies. Attitudes and outlooks do not correspond neatly with distinct social groups.

It is all too easy to anticipate the plot of the narrative of modernization and assume that the educated urban elite have pretty much abandoned shamans in favor of “modern medicine.” This has not occurred. In Kathmandu, surely the cosmopolitan center of Nepal, ritual healing thrives alongside the country’s best and most readily available biomedical services. Discussion about belief in this context is as much about the ambivalence of the experience of modernity in Kathmandu as it is about Kathmandu’s difference from villagers.<sup>42</sup> In the accounts of the urban elite, ritual healers can step in where “modern medicine” inevitably falls short, whether because Kathmandu’s diagnostic and treatment facilities are inadequate or because even the most advanced medical knowledge has its limits. In these situations, they, like villagers, position themselves as modern believers who carefully choose which healers to rely on in particular circumstances. But whereas villagers are concerned that others see them as credulous and ignorant, the Kathmandu elite are concerned with a state of modernity they fear is partial or second-rate compared to that of the developed world. Cosmopolitan and local meanings exist simultaneously in every social location. In Chandithan and Kathmandu, a narrative of modernization is being assimilated, but it is also being refashioned to various local purposes.

There is no monolithic modernity expanding, inexorably, into new social spaces. To insist on this is not to deny that the social formations we call modern (such as capitalism, bureaucratic rationality, and certain forms of state control)

do not have an impact. They do, and their forms and consequences in various societies should be understood. But we should not confuse the label social science uses to signal the complex relation among these forms—modernity—with an essential, immutable, and uniform quality of the social forms themselves. “The worlds of capitalism and modernity are complexly multilinear rather than straightforwardly unilinear,” Pred and Watts observe in their study of local modernities (1992:xv). Further: they “are characterized not only by temporality but also by spatiality—by simultaneous diversity” (1992:xv). Among the simultaneously diverse aspects of modernity is the *idea* that being modern can be a social identity, distinct from other identities. The idea of the modern posits difference, but it is not the same difference for everyone, everywhere, every time.

There is no coherent local counterideology that “resists” modernity, even though there are many aspects of local life that do not fit easily within it. It is not possible to recover a pure, authentic indigenous belief system that is clearly separate from someone else’s modern ideas. Nor, if this were our goal, would this tell us much about the local “culture” of Chandithan, for cosmopolitanism is itself now an aspect of that local culture. Clearly, by displacing the traditional onto someone somewhere else, some people in Chandithan are able to construct themselves as cosmopolitan villagers. In the process, tradition itself emerges as an object of self-conscious attention. The local—as local, as marginal, as parochial—comes into being through engagement with the wider systems of many beyonds (Tsing 1993). Local and cosmopolitan are socially constructed positions. My goal has been to trace practices that construct them.

Talking about belief is an activity that enables local meanings to intersect with cosmopolitan ones. The skepticism built into all relationships with shamans blurs easily into a modern skepticism toward any belief in them. No one in Chandithan is called upon to differentiate between a traditional and a modern skepticism. For them, this is a productive ambiguity. Any local talk about belief lends itself to presentation and/or interpretation in the dichotomizing terms of modernity. This is a convergence that can be solidified into a connection. Positioned speakers, each with their agendas and their real and imagined interlocutors, act as if, and can be understood as if, they are all speaking the same *lingua franca*. Ambiguities and slippages of meaning, even misunderstandings, create a chain of translatability that allows talk about belief to have complex local meanings while simultaneously lending itself to a discursive cosmopolitanism.

The idea of the modern similarly operates as a node of connection, a representational adapter kit suitable for international travel. It becomes cosmopolitan not because “Western” ideas spread through the world, homogenizing it, but because heterogeneous meanings and social concerns can be organized through it. This is why it is not enough to simply observe how widespread Western notions of modernity are or to insist that in every locality modernity has its own shape. For the idea of the modern has become a modality for engagement within and between social locations, and it is the forms and practices of that engagement that need to be understood.

If we want to talk about the power relations organized through the idea of the modern, we must begin by realizing that this is not the power of a dominant ideology imposed upon other views (the image is of a power acquired by “conquering” more and more “territory”). It is the power of a network whose extensive reach depends on a web of linkages rather than its ability to be everywhere at once. The idea of the modern exists in a network of translatable social maneuvers that are not reducible to a single thing. One, but only one, of these maneuvers is the explicit ideology of modernization that legitimates so many national and international institutions. This ideology can both propagate and play on ideas of the modern, but it is neither the only source of local ideas of the modern nor the only form such ideas take. Ideas of the modern are not simply manifestations of an expanding Western hegemony. In order to account for the symbolic power, the social effects, and indeed the imputation of “Westernness” to the idea of the modern, we must begin by paying close attention to the specific ways this idea is alive in the world.

A central issue here concerns how we understand the realm of culture and how we approach both global culture and situated analyses of localities. Here I turn to yet another metaphor, one taken from optics. To analyze the social processes at work in this place, we must combine a close-up, high magnification view of the micropolitics of local life with a wide-angle picture of global interconnections. When we focus on the village level, social differences that are slight by aggregate measures of stratification come into high relief. The traditional-modern dichotomy replicates within communities, within families, perhaps even in the ways individuals think about themselves. It generates ambiguities and displacements. The apparently smooth surface of a village where people rely on shamans turns out to be bumpy and uneven. It is important to remember that this uneven surface is the ground of everyday life for people in Chandithan. It can appear smooth only from a distance.

A wide-angle view shows that the minutiae of this textured local life is simultaneously part of a much, much bigger picture. When someone in Chandithan makes a claim to modern consciousness by positing a credulous other, that person has tapped into a deep global reservoir of ideas and images. These images include notions of progress and development, of rationality and science, of beliefs and culture—protean ideas of modernity that have life and uses in some of the most powerful discourses and institutions around. The key modern concepts are cosmopolitan concepts not just because for Nepalis they are associated with the rest of the world but because *the concepts themselves are mobile*. Being cosmopolitan in Nepal means being able to draw on and maneuver with these notions. Being modern advantageously distinguishes a person in Nepal from others in the same village or the same country. At the same time, it signals distant alliances. The lingua franca of modernity allows one to move, to speak with more people, to establish far-reaching connections. To claim a modern consciousness in Nepal is to claim membership in a transnational community of modern people.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* This paper was prepared for the Spring 1994 seminar of the Program in Agrarian Studies, Yale University. I would like to thank the participants in that seminar's lively discussion as well as Vincanne Adams, Kate Gilbert, Akhil Gupta, David Nugent, Pratyoush Onta, Louisa Schein, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments. Research in Nepal (1985–88) was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for Doctoral Research Abroad and a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the South Asia Program of the Social Science Research Council. I am also grateful to the Charlotte Newcombe Foundation and the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale for fellowships supporting various stages of work on this project.

I am deeply indebted, as well, to the many people in Nepal who shared their time and their thoughts with me in the course of my research. For reasons of confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for individuals and for the village in which I lived.

Two works not mentioned in the references set me thinking about the issues in this paper. These are *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, by Jeanne Favret-Saada (Cambridge, 1980) and Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987).

1. *Dhāmi-jhānkri* is a generic term that covers a range of ritual specialists. In central and western Nepal, the words *dhāmi* and *jhānkri* indicate distinct ritual practitioners. In eastern Nepal, the terms *dhāmi* and *jhānkri* are used interchangeably. I follow the usage of the people of Bhojpur in this essay.

In addition to shamans (who experience trance/possession) there are many other kinds of ritual healers in Nepal. These include people who can “blow spells” (*phukne mānche*), various ritual officiants, astrologers, Brahmin priests, and Buddhist lamas.

2. I learned this through the many ways people informed me what I “must be thinking” about events I witnessed.

3. See Atkinson 1992 for an overview.

4. I use the term “modern medicine” in this paper because I want to emphasize the symbolic connection between biomedicine and modernity that is operating in Nepal. Tellingly, just how to “name” this kind of medicine has been a persistent difficulty in medical anthropology. As Leslie (1976) notes, to call it “modern medicine” suggests a contrastive relationship to some conservative “traditional medicine”; to call it “scientific medicine” obscures its nonscientific dimensions and suggests that other medical systems are unscientific; to call it “Western medicine” is to overlook its transcultural dimensions. Leslie (1976) and Dunn (1976) prefer the term “cosmopolitan medicine.”

5. In many cases, the sufferer need not even be present in order to be diagnosed (through divination) and treated (through ritual).

6. I use the word “doctor” because that was the way people in the village where I lived referred to “modern medicine.” Few of these people will ever come face-to-face with a university-trained physician in their lives. In 1988–89 there were 879 doctors for a population of just under 18 million. Even auxiliary health workers—health assistants, nurses, village health workers, vaccinators, malaria field workers, and so forth—are few and far between in the hills (there were a total of 20,565 auxiliary health workers in 1988–89). These statistics are from His Majesty's Government of Nepal (1994). No one knows how many *dhāmi-jhānkris* there are in Nepal.

7. I am arguing that shamanic healing is tied to locality through these associations. Shamans themselves do not need to be members of a local community to heal, however. In fact, people prefer shamans from other places.

8. I find a parallel in Homi Bhabha's observations on the semiotic instabilities in colonial discourse, though Bhabha posits these relations for discourse in the abstract and I am concerned as an ethnographer to show how they structure social practice. Bhabha has shown that in the course of being asserted and reasserted, the essentialist and self-evident nature of colonial distinctions is revealed as problematic. Rather than fixing the world once and for all according to its naturalized categories, colonial discourse paradoxically produces a hybridity that escapes classification. Colonial categories of difference are displaced through the very acts that attempt to replicate them. This displacement occurs because the idea of difference on which colonial authority is based is also a "mode of address" that structures interactions between actual historical subjects. Bhabha reminds us that there is always a gap between a representation and that which is represented. "Paradoxically . . . an image [of colonial authority] can never be 'original'—by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it—nor 'identical'—by virtue of the difference that defines it," notes Bhabha. Consequently, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent," he insists, "split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjuncture produced within the act of enunciation" (Bhabha 1994:107–108). Bhabha's insights suggest that a formal reading of the structural oppositions of this discourse is inadequate to account for the proliferation of meanings left in its wake (see, for instance, the accounts in Comaroff and Comaroff 1993 and Pred and Watts 1992).

9. These questions are especially salient as we try to find a point of analytical purchase on the moving terrain of global cultural interconnections. There is a sense—often expressed in vague, hyperbolic evocations of "new" and "dizzying" forms of interaction across space—that relations of cultural differentiation and diffusion have accelerated or changed in some fundamental way. Most discussion of the transnational character of cultural processes has focused on the media, communications, and information technologies; on commodification and consumption; or on mobile, displaced, or diasporic communities. These are practices, things, and conditions associated with modernity or postmodernity. People who mainly stay put in villages that lack television sets, and whose lives include what seems like stereotypically traditional involvement with shamans and their rituals, fit less obviously into these discussions. Yet as Tsing (1993) shows, the very marginality of these "out-of-the-way places" both arises from particular forms of global engagement and generates a situated commentary on them.

Appadurai has attempted to formulate a vision of the convergences and divergences he calls "cultural flows" by suggesting that "the complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics which we have only begun to theorize" (1990:6). The metaphor of "cultural flows," while helpful in focusing attention on the multiple pathways through which "globality" is achieved, risks calling up a vaguely diffusionist imagery of ideas that spread of their own accord between fixed locations. Latour's criticism of diffusionist models in the sociology of science is pertinent here. Diffusionist models, he argues, imply that facts and technologies are endowed with inertia. "[I]t seems that as people so easily agree to transmit the object, it is the object itself that forces them to assent. It then seems that the behaviour of people is *caused* by the diffusion of facts and machines" (1987:133). When ideas are thought of as compelling in and of themselves, what is "forgotten are the many people who carry them from hand to hand" (1987:133). Latour proposes an alternative perspective that attends closely to the practices that construct the associations, linkages, and translations through which ideas and technologies move: "*there are always people moving the objects along but they are not the same people all*

along” (1987:137–138; emphasis in original). My attention to conjunctures in the creation of cosmopolitanism borrows from Latour’s methodological discussion of “associations” and “translations.”

10. Writes Robbins: “Instead of renouncing cosmopolitanism as a false universal, one can embrace it as an impulse to knowledge that is shared with others, a striving to transcend partiality that is itself partial, but no more so than the similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples. The world’s particulars can now be recoded, in part at least, as the world’s *discrepant cosmopolitanisms*” (1992:181; emphasis in original).

11. Mr. Rai spoke in a Nepali peppered with English words, as did many of the people I quote here. The English words speakers used appear in single quotes to distinguish them from my translation of the Nepali. I have retained some specialized Nepali vocabulary.

12. Chhetris are high-caste Hindus ranked below Brahmins. The dhāmi performing on this occasion was also a Chhetri, though his clients and most of the onlookers were Rai—an ethnic group considered inferior by high-caste Hindus and often stereotypically depicted by them as simple and less sophisticated.

13. I am drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of language, modeled on dialogue:

the word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. [1981:280]

14. Schein has also sought to capture a “process of identity redistribution, dense with local practices and cultural production” with the term “imagined cosmopolitanism” (1994:149).

15. In the 1980s, *bikās* (development) was *the* idiom in which virtually all social debate took place. When I returned to Nepal for a few months in 1992, after the 1990 People’s Movement overturned the politically repressive panchayat system of government, I had the sense that the terms of public debate had broadened somewhat. *Bikās* was still important, but “democracy” and “privatization” were also important organizing themes. My sense was that in the more open political climate, previously repressed concerns could be expressed more directly. This seems to have contributed to a wider and more critical debate about development itself.

16. Nepal’s relations to British India were extremely complex. I do not mean to suggest that Nepal was unaffected by its relations to British India. Burghart (1984) argues that Nepal was not ruled as a “nation-state” (in the modern sense) until after 1951.

17. Rana rulers systematically extracted labor and resources from the countryside, investing little in public welfare or improvement.

18. Nanda Shrestha, a geographer, has begun writing about development ideology in Nepal through his own memoirs of the experience of “becoming a development category.” He tells of watching, as a child, the first airplane land in Pokhara and learning that this was *bikas* (1993). I’m not sure how people in Kathmandu and other towns experienced these social changes, and certainly there are people in remote areas for whom the development frenzy occurs on a distant horizon.

19. In the 1950s and 1960s (when these processes were in their earliest stages), it was mostly the very few literate people (most often, high-caste Hindus) in rural areas who were able to take advantage of new opportunities. Newar merchant families and some of the soldiers retired from the British Army (mainly Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and

Limbus) also appear to have been advantageously placed to take advantage of new opportunities.

20. An anecdotal illustration of the cultural meaning of cosmopolitanism in relation to class comes from an internet discussion group on Nepal (soc.culture.nepal, 1994). In a discussion about Nepali undergraduates studying in the United States, one Nepali complained about low-caste Kathmandu Newars who got rich enough by selling their land in the real estate boom in Kathmandu to send their children to private universities in the United States. He insinuated that these were ill-gotten gains and that these people did not “deserve” to study in the United States because their parents were the “kind of people” who “still” live in their mud house and winnow rice by hand. Not surprisingly, this provoked a number of replies. The writer had clearly drawn on a very powerful image.

21. There are many ways to do this. One is to educate sons to enable them to qualify for a job. Another is to marry daughters to men with jobs (until now, for Rais in eastern Nepal this has meant marrying daughters to soldiers in the British Army). Some women pursue education as a way to avoid marriage. Men also seek opportunities through military service in the British and Indian armies, the Nepali Army and Police, the Singapore Police, and, recently, in factory work in Japan and South Korea. Out-migration for labor in India has gone on for at least 150 years. Many families have a branch in the Tarai, Assam, or Bhutan.

Clearly, economic pressures force people to migrate or join foreign armies for employment. But from the local perspective, these are seen in part as opportunities. For example, a young village man who can get into the British Army nowadays is seen locally as very privileged indeed. The British Army has reduced the number of recruits and raised its standards over recent years, so that now a man has to be well educated and well connected to get in.

22. Shrestha (1990) discusses the general patterns of circular migration. Shrestha suggests that a new trend may have begun: instead of reinvesting in their home village, circular migrants are starting to buy land and move to towns and cities instead, thus further impoverishing the countryside.

23. Though economic pressure leads men to go to India in search of employment, this employment raises their status and the status of their families, not just economically but in terms of the cultural capital associated with being cosmopolitan.

24. This appears to have been going on for many generations, though there is insufficient data to reconstruct this process fully. The extreme variability in land and labor relations from place to place in Nepal makes it difficult to generalize from one local study to the nation as a whole. Statistics on migration are aggregated at the district level—not a fine enough mesh to catch the process that is occurring at the village level.

The connections between those who leave farming and those who stay behind are not without tensions. For example, the young men who have primary access to salaried employment now enjoy a new form of status within family hierarchies of age and gender. Agricultural labor and resources continue to belong to everyone in the joint household, where gains from salaried employment can sometimes be claimed as personal wealth. This appears to disadvantage women in these households (Kate Gilbert and Julia Thompson, personal communication, February 1994).

25. This includes a reinvestment value, because it can potentially be brokered into further opportunities.

26. Note that for hill villagers, being able to cross a street with car traffic is a cosmopolitan survival skill. (I heard many funny self-mocking stories about people’s

first trips to Kathmandu: trying to cross a street, figuring out how to drink fizzy beverages such as Coca-Cola, buying a ticket for a movie.) For Sherpas, for instance, learning to anticipate the desires of foreign tourists and “be” the kind of Sherpa Westerners will pay to be around is a sophisticated deployment of a cosmopolitan sensibility (Adams 1995).

27. Tsing (1993) writes about a similar association of travel with power in her analysis of “the cultural construction of marginality” in Kalimantan.

28. See Pigg 1992 for a longer discussion of the ways these phrases are used in a relativistic imagining of difference in relation to development.

29. “Village” is a problematic category for Nepal. In eastern Nepal, settlement is dispersed. There are no village units per se, with spatial and/or social boundaries. Administrative boundaries (the unit called the panchayat at the time of my research and now renamed Village Development Committee) do not coincide with natural communities (Benjamin 1989). The panchayat I lived in had 2,059 registered adult voters. It takes three to four hours to climb from the river to the ridge (i.e., bottom to top) and about two hours to traverse the panchayat horizontally (i.e., on a path along the side of the mountain). The panchayat in which I resided is a mixed ethnic area. About 25 percent of the panchayat’s residents are Brahmin-Chhetri (high-caste ethnic Hindus) and about 6 percent are ethnically Hindu occupational castes (i.e., untouchables); 26 percent are Newar and Kumal; 22 percent Rai; and about 17 percent Tamang.

30. This logic echoes anthropological discourse on cultural beliefs. Good has probed into the empiricist assumptions behind the juxtaposition of knowledge and belief, whereby “knowledge requires both certitude and correctness; belief implies uncertainty, error, or both” (1994:17). “No wonder,” he comments, “that discussions of ‘the problem of irrational beliefs’ so often cite medical examples” (1994:21). Many anthropological writings on medicine, he observes, advance the empiricist paradigm by treating biomedicine as a pure form of objective knowledge while describing the “beliefs” on which other medical systems are based. This framework reproduces both an epistemology and a structure of power relations because “the representation of others’ culture as ‘beliefs’ authorizes the position and knowledge of the anthropological observer” (1994:20).

31. “There exists a disjuncture,” Gyan Prakash says of colonial discourse, “between meanings articulated and the processes and conditions that make their articulation possible” (1992:154).

32. Mainstream development research on local attitudes rarely takes into account the reflexivity people have about their own society, much less their perceptions of the messages, institutions, and programs thrust at them in the name of development.

33. For instance, in development-related research in Nepal, sites are chosen for the ethnicity of the population. If a study of “attitudes” is carried out in a predominantly Rai area, say, then the results are generalized to all people identified as Rais, no matter how different their social positions may be due to other factors. Ideas and attitudes are always attributed to ethnic character (race), and almost never to other factors, such as degree of involvement in wider economic relations.

34. Invocation of the “ignorance” of villagers by more educated Nepalis has many meanings. Though Linda Stone and I have remarked on the ways it stereotypes and blames villagers, denies them agency and silences their voices, the denunciation of villagers’ ignorance has another, political meaning as well (Pigg 1992, 1995; Stone 1986). It serves as shorthand for the complex social, political, and economic factors that limit most villagers’ access to information, education, and opportunity. Thus, speaking

of villagers' ignorance can be intended as a condensed and oblique way of denouncing social inequality.

35. What schools do and how they instill various messages is far more complicated than what I can go into here (Holland and Skinner 1995; Skinner and Holland in press). Simply going to school marks you as a different kind of person, as someone destined to be more modern than others. Schools expose people to images of modernity, modern places, and modern ideas. And though the curriculum includes numerous patriotic messages about Nepal and Nepali traditional life, the overall message is clearly that local knowledge is insufficient, worthless, and so on. Several young adults spoke to me quite movingly about the ways they are trying to reconcile what they have learned in school and what they have learned from growing up in a village.

36. Nor should this be surprising. Duden (1991) describes patients in early-18th-century Germany who went to the doctor for confirmation of what they already knew. The idea that a medical specialist has the authority to identify the truth about an illness is one that emerges with the clinical gaze and the modern body.

37. "Source-force" is Nepali-English slang for having a contact or having pull in official contexts.

38. The sick person does not necessarily have to be present for a shamanic treatment.

39. Shamans themselves can be cosmopolitan.

40. In contrast: "that which is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying; tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition" (Bourdieu 1977:167). Bourdieu distinguishes between the universe of discourse and the unspoken, accepted common sense of what he calls *doxa*.

41. Emphatic particles, for instance, make it possible to inflect the intensity of the belief into the word itself.

42. I am grateful to Pratyoush Onta for suggesting the importance of "the ambivalence of modernity" (his phrase) in Kathmandu for my argument about the place of villages.

### References Cited

Adams, Vincanne

1995 *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Anderson, Benedict

1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Appadurai, Arjun

1990 Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Political Economy. *Public Culture* 2(2):1-24.

Atkinson, Jane

1992 Shamanisms Today. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21:307-330.

Bakhtin, Michail

1981 *The Dialogical Imagination*. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Benjamin, Paul

1989 *Local Organization for Development in Nepal*. Ph.D. dissertation, Anthropology Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Bhabha, Homi

1994 Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817. *In* *The Location of Culture*. Pp. 102–122. New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre

1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Richard Nice, trans. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Burghart, Richard

1984 The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal. *Journal of Asian Studies* 44(1):101–125.

Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff, eds.

1993 *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Duden, Barbara

1991 *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dunn, Frederick

1976 Traditional Asian Medicine and Cosmopolitan Medicine as Adaptive Systems. *In* *Asian Medical Systems*. Charles Leslie, ed. Pp. 133–158. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Escobar, Arturo

1991 Anthropology and the Development Encounter: The Making and Marketing of Development Anthropology. *American Ethnologist* 18:658–682.

1995 *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fisher, James, ed.

1987 *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology, Vol. 1*. Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University.

Good, Byron

1994 *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson

1992 Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology* 7:6–23.

His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Central Bureau of Statistics

1994 *Statistical Pocket Book*. Kathmandu.

Holland, Dorothy, and Debra Skinner

1995 Contested Ritual, Contested Femininities: (Re)forming Self and Society in a Nepali Women's Festival. *American Ethnologist* 22:279–305.

Latour, Bruno

1987 *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

1993 *We Have Never Been Modern*. Catherine Porter, trans. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Leslie, Charles

1976 Introduction. *In* *Asian Medical Systems*. Charles Leslie, ed. Pp. 1–12. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mishra, Chaitanya

1984 Social Research in Nepal: A Critique and a Proposal. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 11(2):1–10.

Pigg, Stacy Leigh

1992 Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:491–513.

1995 Acronyms and Effacement: Traditional Medical Practitioners (TMP) in International Health Development. *Social Science and Medicine* 41:47–68.

Pouillon, Jean

1982 Remarks on the Verb 'To Believe.' *In Between Belief and Transgression: Structuralist Essays in Religion, History, and Myth*. Michel Izard and Pierre Smith, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Prakash, Gyan

1992 Science "Gone Native" In Colonial India. *Representations* 40:153–178.

Pred, Allan, and Michael Watts

1992 *Reworking Modernity: Capitalisms and Symbolic Discontent*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Robbins, Bruce

1992 Comparative Cosmopolitanism. *Social Text* 31/32:169–186.

Rofel, Lisa

1992 Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China. *Cultural Anthropology* 7:93–114.

Sagant, Philippe

1987 La cure du chamane et l'interprétation des laïcs. *L'ethnographie* 83(100–101):247–273.

Schein, Louisa

1994 The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China. *Social Text* 41:141–164.

Shrestha, Nanda

1990 *Landlessness and Migration in Nepal*. Boulder: Westview Press.

1993 Enchanted by the Mantra of Bikas: A Self-Reflective Perspective on Nepalese Elites and Development. *South Asia Bulletin* 13(1–2):5–22.

Shrestha, Ramesh, and Mark Lediard

1980 *Faith Healers: A Force for Change. A Preliminary Report of an Action-Research Project*. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises.

Skinner, Debra, and Dorothy C. Holland

In press Schools and the Cultural Production of the Educated Person in a Nepalese Hill Community. *In The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. Bradley A. Levinson, Douglas E. Foley, and Dorothy C. Holland, eds. Buffalo: SUNY Press.

Stone, Linda

1986 Primary Health Care for Whom? Village Perspectives from Nepal. *Social Science and Medicine* 22(3):293–302.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt

1993 *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the Way Place*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.