

The Shaman and the Ghosts of Unnatural Death: On the Efficacy of a Ritual

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In the Himalayan region, and even beyond it, odd behavior, illnesses, and especially sudden or accidental deaths, are attributed to the actions of the dead who have come back to torment the living.

Among the Limbu tribesmen of eastern Nepal, these attacks take many different forms. The symptoms have very little in common from illness to illness. The eyes of infants roll back into their heads; they refuse to take the breast and die after only several months of life (they are called *sa-sik*). Women – as well as men – remain infertile, and are subject to bouts of confusion and temporary madness. Pregnancies often come to bad endings: there are spontaneous abortions, death in childbirth (*sugup*), an inability to produce milk. Men complain of stomach aches, tremendous headaches, vertigo, and various other troubles: they too are stricken with temporary madness, with loss of consciousness, and with inexplicable terrors that lead to fatal accidents or that even drive the victim, in a fit of rage, to murder or suicide (*sogha*). People of both sexes and all ages are affected. At home the family chickens often die suddenly and pigs choke to death.

Whether it be among the Buddhists of Sherpa, the Hindi of the Newar valley of Katmandu, or even the Limbu with their “religion without name,” there exist, among a large number of the Himalayan populations, special rituals or ritual specialists whose self-proclaimed function is to thwart the aggression of the returning dead. Among the Limbu, who are the subject of this article, one of the two local shamans (the one designated by the term *yeba*) is called upon to perform this ritual (Sagent, 1987; and, for comparison, cf. Vitebsky, undated).

Whatever their cause, the illnesses themselves are surely real. Two questions are of interest here: to what extent does the shaman succeed in effecting a cure and, more importantly, what is it about the funerary rite – its aim being to avert the illnesses caused by the returning dead – that makes it work?

It is worth noting that the general beliefs of the Limbu people concerning the returning dead flagrantly contradict many of the observable facts. Could this be the reason for the ritual's efficacy? As will be seen, this archaic ritual is not without analogies in the modern world.

I. General Beliefs

Who, according to the Limbu, are the returning dead? To answer this question, one must immediately make a distinction between two kinds of dead. These groups, clearly separated in principle, are "ancestors" (*theba*) and "others".

Ancestors and Others

Ancestors live in the village of the dead (*khema pangphe*); the others never reach it. This is the first difference.

When a person dies a normal death, the other Limbu shaman (the *phedangma*), the one who officiates at the ordinary ritual, accompanies the deceased (*sam sama*) to the beyond; this ritual takes place in front of all the villagers, who have assembled in the deceased's home. The village of the dead is therefore not completely unknown to the living; it is located to the west of the world of the living and neighbors the sun and moon, although the light of those two heavenly bodies glimmers only faintly here. At the end of a long voyage, whose stages are always the same, the shaman and the deceased reach the banks of a lake: this is The Lake of Tears (*Mikwa warok*), beyond which the village of the dead stretches. In semi-darkness the shaman calls out to the ancestors: sometimes he is able to discern their shadows on the other bank. Shouting, he summons them to take charge of the deceased; he tells them to take care of him and not to send him in search of water: "This is not a slave (*yok*)!" he yells. "This is your grandchild. I'm entrusting him to you. He is a member of the Pang-bohang clan!" Then, with the spirits who have accompanied him, the shaman retraces his steps.

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It is necessary to have a clan name to reach the village of the dead. All the inhabitants of the village live in small houses. The recently deceased reside in dwellings resembling those of a Limbu house of today. Those who are long dead live in a "big house," although this one too is minuscule; it is white and very long, with a series of eight doors, a guard posted at each one. Some aged Limbu who were interviewed, like Tarbare, claim to have reached the village of the dead in dream. They say that the dead there dress as of old, in turban and large cloth belt. In the fields beyond the houses, neither rice nor corn is grown; instead mustard and buckwheat are, as in the old days. Opinions differ as to the rest. Do the dead have livestock? Are their eyes open? A mystery!

Dying far from one's relatives

Among those who undertake the voyage to the beyond, there are certainly some who never make it to the village of the dead: we know this because they return later to attack the living. One such case occurred in Libang; it was caused by a cat who, left inside a house locked shut for the night of vigil over the corpse of the family's grandmother, brushed against the deceased's body. Made impure by this contact (this idea can be found in other places, cf., for example, Gaborieau, 1975, 70), the grandmother never became an ancestor (*yuma*). There is also the case of a man, one of the rulers of the valley, who turned back for a last look at his home just as he reached the village of the dead; his relatives were at that moment in the process of serving the festive dinner, held in his honor, which closes the funeral rite (*barakhi*): outside his house over a thousand people were gathered, feasting. Nonetheless three of the guests, who had come from afar, were just then complaining of their host's stinginess in regard to food and drink. The dead man, furious that his funeral banquet was not up to the dignity of his rank (and all because of his son's avarice), swore to have his revenge; he too failed to become an ancestor.

Such cases are rare. Usually the dead person does reach the village of the dead. This is thanks to the living, who have fulfilled their supreme obligation in his regard: not to let him die alone. They must also make certain that the shaman is present to hear the deceased's final words; and it is the family's duty to ensure that the funeral rites are fulfilled in all their details. It takes nearly a year to carry them out, and during that time no one is certain whether the deceased has reached the village of the dead. Only when the final

feast is concluded, and the relatives, standing at the edge of a field, have publicly attested to having fulfilled every detail of the rite, can the deceased, until then called *let sam*, become forever *theba*, an ancestor.

If the relatives have fulfilled their responsibility, their ancestors do not seem to be truly ill-intentioned. Sometimes, if an ancestor becomes threatening, his house is knocked down (*khema him yoma*). But most often when an ancestor does appear, it is to warn an old person that he or she has not long to live: during the night his or her legs are "bound" (*khengma*) and, when the old person rises, his or her entire body feels stiff, as if with arthritis. In other cases the ancestors inspire dreams in which the old person sees himself on the road leading to the village of the dead. And when death approaches, the ancestors are believed to assemble outside his house. Sometimes the ancestors can be heard in the night, whispering. In the village there are some who know that this means the old person is going to die.

The ancestors are thought of as faceless, nameless dead. Once a year the living invoke all the generations, one after another, in order to guarantee that they will protect their descendants.

The deceased who cannot become an ancestor is the one who is dangerous to the community. He terrorizes it. Usually he has died alone, struck by a bolt of lightning or swept away and drowned in a river. If the corpse is found there is even proof of it: he has his "mouth open," his "hands open." This is how souls (*sam*) escape, having lost their way (*potma*) in the forest: they will never reach the village of the dead (cf., among others, Granet, 1968, 360; Harva, 1959, 201; Lot-Falck, 1971; Bonnerjea, 1927, 90; Stein, 1956, 110).

Guilt (so) and premature death

When trying to account for the dead who return seeking vengeance, the Limbu say – this is their first explanation – that they do so because they have died far from their relatives. And it is true that this idea does encompass a certain category of revenants, called *sogha*: these are adult males who have died alone, often by accident or violence. But then how to account for the troop of females who have died at home in childbirth (*sugup*) surrounded by the affection of their relatives? It can not be said that they have died alone!

To die far from one's relatives: when this first explanation

becomes inoperative, the Limbu have recourse to another explanation. Once, one of them recounted, he had joined up with a group of migrants who were on their way to Sikkim to earn some money. This small group, having left the village of Limkhim in the Tamur valley, were crossing the Chyangthapu forest. As night fell it threatened to rain, so the men made their camp at the entrance to a cave. Toward midnight an unusually violent storm erupted; the thunder rumbled so loudly that two of them were left deaf for several hours after the storm had passed. The next morning the sky was blue and the forest calm; and right next to their cave they found the charred bodies of a young boy and girl. Several hours later, having reached the first village at the edge of the forest, they sounded the alarm. But the villagers said they already knew: the night before, at dusk, the young people had fled. They were a brother and sister who had committed incest.

As long as incestuous lovers are not separated, they live under the constant threat of lightning and wild beasts, of the earth opening up beneath their feet: they already know they will die without offspring. They will never celebrate the first tooth of their grandchild, which is the sure sign of having fulfilled one's destiny in the chain of ancestors; they will not have transmitted "the bone of the clan" to their descendant. In other circumstances they might have been able to reclaim their reputation (*ingsa*), their lost honor, and especially the power (*hang*) of their vital force. But to carry out the necessary rituals, the shaman must always know the clan name. Incestuous lovers no longer have a clan. Banished, it is as if they have lost the protection of the Gods and are doomed to know a terror that leads to madness.

What is the difference between unnatural death and banishment? "To banish a man to confinement is already to kill him," Granet has written in another context. The Limbu people say of such a man that "he dies quickly" (*hara si*), and the lovers of the forest of Chyangthapu knew they were doomed.

It is to the second explanation of unnatural death that the Limbu turn when the first becomes inoperative: premature death is always the consequence of sin or guilt (*so*). Even the village father, mad with grief over the death of his young daughter in childbirth, must, over time, make up a reason for it; no one knew, but she was under the spell of the demon of jealousy (*Nahen*). Or: a man was knifed to death because he himself was a killer. Or again: she was widowed because she played around.

All the dead who die quickly are dangerous; and they always return, determined to make others die just as they did.

A furious desire for revenge

There is yet another idea advanced by the Limbu in regard to unnatural death: because he dies quickly, the deceased is impelled by a furious desire for revenge.

The deceased is furious because his life has been cut short, leaving him with unsatisfied desires. The happier the baby was, and the more he loved his mother, the more jealous and bitter he is after his premature death. The same applies to the woman who dies in childbirth, deprived of the fruit of her love. When a woman who is breast-feeding dies, it is unthinkable to call in a wet nurse to save the newborn, because the deceased will surely attack her. The same kind of rage is felt by a man killed on the blade of a spear: he will turn against his relatives if they do not avenge his death. The practice of vendetta is based on this idea.

The fury of the deceased has still another justification. In this case, it refers to fate beyond the grave. Because he could not reach the village of the dead, the deceased continues to roam: he is hungry and thirsty, overpowered by a feeling of dread. Out of this dread his fury against those who are still alive is born. He cannot accept his miserable lot when others drink the milk of his calves, eat his hogs, and sleep in his bed, sometimes with his own wife.

Clearly the beliefs of the Limbu are rationalizations that combine ideas from different epochs. Still, the band of ghosts is composed for the most part of those who have died unnatural deaths. They can attack at any time and anywhere, and they will go after anyone. And all of them, sooner or later, do return. At least this is what the Limbu claim.

II. The Facts

The truth is that the beliefs generally held concerning unnatural death often contradict observable facts.

The time of the deceased's return is restricted

Firstly, it is false to claim that the dead can return at any time. Rather, picturesquely speaking, it can be said that revenants

appear periodically, according to a kind of rule of threes: three days (cf., among others, Evans-Wentz, 1960, 105; Gorer, 1967, 352; Moréchand, 1968, 91; Mills, 1980, 169; Höfer, 1981, 24; etc.), three months, three years, three generations.

Three days: speaking of a man who committed suicide by throwing himself from a bridge, the shaman said: "His corpse was found in the rocks along the river bank. His mouth was open and his spirits had fled; finding them is no easy matter. I finally caught sight of them, up there, on the mountain above the village of Tengma. I flew up toward its crest. The deceased was there, his back turned to me as he worked the field. I approached him and, with the help of the spirits who had accompanied me, I grabbed him. The deceased turned and said, 'Why did you grab me like a thief?' I answered: 'I grabbed you that way because you're dead.'"

The deceased does not know about his own death for three days, and it is the shaman's duty to inform him. Out of this obligation comes an imperative rule: The funeral of the deceased must be held within three days of his death; otherwise there is a risk of losing control of the deceased once he "awakes." This point, although not often commented upon, is consistent with what we know concerning the entire Himalayan region; for example, even in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which draws liberally from traditional beliefs, the deceased does not become aware of his own death until the third day after it occurs.

After the completion of the funeral for the victim of unnatural death, the deceased will never again return if the shaman is expert in his duties. However there are sometimes second-rate shamans who are afraid and who botch the job; they abandon the deceased in the middle of the journey and say nothing about it. Then, one day in the future, the deceased, awakened (*jagnu*, in Nepalese), appears as a ghost. In Libang the Limbu claim that if a deceased is to return, it will be known within three or four months from the time of the funeral. Yet the facts give a more fluid impression: among a half dozen Limbu cases, the time ranged between one and six months, while among another Himalayan group (Bouillier, 1979, 162) it took as long as eighteen years.

When there is serious aggression, it is up to the shaman to make the initial identification of the deceased. Only after this is done can the grand ritual of unnatural death take place again – a repetition of the funeral rite whose object was to "kill the phantom" (*sogha, sugup, sepma*). But if a deceased returns once, say the Limbu, he

will return again; from here on the ritual must be performed every three or four years, which is the length of its effectiveness. There are several cases among the Limbu that attest to this periodicity. It has also been remarked elsewhere in the Himalayas: for example, among the Chantal of Nepal, there was a report of an attack by a particular deceased in the years 1966, 1968, and 1971.

Finally, there is the "law" of the three generations (Hitchcock, 1966, 56), beyond which the phantom disappears forever. This same observation, made among the Magar people (Nepal), leads the author to the following statement: the deceased who returns is the same one who was known during his lifetime (the rule seems to be different for the Indo-Nepalese). It is thus false to affirm, as does the popular belief, that a dead person can return at any time.

In addition, like all malefic forces, the phantoms appear at "marginal" times: at the full moon, new moon, the passage from the "rising" to the "falling" season, etc. Therefore there are moments when the revenant shows him or herself more willingly. The case is the same with places.

The place of the deceased's appearance is restricted

It is known that the spot where a person kills himself becomes haunted by his presence: such a person is never buried in the cemetery with the other dead; he is buried downstream from the village. The person who falls to his death from a bridge is buried at the very spot his corpse is found. It is said that this is the place where he became "master of the ground." One of these grave sites is located in the valley of the Mewa, next to an ancient trail leading to a fairground; the current trail makes a large detour around it. The tombs of infants and women who have died in childbirth are dug hastily and in an uncultivated area downstream from the village, near the banks of the river. The shaman of Libang has treated many people for illnesses contracted near the burial sites of people who have died unnatural deaths (villagers go there in search of wood for heating).

Not surprisingly, the deceased who returns makes himself known most often in the house in which he lived. Beware of empty houses offered to ethnologists looking for a place to stay: Robert Ekvall (1952, 19), in the Tibetan Amdo, and Cristoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1964, 307), among the Sherpa of Nepal, know something about that!

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In fact, the same case applies to places as to time: the kindling of memory in certain locations haunted by the malefic dead is culturally conditioned. That is to say, other spaces are relatively free of their presence. In Libang, if a woman is feeling sick in the third month of pregnancy, the shaman often diagnoses the case as an escape of spirits. In response, while standing at the doorway of her house, he sets off to find them. He details each stage of his voyage. Reaching the distant banks of a lake high in the mountains (*yumik-ma*), he finally spots the sufferer. Feet in the water, she is sewing, and he calls to her. Then he gathers her spirits and places them in a basket (this ritual is called *sam lama*, which means "to go in search of spirits"). He discerns shadows approaching along the lake's bank. Waving his sword to keep them away, he shouts, "It is a woman! She's dressed in red, and her hair is undone!" As he heads back to the village he often turns around and shouts, "There are three of them right at my heels!" He waves his sword at them, etc. The pregnant woman, crouching behind the door, sees and hears all of it. By reawakening her memory of the village women who have died in childbirth, the shaman is trying to test the power of these memories over her: "Isn't that Sansamaya, your friend who died last year?" His aim is to provoke a crisis so that he can better control it.

The deceased does not go after just anyone

The attack of a revenant is usually preceded by annunciatory dreams, by night terrors brought on by hissing sounds, by stones rolling around outside the house, by a jug that falls inexplicably and breaks, or by a door violently opened; footsteps are heard, blazing torches are seen in the night, silhouettes appear and disappear, a hand reaches through the window and grabs someone by the arm. Certain smells become intolerably strong.

The patient, Berreman has noted (1963, 87–89), often complains of profound fatigue accompanied by various other symptoms: an inability to feel, difficulty in concentrating, insensitivity to pain, and, always, the impression of being incapable of resisting an oppressive force; speech occasionally becomes incoherent; sometimes there are losses of consciousness that end in death; there are falls from a bridge or from a cliff-trail above a chasm. There are even cases of possession so tormenting that murder or suicide results. V. Elwin has reported a case in which a man "killed out of

fatigue." In addition to the primary illness, all kinds of other ailments appear along with it: tremendous headaches, stomach problems, difficulties in producing milk, complications with pregnancy, and so forth.

Only in exceptional cases is the patient or his family able to identify the cause of these illnesses. As a rule, therefore, the shaman is called in: it is his job to diagnose the illness, to determine why the deceased has returned, and to arrange for his departure. There are two ways this can be done. The first is the gentle way, the *phedangma* of the Limbu: after a "clinical examination" of the patient, the shaman suggests turning to divination as a means of interpretation. The other way is the *yeba*: after inducing the revenant to take possession of his patient, the shaman then orders him to explain himself.

Ethnologists are often more interested in general beliefs than in particular facts, which accounts for the paucity of such facts in the literature on shamanism. Nevertheless, based on the available concrete data, the following statement can reasonably be made: if a deceased returns to attack one of the living, he has good reason for doing so.

Shirley Jones (1976, 26) described the following situation, which she apparently witnessed in 1969 among the Limbu of Terhathum: A woman named Sahili lived with her husband and young son in a house constructed on a terraced mountain slope; her mother-in-law and sister-in-law and the sister-in-law's granddaughter lived there too. That year, toward the end of the monsoon, there were three consecutive days of heavy rain. On one of the nights the house was swept away by a landslide, killing the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law's daughter.

The days that followed the rites of unnatural death were difficult for the survivors. The sister-in-law who had lost her daughter disappeared to a neighboring town where she drowned her sorrows in drink; the husband, a small-time shaman without work, did the same. Sahili's young son was extremely troubled by the tragedy. It was all Sahili could do just to keep the household together.

A month after the tragedy, the family was out of money: the sister-in-law, needing money for another binge, had taken and sold the mother-in-law's jewelry. The day after the sale Sahili had her first attack, running wildly about the streets of the village. She entered houses screaming and generally acted like a madwoman. That night her husband and sister-in-law brought her home and

beat her with nettles in an attempt to exorcise her: they realized that the mother-in-law had come back to make trouble.

For five consecutive evenings Sahili experienced an attack. Possessed by the spirit of her mother-in-law, mad with rage, she [the mother-in-law] would scream at the top of her lungs in her daughter-in-law's voice: "Give me back my bracelets! Give me back my golden nose ring!" Apparently Shirley Jones left the country as the village was preparing for the grand rite of "killing the ghost" (*sugup sepma*) of the mother-in-law.

Thus it cannot be said that all victims of unnatural death return – far from it. Moreover, the victims whose return has been described by ethnologists return for a reason (Jones, 1976, 26; Macdonald, 1966, 296; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1964, 307; Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, 220; Crooke, 1978, 234-236; etc.):

- a mother, swept away by a landslide, whose daughter sells her jewels for drink;

- an infant, dead because his mother has a new baby who drinks the milk destined for him;

- a father, a man of great reputation in the valley, whose son, out of avarice, does not hold a funeral equal to the dignity of his rank;

- a woman whose husband, widowed at a young age, finds and marries another woman, younger than the deceased;

- a man, killed in an avalanche, whose corpse is discovered by a group of yak herders who do not show the deceased the proper respect;

- a grandmother, drowned at the bottom of a well, whose newly married granddaughter carries away the grandmother's jewels to the husband's house;

- a man, also killed in an avalanche, whose house is used as a place of carousal without offering him something to drink, and whose belongings are stolen when his wife and son prudently decided to leave to live elsewhere.

All these cases have one thing in common: the deceased never complains of being forced to wander half-starved at the edge of the village. Nor does he or she refer to desires left unsatisfied by a premature death. The deceased complains instead of a wrong done to him or her. And he complains as if he does not know that he is dead. In fact, it is not the dead who act wrongly in regard to the living but the living who not only act wrongly in regard to the dead but who act as if the deceased were still living.

It is in such cases that the Limbu grand rite of unnatural death comes into play; it of course cannot be carried out by a second-rate shaman, because in that case it will fail. But if the shaman knows his business, the deceased will no longer have cause to return to harass the living.

III. The Treatment of Memory

The following excerpts show how a victim of unnatural death returns, during his funeral, to settle the score with the living. This story was recorded by Boyd Michailovsky in 1977. It was told by a Limbu tribesman nicknamed Motta (Harka Jit, of the Pang-bohang clan, in the village of Libang in the Mewa valley, located in eastern Nepal), who had for several years been a friend and our informant. Motta himself attended the funeral he describes, in 1958 or 1959.

"A long time ago," Motta said, "Damar Doy had a nephew by the name of Uttar Hang. Losing his father and mother in close succession, he decided to go live in his mother's native village, Limkhim, located above the Tamur valley. There he lived with his maternal uncle, looking after his animals. He settled down there and was married."

The narrative itself begins with the arrival in Libang of a man, sent from Limkhim, who announces to Motta and his uncles that Uttar Hang has just died. "How did it happen?" one of Motta's uncles asks. "It happened on the Thumma bridge. He had drunk a bit of beer. Well, a bit more than a bit. It was raining buckets and two of us had just crossed the bridge. He was behind us and we were waiting on the other side. In the middle of the bridge he slipped, fell, and was killed."

The reason someone had come looking for the men of Libang was that – as the closest relatives of the deceased – they were responsible for the funeral. In the past Motta and his uncles had lived in the same house as the deceased, i.e., the house of Damar Doy (1871?–1952), who was one of the most powerful Limbu chiefs.

What the story fails to mention are the reasons that impelled the deceased to exile himself to the neighboring valley: Dhan Pati, the deceased's father, was the younger brother of Damar Doy, and there was bad blood between the brothers; in 1948 the deceased, Uttar Hang, returned from three years of service with the British Gurkha; the very same evening his father, Dhan Pati, tried to shoot

his brother to death with a rifle down by the river. His uncle had his father prosecuted under the Nepalese justice system, and the trial expenses alone exhausted all of Uttar Hang's military pay (between eight and nine hundred rupees). This expenditure, moreover, was wasted, because his father was sentenced to the Nepalese jail of Biritnagar where he died in 1955. Having lost everything – not only his pay, but his fields, his livestock, and the money he was to inherit from Damar Doy, which Motta and his uncles shared – Uttar Hang fled to Limkhim. Thus when Motta and his uncles set out for Limkhim, it was with a heavy heart: if ever there were a deceased who had reason to seek vengeance, it was Uttar Hang.

The Limbu rite of unnatural death is a grand and spectacular ceremony. It requires the shaman to carry out the *yeba*, the "extraordinary rite." It begins informally, with a search for the corpse that is being carried through the village, sometimes by as many as one hundred men. Once the corpse is found, the grave is dug at the site of the accident. The burial rite of unnatural death differs from the one performed in a case of natural death. The shaman, dressed in his best finery, dances around the burial area, searching for the deceased's spirits; once he has gained control of them, he makes his way up a narrow mountain path, surrounded by the crowd, toward the house in which the funeral will take place. In the courtyard of the house a giant mast (*yakesing*) has been constructed; there the villagers assemble. The shaman then dances around this mast, trying to "kill the *sogha*" and force the ghost back to the other world, along the "twisted path" (*pekok lam*) of unnatural death.

During the grand rite, which lasts three days, there is a period of time – its length varies, from two to three hours – when the deceased speaks through the mouth of the shaman. It was this moment that was most interesting in the case of Uttar Hang; when it succeeds – as we shall see – it modifies the relationship between the living and the dead.

We will pick up the story at the moment when Motta and his uncles arrive in Limkhim. Entering the courtyard they address the shaman who, pausing momentarily, is removing a majestic plumed hat.

"Hey there, shaman! You've got to do a good job of it for us!" the uncles shout. "Because if you don't do it right, the dead man is going to grab us and throw us into the water [if we are passing over a bridge]. Or he'll knock us from the top of a tree when we're

cutting the leaves. He'll throw us from a mountainside when we're gathering grass stems for thatch. He'll turn us into animal fodder!"

"Alright," the shaman answered. "I'll give it a try! [...] I'll do my best! But in the meanwhile open your ears! Otherwise you'll be saying later: He didn't do a good job!"

(The shaman rises to continue the ritual. He leaves the courtyard and enters the house, which is full of people. When he gets inside, the deceased begins to speak out of the shaman's mouth.)

"The deceased is crying! He was crying! 'I owned land,' he said. 'I owned land and a house like this one. But my mother and father died, and I was orphaned. Then I went to my maternal uncle's house and took care of his animals for him. My uncle arranged a marriage for me. But when I went for her, my bride didn't come [the marriage never took place]. Then I fell from the bridge and I died! [...]'"

"Tell us what's making you unhappy! We want to make you happy," his uncle said.

"Uncle,' the dead man answered, 'you arranged my marriage. It's already been three years since you did it. And yet I didn't die satisfied! Why did I die dissatisfied? It's because I died dissatisfied that I rolled those boulders around your house last night. Crack! Boom! I opened your door! You were all there, hiding inside, while I was doing it!"

"That's the way it was: the dead man was speaking through the shaman's body. And when he spoke everyone said: 'Look! Look! He spoke!' Then, heavy-hearted, the shaman climbed on top of the family's storage chest. Trembling beyond his control, he began to cry. Then, still crying, he spoke to them:

"My new jacket, where is it?"

"It's there," they said to him, and it was put in front of him.

"My heart pines for my jacket. Give it to me," he said, and it was handed to him.

"And my shoes? What have you done with my shoes? My new shoes, I miss them terribly!"

And someone produced the shoes. But next it was his cane that he missed.

"Where is my cane? My heart is breaking! I still prize it!" he said, and now the cane was found and given to him. But he continued to cry. He was still not satisfied.

"Nephew, tell us what is making you unhappy," one of them said to him.

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"Uncle, there are still things I'm missing," he answered, crying.

"Well, tell us what they are!"

"I gave money to the women who live up there in Pandolung, but they never paid me back! If only they would pay me back, I would be so pleased," he said, still crying. The shaman bore Uttar's soul in his body, and it was crying.

While the deceased was crying, the women in question arrived and sat next to him: "Here, take it. We won't keep your money any longer. There it is, take it," they said, and laid two hundred rupees next to him. The shaman was crying – the spirit of the deceased, inside the shaman, was crying – and suddenly the women were giving his money back to him.

"There's another one up there, in Pandolung, to whom I gave a hundred rupees that are still there. We used to dance together at night. I would dream of taking her from her husband and marrying her myself. I gave her a hundred rupees, and she still has them," he said, crying and groaning.

"There, take your money, take it!" someone said as a hundred rupees was handed to him.

"It doesn't matter who took my money; as long as it is brought here and given to me, I'll be happy. Otherwise, I won't be! And I'll knock people off the bridge! I'll hurl them into the void as they collect grass stems from the mountain side! If I'm not satisfied I'll throw them from treetops as they try to cut the top branch." After speaking he began to cry again.

"Nephew," his maternal uncle asked, "is there anything else making you unhappy? You looked after my animals, but for nothing. And I arranged your marriage. What else is making you unhappy?"

"Uncle, listen to me. You gave me my jacket, and I'm satisfied with that. But I worked in your stable for nothing. I worked the fields. I sowed seeds with your hoe. My uncle, how much are you going to give me for it now? If you want to give me something, give it now! But if you give me nothing I will not be happy and I'll never let you go!"

"Alright, my nephew. I want you to be happy! How much do you want?" the uncle asked.

"Uncle, I am not asking for anything. If you want to give me something, then give. If I'm satisfied I'll tell you I'm satisfied. And if I'm not satisfied I'll tell you I'm not."

When the deceased had spoken the uncle said:

"Listen to me, I don't have a lot! And I arranged your marriage! So," he said, "I'm going to give you five hundred rupees." And he took out five hundred rupees for him.

"Alright then, my uncle, if you give me five hundred rupees I'll be happy. I'll have nothing to say against my uncle! And no regrets," said the deceased to his uncle.

"If you have anything else to complain about, just say it," the uncle said to him.

"I'm satisfied!" said the nephew who was dead. "I'm satisfied." Crying he climbed up and sat on the chest. "I took one of my aunt's earrings, and gave it to a woman from Khebeng, in the valley: did she or did she not bring it back? Take a look in the chest. Dear uncle, I stole it; dear aunt, I'm sorry, I secretly gave it away!"

"Nephew, nephew, oh no! To whom in Khebeng did you give it?"

"I gave it to someone, a woman of Khebeng. If she doesn't return it to me in the next two or three days, I'll take her with me, I'll hurl her into the river! If she's cutting grass stems, I'll make sure she slips and falls! And if she climbs up into a tree I'll pull her so she falls!" Suddenly he sees that the woman has come, she's there!

"Here's the earring you gave me," she says. "Don't get up! I'll put it right there." And she laid the earring before him.

"Good. Now that you've given me back my earring, I'm satisfied. I jumped and ran around your houses [last night]! I threw branches and rolled rocks! I opened wide your largest doors! Don't you remember? You must have heard," he said to them.

"We heard! You opened the door with a single thrust! I wondered: What is that noise? But when I went to look, no one was there! Just an open door, boom! Of course we heard! So it's the nephew who died in the fall; he's come back to play tricks on us! That's what I thought! Then I went back to bed, that is, we all went back to bed. You went up behind the house and caused that rock to slide! Then you went down to the tree and started banging on it! We lay silently and listened to all the noise you were making!"

Then all his girlfriends from Khebeng began to speak: "He got on top of our house and leaned hard on the lever of the grain-crushing machine: crash! It fell. Then he put on his shoes and clopped around like a man out for a walk! But when we went to look outside, there was no one there: only the noise! Then we said – we'd heard that our young friend from Libang had died in a fall – we said: That must be him! He's playing tricks on us and making

all this racket! And later that night I had a dream. There was blood everywhere! His head and hands were covered with it. He stood up in the dream, blood streaming everywhere, and he started prowling around! I knew that he'd died in a fall from the bridge and now I was having these dreams!"

"But now we have nothing of yours! We don't have a nickel of yours! We don't have your gold or your silver! We don't have anything belonging to you! We brought you your jacket! We brought you your new shoes! We laid the jewels before you! Your weapon is here. And your cane too," everyone said.

"Still," he said, "even if my uncle has given me back everything, I am not yet satisfied."

"What is making you unhappy?" they asked him.

"There's another woman who took some of my money and kept it."

"Who?"

"Well, it's a woman who lives in Piputhap! If she brings me my money, it'll be okay! If not, I'll take her with me!"

"We'll send someone up there. We'll send a man to bring her back. And if he doesn't bring her back, then take her with you! Make her fall from the top of a tree! Pull her off the bridge by her feet! But nephew, if she's brought to you, don't do anything," said one of the uncles, the one called The Youngest of the Five Brothers.

"Agreed: if she's brought to me, I won't kill her! I won't do a thing," he said. And he continued to cry! And his tears made a "clop-clop" sound as they hit the ground. And just like the dead man, when he was alive – when he would return from the fields [...] – he would head directly to the chest for a seat; now the shaman – when he returned from dancing outside – also headed directly to the chest for a seat [...]. Seeing that, the women of the house thought: Amazing! Our nephew, when he was alive, really had the habit of sitting right there! And if the shaman sits right there then it must be him! And they were sure of it. And their hearts were pained! And they gave him everything!

"From now on," [the deceased said], "I won't play any more tricks. I won't do a thing! I won't pull out a single tree! Now that I feel happy, now that I'm satisfied I won't cause stones to roll!" he told them.

As they went back to Libang, Motta and his uncles were, if possible, even more uneasy than when they had arrived! This was

because at Limkhim the deceased had settled accounts with all his girlfriends who had led him on with hopes of marriage. And what fury they'd seen him show against his maternal uncle! And yet the uncle had welcomed him with open arms, had tried to arrange a marriage for him! Five hundred rupees just because he had him do a little work! What a sum! Enough to pay for a house and fields! As they made their way home Motta and his uncles used these clues to begin figuring out just how much they would have to pay. They did so because the shaman, as he terminated the ritual, had told the deceased: "You're done here, there's nothing more to hope for. But in Libang they'll soon be calling for you. When they do, get going! Your uncle and fellow clansmen will give you everything you need!"

Whatever the case, one thing was certain: the deceased no longer had cause to return to Limkhim to torment the living: the account there had been settled.

Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein.

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