

# 'Spirit Possession' in the wake of the Nepalese Civil War: An exploratory study of stress and coping among conflict-affected Tamang villagers in Kavre District

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## ABSTRACT

A decade of conflict between Maoist rebels and Nepalese government security forces (1996-2006) left many civilians dead and many more victimized by various forms of violence and torture. There is a research gap concerning the conflict and post-conflict experiences of civilians, especially in many of Nepal's ethnic minority communities. This exploratory study was conducted with the Tamang, a Tibeto-Burman community with a distinct language, culture, and religion, in the Kavre District of Eastern Nepal. Local accounts of the conflict's impact were sought and recorded. A content analysis of interview transcripts was performed. As a consequence of the conflict, members of a Tamang community experienced extreme stress from having perpetual fear for their physical security, property, and family members. There is reportedly an increase in a type of trance state, understood in Tamang culture as 'Spirit possession', in the wake of the conflict. The adaptive coping function these trance states may serve is explored.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les affrontements qui, pendant une décennie (1996-2006), ont opposé les maoïstes aux forces de l'ordre du gouvernement népalais ont causé la mort de nombreux civils et ont fait en sorte que de nombreux autres ont été victimes de diverses formes de violence et de torture. Peu de recherches ont été menées sur les expériences qu'ont vécues les civils pendant et après le conflit, et encore moins dans les collectivités des minorités ethniques. Cette recherche exploratoire a été effectuée auprès de la communauté tamang du district de Kavre, dans l'est du Népal. D'origine tibéto-birmane, les Tamangs possèdent leur propre langue, leur propre culture et leur propre religion. Les chercheurs ont sondé la population afin de recueillir des observations sur les répercussions du conflit, puis ont procédé à l'analyse de la transcription des entrevues. À cause du conflit, les membres de la com-

munauté tamang ont vécu un stress démesuré qu'ils associent au fait d'avoir vécu dans la peur constante de voir leur sécurité physique, leurs avoir et les membres de leurs familles menacés. Au lendemain du conflit, on a rapporté une augmentation des cas d'un certain type d'état de transe que la culture tamang désigne comme une « possession par les esprits ». L'article explore le rôle que ces états de transe peuvent jouer pour permettre aux personnes de s'adapter et de composer avec le stress vécu.



A decade of conflict (1996 – 2006) between Maoist rebels and Nepalese government security forces claimed 16,000 lives (Luitel, Jordans, Sapkota, Tol, Kohrt, Thapa, & Sharma, 2013). Torture was practiced frequently by both sides, and participants in the present study were either victims of torture, or witnessed torture or other forms of brutality. Since the resolution of the Nepalese Civil War (1996 – 2006) in a peace accord, Nepal has been in a prolonged political transition. In the summer of 2013, Nepal Mental Health Foundation (NMFH) organized a conference where politicians from both the democratic and Maoist parties publically acknowledged, for the first time ever, the massive psychosocial impact of this conflict on the civilian population (Kathmandu Post). This acknowledgment came with a pledge to enshrine mental health rights within the constitution, as well as improve mental health services, which are in a dire state (Regmi, Pokharel, Ojha, Pradhan, & Chapagain, 2004).

The rights and services promised by the government of Nepal could lead to an increase in clinical and counselling services at an unprecedented rate. While this appears to be a promising development, a challenge is presented by the research gap concerning the conflict-related experiences of several of

Nepal's ethnic minority groups. It is not well known how members of these groups have coped with the conflict and also what community resources are already present that may be aiding a recovery process. Clinicians risk exacerbating tensions within these communities if they intervene without being appropriately informed about local idioms of distress and culturally-sanctioned forms of coping.

A related complication for intervention efforts is the widespread discrimination and stigmatization of mental illness in Nepal. Supernatural and religious approaches to understanding and treating mental illness are normative in many places, and somatization of psychological symptoms is also widespread (Regmi et al., 2004; Lauber, Christoph, & Rossler, 2007). Within this context, a response from government and NGO sectors focused on simply increasing the accessibility of resources is insufficient. The success of clinical work in conflict-affected regions will be largely based on 'cultural competence', which must be grounded in solid understandings of other cultural practices and epistemologies (Canino, Lewis-Fernandez, & Bravo, 1997; Van Duijl, Cardeña, & De Jong, 2005). Making intervention efforts more problematic, there are potential consequences of identifying individuals who may have mental disorders in communities that hold heavy stigmas against mental illness. This is another reason to acknowledge, understand, and support local forms of coping, even if they have supernatural or religious explanations and associated rituals.

Regardless of the research work required, properly informing intervention teams about the diverse cultural contexts in which conflict occurred in Nepal is an urgent priority. Firstly, as Kohrt and Harper (2008) have identified, there is an abundance of untreated trauma. Untreated trauma can lead to states of anxiety and depression, substance use disorders, and even subsequent violence by the victims (Flannery, 2001). Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that the people most affected by the conflict were minority groups far from the urban capital of Kathmandu where most of the health resources are located (Luitel et al., 2013). This can be seen as a basic issue of health equity, as minority groups in Nepal are already underserved by the healthcare system.

The present study was conducted with the Tamang, an ethnic minority group that to our best knowledge has not been the focus of any research regarding conflict-related experiences or coping behaviour. The dearth of research on this population is unfortunate considering that many of their communities are in the Kavre District, the site of several of the bloodiest battles during the conflict. The INSEC 'Conflict Victims Profile' states that in Kavre District, with a total pop-

ulation of 385,000, 125 people were killed by the Nepal Army and 154 were killed by Maoist forces (INSEC). This research focuses on the Tamang members of a mountainous village called Kharpachowk. According to these interviewees, many people were tortured, beaten, kidnapped, or interrogated.

Trance states are a phenomenon experienced in this Tamang community that appear linked to these potentially traumatizing events. 'Spirit possession', as this experience is locally conceived, involves an extended period of bodily shaking and may also entail obscene or uncharacteristic utterances. A further characteristic often witnessed is temporary personality change. Members of the Tamang community in Kharpachowk, including educators and a health worker, believe that 'spirit possession' is a way in which the deceased can return to speak through the living (Sharma, Jha, Joshi, & Lamsal, 2010).

Not exclusive to the Tamang, 'spirit possession' is reportedly on the rise in many rural areas of Nepal (Nicoletti, 2006) and in fact reports of it are relatively frequent across southern and Southeast Asia and in parts of Africa (Bourguignon, 1968; Bulatoa, 1982; van Duijl, Nijenhuis, Komproe, Gernaat, & de Jong, 2010). Jones (1976) underscores the fact that 'spirit possession' is culturally articulated in a diversity of ways, and hence it is important not to make assumptions about the applicability of findings across different cultural settings.

While this phenomenon may be articulated in different ways, there appears to be a common feature in the environments from which 'spirit possession' emerges. Perera (2001) claims that "reports of supernatural activity generally arise from places where violent actions are known to have taken place" (p. 197). A quantitative study conducted in Uganda showed that compared to a control group, those who had experienced 'spirit possession' reported having had higher levels of exposure to armed violence in a local civil conflict (van Duijl et al., 2010). Consistent with cultural perceptions of possession states as literal experiences, study participants did not connect these states to conflict exposure (van Duijl et al., 2010). Anthropologists and ethnopsychologists have noted this epistemological gap between Western researchers and study participants in 'spirit possession' studies, and have suggested that researchers use the terms 'possession trance' or 'trance state' to clarify when they are referring to this phenomenon from their perspective (Bourguignon, 1980). This convention is adopted in this paper.

The present investigation is qualitative in nature, and was guided by a broad research question for each of the study's three focal points: stress, coping, and intervention guidance. 1) During the civil war, how

badly were members of the Tamang community in Kharpachowk impacted? 2) Since the conflict ended, how have individuals in this community been coping with the severe stress they may have experienced? 3) What local customs and behaviours seem most pertinent for designing an effective psychosocial intervention?

'Spirit possession' emerged as a key theme of the interviews, and it is hypothesized that it is a response to extreme stress. While 'spirit possession' occurred before and during the conflict, it was reported far more often in the period after the conflict ended. This connection to potentially traumatizing events, as previously noted, was found in other post-conflict contexts such as Uganda. Speculation will be made about the way possession trance may serve to reduce stress, but more research in this area is definitely needed.

As a note, the concept of stress was used in place of trauma, both because it seemed a better match to local idioms of distress (see Chase, Welton-Mitchell, & Bhattarai, 2013) and because no psychometric testing was performed as part of this study. Furthermore, there is ongoing debate on whether trauma-related disorders such as PTSD are outcomes of political violence that are actually universal (Pedersen, 2006).

## Methods

### Design

The study was conducted over a 9 week period in Nepal. Data was collected in Kharpachowk, a remote region in the Kavre District of Nepal with approximately 300 households. The native language is Tamang, though a majority of villagers speak Nepali, and a minority also speak some English. All Tamang individuals practice a type of Buddhism and approx-



Figure 1: Image taken of Kharpachowk by Jesse Beatson

imately 95% of the residents in Kharpachowk are ethnically Tamang. The research team included a native speaker of Tamang and a Nepali speaker, in addition to the primary researcher, who was an English speaker with basic Nepali language skills.

The research was conducted in three stages: general literature review, data-collection, and data-analysis. Over a five week period, research team members familiarized themselves with various aspects of the Nepalese Civil War, coping theory, and Tamang culture. Subsequently, during the two week community entry phase, interviews were conducted to determine how villagers had experienced the conflict and how they were continuing to cope. The final two weeks of the study involved a form of "member checking", in which individuals familiar with Tamang communities and with possession trance states, but not villagers themselves, were consulted about preliminary findings. These 'consultant informants' were based at La-gankhel Mental Hospital and Tribhuvan University.

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### Data Collection

In-depth and semi-structured interviews of approximately an hour's length each were conducted with a cross-section of community members. A total of 16 key informants from the community were contacted, as well as 3 additional 'consultant informants' from outside the community, and all agreed to participate. Nearly 80% of the community interviewees were named on a list of community members provided by a Kharpachowk resident who met with the research team in Kathmandu before the study commenced. The remaining interviewees were contacted via a snowball sampling procedure. Interviewees were drawn from a wide array of social and occupational categories.

Interviews were conducted in the language requested by the interviewee and were often carried out in contexts where interviewees would feel relaxed - mainly in their own homes - with the aim of allowing them to feel comfortable and speak in their own terms. Interviews were audio recorded. Where interviews were not conducted in English, transcriptions were produced by research team members. Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that qualitative research often reaches a saturation point. For the present research, once major trends in the interviews began to recur and key themes had already emerged, the research team stopped adding new individuals to the sample.

### Data-Analysis

A content analysis of interview transcripts was performed. Transcripts were first read through briefly, and then re-read very carefully. The data was then coded in terms of overall relevance to Tamang expressions of stress and coping. Relevance was determined by looking at the frequency with which certain words or themes were repeated as well as the importance attributed to these words and themes by interviewees. For stress codes, the frequency of related words like 'fear' and 'tension' were tabulated. In addition, the extent to which conflict-related occurrences like 'interrogation', 'beatings' and 'torture' were mentioned was noted. For coping codes, we looked for themes that were common across interviews. We referred to Chase and colleagues (2013), in which coping strategies from the Brief COPE scale were adapted for working with a Bhutanese refugee population in Nepal. Some coping styles from this scale include: active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, religion, and seeking emotional support.

Analysis was concentrated around the central theme of possession trance. Research team members agreed that reporting on the theme of possession trance would make the most meaningful contribution to the literature on stress and coping; particularly in terms of the diverse ways that extreme stress can manifest and be managed. Further, possession trance is likely to be one of the least understood aspects of Tamang society, and more research on this is needed to facilitate the cross-cultural understanding necessary for effective psychosocial interventions.

### Results

As consequence of the conflict, locals experienced extreme stress from having perpetual fear for their physical security, property, and family members. Themes of violence were highly prominent in interviews, and all locals mentioned that during the conflict they had either experienced or witnessed at least one of the following acts: torture, extortion, murder, theft, or kidnapping. One interviewee described having stray bullets fired through the walls of his home while he and his family hid inside. Another showed a bullet that was still lodged inside his wounded leg. Yet another interviewee spoke of being blindfolded and taken away for months of interrogation, never once told where he was being held or for how long. Not surprisingly, the word 'fear' was mentioned several times, specifically in 8 of the 16 interviews with locals. As one informant told us:

"we lived in fear. We were trapped by both parties [Army and Maoists]. What to do? With whom to

share our tensions? We were happier after the peace accord. We can now die a natural death; nobody will come and kill us".

Describing the post-conflict scene, many interviewees pointed to the importance of *bombos* – Tamang shamans – who through elaborate rituals "chase away evil spirits". A commonly held local belief is that the souls of deceased persons, especially those who had not received proper burial, enter the bodies of affected individuals. Since there were many improper burials during the conflict period, the Tamang report that their community is haunted by restless spirits. When asked about specific coping strategies, several interviewees said that there is so need for them, for they believe that there are no "psychological symptoms" in the community after the conflict.

Physical manifestations of possession trance that were often mentioned included shaking, randomly speaking, and fainting. Sharma and colleagues (2010) found that possession trance in Nepal primarily affects school-aged girls. This was also reflected in Kharpachowk, as according to several informants, a large majority of Tamang individuals who have experienced possession trances are young girls. When queried about whether individuals who underwent possession trances experienced any discrimination, informants replied that anyone may be "caught by spirits" and possession is not caused by bad karma, bad luck, or moral failings. Consequently, individuals experiencing possession trances are given broad community support, in addition to the treatment they receive from a *bombo*.

This high level of acceptance for those "caught by spirits" contrasts with the way expressions of distress in psychological terms –sadness, hopelessness, depression, or anxiety – seem to be received. In Kharpachowk, these expressions are interpreted as signs of mental weakness. A person with a mental illness, according to one informant, "is considered a 'half-mind' and their social status deteriorates". Similarly, drinking alcohol to "solve tension" is not highly esteemed. In particular, women are discouraged from drinking. Women are also expected to perform their social and occupational roles with a positive attitude, implying a taboo against negative venting.

An academic from Tribhuvan University echoed Tamang interviewees, noting that villagers did not know the reason for the conflict; they were uncertain about its aims, as well as how long it was expected to last. As a result, Tamang individuals experienced "cumulative tensions", along with a "meaning vacuum". Medical informants from Lagankhel Mental Hospital, who had some experience working with members of the Tamang community in Kharpachowk, suggested



that possession trances are fairly common with this community. Consistent with what was noted earlier, medical informants also confirmed that these possession trances occur most frequently with young girls.

The doctors explained that an important component of possession trance is a 'dissociative spell' whereby individuals act out in uncharacteristic ways and have no memory of these behaviours. When questioned about why adolescent females are the most vulnerable to possession trances, the doctors suggested that this same population experiences the greatest number of social restrictions and hence has greater levels of "suppressed emotions". Comparatively, men have more coping options available to them, including substance use. Similar to possession trance, drinking induces a form of dissociation that may help men manage stress.

Nearly all community participants inquired whether research was being conducted for the purpose of intervention and indicated a desire for outside support to address conflict-related issues, including psychosocial counselling.

## Discussion

In the years following the conflict, reportedly there was a significant rise in possession trances occurring in Kharpachowk. This increase is seemingly connected to the severe stress induced by conflict-related events. Similar to other documented cases in Asia and Africa, in this region the state of possession trance induces individuals to shake uncontrollably and perform strange behaviours uncharacteristic of the individual (Nicoletti, 2006). Berceci (2005) describes how bodily 'shaking' might serve a positive healing function:

"Once the trauma is over, the body's nervous system is designed to literally shake out this deep muscular tension and help the body return to its normal state. This shaking or trembling...signals the brain to release the contraction and return to a normal state of relaxation"

Kleinman (1980) proposes that along with denial and somatization, dissociation is one of the three universal coping strategies found in all cultures. Medical staff at the Lagankhel Mental Hospital suggested that possession trance offers an opportunity to cope through inducing a "dissociative spell". These same informants suggested that an altered state of consciousness enables villagers to vent negative emotions while escaping any guilty feelings or social stigma, as the blame for these actions is attributed to the intruding spirit. Whether possession trance affords benefits through tension release or through dis-

sociation, or some combination of the two, it appears to be an adaptive and culturally-sanctioned form of coping.

Future studies should investigate whether the culturally-defined state of possession necessarily requires an individual to experience altered physiological or psychological states. This could be achieved by adding medical assessment to ethnographic observations. Gaining these insights could further academic understanding on how exactly possession trances help individuals cope. One option would be to measure levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, before and after a possession trance episode to see if stress levels are reduced. Similarly, future studies could go beyond 'stress' and attempt a study of trauma levels; for instance, investigating the applicability of the PTSD construct in conflict-affected Tamang communities. Performing quantitative studies with large sample sizes would also help determine whether or not gender differences are statistically significant.

## Conclusion

Kharpachowk is a community that has been seriously impacted by civil conflict. For several years it was plagued by a seemingly endless influx of armed combatants who were frequently violent with villagers, frequently using torture. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord (2006) between the government and Maoist rebels, the Tamang have made their best efforts to pick up the pieces and resume their former lives. Nevertheless, some still feel ongoing tensions that they attribute to conflict experiences.

Through in-depth interviews, it was learned that methods of coping with remaining tensions are limited by the stigma associated with psychological articulations of distress. Coping behaviour is even more circumscribed for women who face social taboos against drinking and venting negative emotions. In this context, possession trance appears to act as a kind of 'cultural free zone' where extreme stress can be processed in such a way that the individual avoids incurring social disapproval. This is not to say possession trances are consciously contrived to deal with stress or achieve personal goals. Instead, the mechanism for selection of this coping strategy likely operates subconsciously.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine the effectiveness of possession trance as a form of coping. Outside interventions are desired by community members, and are most likely required as one way to enhance community coping resources. Since there is now political will in Nepal to address post-conflict psychosocial distress, interventions seem a likely prospect over the next few years. The form that

these interventions take, if they are to be respectful and effective, must be grounded in a thorough understanding of Tamang culture. Otherwise, interventions run the risk of failing to meet the needs of this severely conflict-affected community, while also contributing to cross-cultural misunderstanding. Caution is especially warranted given the lack of firm empirical evidence for current Western classifications and treatments for possession trance. When investigating this phenomenon in various and diverse communities, learning how it is locally conceptualized will likely advance Western knowledge on this topic.



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