

# **PHOMBOS: A LOOK AT TRADITIONAL HEALERS AMONG THE JIRELS OF EASTERN NEPAL**

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## **Introduction**

The data presented in this paper were gathered from several Jirel *Phombos*. For comparative purposes, we also interviewed and videotaped the performances of two Sherpa *Jhankris* and one Tamang *Jhankri* living in the Jiri Valley. Our principal informant, however, was Jirel Nir Bahadur, a *Phombo* trained by Pusing Lama, a notable magico-religious practitioner and Lama who died in 1996. In addition to spending long hours conducting interviews and photographing his ritual paraphernalia, we also visited Nir Bahadur's house in Kalang Village (Ward No. 1) on several occasions to see him conduct curing rituals and videotape his performances. These visits often took place late at night, because that is when healing rituals are conducted, and involved traveling some 11 km on foot along treacherous and slippery leech infested paths.

## **The *Phombo* and his Profession**

The role of the *Phombos* in the clan rituals of the Jirels was discussed in detail in "Jirel Religion: A Preliminary Look at the Rites and Rituals of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume. The present paper should be considered an extension of that article. The literature on the *Jhankri* of Nepal and indigenous healers in general is extensive (see Bista 1980: 11, 59, 91, 97, 171; Miller 1997; Hitchcock and Jones 1976; Fournier 1976, see also the volume by Fürer-Haimendorf 1974; the special issue of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies: Anthropology, Health, and Development*, 1976 vol. 3, Rienhard 1976; and Subedi 1989, 1992; Subedi and Subedi 1993; and Subedi et al., 1995). However very little has been written about the Jirel *Phombos* (with the exception of the short article by Williams-Blangero, et al., [1995], which treats the subject indirectly).

*Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, The Jirel Issue (January 2000), 39-52.  
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The *Phombos* present an interesting ethnographic variation to the various accounts of Nepal's indigenous healers and spirit masters. For this reason, the discussion will focus on the *Phombos* themselves, how they choose their profession or receive their calling, their world-views or cosmology, and their traditional functions as healers and intermediaries between the natural and supernatural worlds.

The Jirels call the *Phombos* "priests," while others have called them "traditional faith healers" (Miller 1997:1). Neither of these definitions is adequate. While the *Phombos* perform certain priestly, or priest-like, functions, such as leading group rituals in clan *kul devata* worship, they also function very much like shamans in having a direct and personal relationship with the supernatural world. Specifically, they claim to have the ability to call spirits or gods, allow the supernatural beings to take possession of their bodies, and then use the powers of those beings in controlled and restrained ways. This personal linkage with the spirits/gods through the medium of his own body is the key to understanding the *Phombo*, his cosmology, his role in society, and his healing powers.

The term *Phombo* is reminiscent of the name of the Tibetan oracle-priests, the *Bon-po*, who also used drums, became possessed by gods, practiced exorcisms, and acted as healers (Eliade 1964: 177, 432-433). A Tibetan connection between Jirel *Phombos* and the Tibetan *Bon-po* is not unlikely, given the considerable diffusion of cultural elements from Tibet into the Jiri area. This, however, is speculative and pursuing this line of inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper.

### ***Phombo* the Jirel Shaman**

In the religion paper we referred to the *Phombo* as a shaman. The term "shaman" is thought by some to derive from the word *saman*, or *vaman* (Laufer 1917), used by the Tungus-speaking people of Siberia to refer to a particular type of magico-religious specialist, a part-time practitioner, whose services are sought during times of personal or social crisis. It must be noted, however, that not everyone agrees on this derivation (see Kehoe 1995 for a discussion; see also Voight 1984). The shaman, more popularly known as a "medicine man," is adept at personally communicating with the spiritual world. These practitioners, who play drums, enter into trances, and become possessed with spirits, often serve as healers, diviners, and guardians of the psychic equilibrium of their communities.

In his book, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, Lewis (1971:55) maintains that the control that the practitioner exercises over the spirits incarnated in his body is the essential characteristic of shamanism. Although spirit possession does not necessarily characterize

all shamanistic traditions (cf. Sidky 1999, 1994), this generalization does hold true for the Jirel practitioners. The contact between the *Phombos* and the supernatural world is not only a personal one, but it is as well a controlled one, for the *Phombo* is able to restrain and regulate the foreign and potentially dangerous entities which have taken possession of him. Given these characteristics, the *Phombo* may be considered to be a shaman in the traditional anthropological sense of the term (cf. Miller 1997: 9; Reinhard 1976:16; Sidky 1999).

Shamans are not to be confused with priests, even though they may perform priest-like functions. For example, the *Phombos* did perform such functions, presiding over all rituals—including funerals, marriages, and other life-cycle observances. However, after the Jirels adopted Buddhism, the performance of funeral rites, cremation and last rites (called *ghewa*), held 40 days after the funeral was taken over by the Lamas. Still *Phombos* have retained their other priestly duties.

Following a typical anthropological definition "a priest is usually part of a larger religious establishment, is more concerned with the conduct of group ritual and derives his relation with supernatural powers by virtue of his office within [an ecclesiastical establishment]. The shaman, to the contrary, is usually an individual practitioner, and his contact with the supernatural world is personal and immediate" (Murphy 1989: 203).

Two important points may be made here: first, a priest is confined and constrained by a formal hierarchical organization; and second, he derives his authority from the office he occupies within that hierarchy. The *Phombo* is free from such constraints. So far as we were able to discern, *Phombos* lack a hierarchical organization, aside from a master/disciple relationship, which may last for brief intervals when a *Phombo* accepts as his guru (spiritual guide) a practitioner who possesses some special knowledge. Others deny that they have any gurus at all, claiming that their knowledge is obtained directly from their helping spirits. Thus, even that master/disciple relationship is absent in some cases.

### ***Phombos* and Lamas**

Interestingly, Jirel Lamas have drawn on some of the practices and beliefs of the *Phombos*. Whether this is a unique syncretism, or whether it reflects inherent shamanistic elements in Tibetan Lamaism, the existence of which has been suggested by Eliade (1964: 433-435), is unclear. One of the most famous Jirel Lamas, Pusing Lama (d. 1996) was at first a *Phombo*, but later in his career underwent training to become a Buddhist priest. This was confirmed to us by his son, who is now himself a practicing Lama and a healer. It is said that Pusing Lama incorporated elements of both traditions

in his professional repertoire (cf. Williams-Blangero et al., 1995). Moreover, as noted in the paper "Jirel Religion: A Preliminary Look at the Rites and Rituals of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume, we encountered at least one practicing *Phombo* who was personally trained by Pusing Lama, after the latter himself had abandoned his old profession.

Some Jirel Lamas do act as healers uttering mantras (incantations), and blowing blessings, referred to as *phukphak*, and prescribing herbal medicines. One Jirel Lama, the son of the late Pusing Lama also dispenses charms, called *buti*, (a small packet containing magical substances worn around the patient's neck), and owns an elaborate assemblage of ritual paraphernalia and magical substances for this purpose. These are identical to those that are used by Jirel *Phombos* as ingredients to be placed inside the *buti*: They include human bones, wolf bones (*phara*), bear claws (*thome*), parts of a musk deer (*kasturi*), tiger skulls (*chen*), rhino bones (*gaida*), mongoose bodies (*neuri-musa*), python skin (*rulbo*), dried wasps (*yuwa*), pieces of rope with which someone committed suicide (Jirel term unknown), grasshopper cocoons (*abiganga*), and a yeti skull (*yeti*).

One of the differences between the Lama's *buti* and that of the *Phombo*'s, is that the former wraps the magical ingredients in paper rubbings taken from carved wooden blocks containing Buddhist texts, while the *Phombos* do not. Moreover, it should be noted that the list of items given here are perhaps not representative of all Jirel Lamas, as it was obtained from the son of Pusing Lama, who was a *Phombo* of great renown, and passed on much of his knowledge to his son.

In comparing the collection of magical substances owned by the Lamas with those carried by the *Phombos*, there is one notable item missing from the list given above. This item is found among the medicines of the *Phombo*, and is the skull of *Ri Phombo*, or "forest *Phombo*," called "*Ban Jhankri*" in Nepali. These are beings that are said to live in the forest, steal children and train them to become *Phombos* (cf. Miller 1997:21). Our *Phombo* informant said that he places scrapings of the magically potent skull inside the *butis*, which he makes for his patients who are especially in danger of magical assault.

A major distinction between the Lama and the *Phombo* is that, unlike the latter, the Lama does not enter into a trance or undergo spirit possession. Lamas acquire their position through study and usually teach the profession to their sons. A person becomes a *Phombo*, on the other hand, when a god, goddess, or spirit of an ancestor enters into his body compelling him to take up the profession. The physical manifestation of such spirit possession is the characteristic shivering or trembling. The shivering is at first uncontrollable but the *Phombo* eventually learns to

bring this trembling under control. On several occasions, while observing *Phombo* performances, we noted certain individuals in the audience shivering uncontrollably, their condition being induced by the pounding of the drum and the presence of the spirits beckoned by the *Phombo*. Their shaking was so unmanageable that they were unable to stand or walk. Later we found that these were students studying for the profession, but as yet had not mastered the ability to control the shaking and shivering characteristic of spirit possession.

When a person is "called" for the profession, the shivering reoccurs and may be accompanied by a major psychological crisis that can last for some time. The *Phombo* from the Serba clan noted that it was the spirit of his grandfather, himself a practitioner of great renown, that first entered into his body and thus caused his shivering. When this happened, he said, "I was senseless and like a madman. I also lost my power of speech. After five years I could speak again, and realized that I was to become a *Phombo*. I then went to Pusing Lama, offered him much *chang*, and asked him to teach me the mantras and how to use the drum and the bell belts."

Once a possessed individual is able to control the shivering, he gains divine powers and can assume the role of a *Phombo*. Such control is achieved either as a result of the tutelage of the spirits or gods, or more frequently through instructions from an existing practitioner.

The spirit intrusion that transforms a person into a *Phombo* is different from demonic possession, which is attributed to the action of noxious and pathogenic supernatural entities. Also, if one *Phombo* sends a god or spirit to enter the body of another *Phombo*, which happens during periodic psychic battles between practitioners, the latter will become ill and may even die, unless he takes countermeasures.

One informant described his subjective impressions when possessed: "this state is like a dream. We can see what is good and what is bad; we can see gods, goddesses, the spirits of our ancestors, and demons. We feel brave and strong and sense that we can defeat anyone." While possessed, the *Phombos* will speak for the spirits inside them. They say that they are aware of what people say and ask of them, but do not always hear everything.

One of the "miracles" that these practitioners sometime perform while "possessed" is to drink flaming mustard oil in small metal cups (*dupati*). If they were to do this while in a normal state, they claim, it will severely burn their mouths and throats. The first time a *Phombo* drinks *dupati* is when his teacher is convinced that he has mastered the spirits and has learned all the necessary mantras and rituals. As a test of his disciple's powers, the teacher asks the student to drink seven cups of burning oil. If

the student succeeds without being burned, he then becomes a professional practitioner.

Each *Phombo* has his own particular gods and goddesses, whom he specially reveres. For example, the *Phombo* of the Serba clan worships the goddess *Papachernji*, in addition to his own clan god, *Chyomu* (see Sidky et al., "Jirel Religion: A Preliminary Look at the Rites and Rituals of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume). Furthermore, all *Phombos* worship *Mahadi* (*Mahadev*, Lord Shiva) and the goddess *Bhagabati*. One *Phombo* explained this as follows: "The Mahadi was himself a *Phombo*, the original one, and in the past he used to perform the services of the *Phombo* for everyone. It was Mahadi who also created the *Ri Phombo*, or *Ban Jhankri*, as his first disciple and to cure the God when he himself became ill. But now, in this present age, the gods have turned into stone statues and so their spirits must now enter into the body of humans. What *Mahadi* used to do, is now done by humans, whose bodies become the receptacle for the spirit of the god. As for *Bhagabati*, she is a powerful goddess and she sometimes appears in our dreams and instructs us to perform certain tasks. If she happens to enter into our body when we are reciting our mantras, we gain divine power and become especially powerful. When she is in our body she will speak with her own voice."

### The Functions of the Phombo

The *Phombo* treads where neither doctor nor priest are able to do so. The priest utters prayers and makes offerings to supernatural beings, the doctor administers pills, but the *Phombo* sets foot into the invisible world, the juncture between the realm of humans and the world of the spirits (gods, goddesses, ghosts, nature spirits, demons), from whence emanate unexpected and uncontrolled intrusions into the lives of people, resulting in calamities, sickness, and disharmony. The *Phombo's* task is to control and divert those intrusions (cf. Miller 1997: 261).

A wide array of spirits, evil agencies, and individuals with the power to cause harm by magical means, are thought to intrude into the lives of people, wrecking havoc and misfortunes. One of these evil agencies are the *boksi* who are evil women who cause sickness by using invisible powers. One *Phombo* described the *boksi* as follows: "These are living women. They are the opposite of the *Phombos*. This is because when anyone suffers from evil spirits the *Phombo* drives those spirits away. But the *boksi* makes the evil powers even stronger and makes them enter into the body of people. When such women are dissatisfied with anyone they will send an evil spirit into them. Sometimes the victims become dumb, some experience terrible headaches, others vomit blood and die. When the *boksi*

become envious, their powers become operative. Often in a village there are more *boksi* than there are *Phombos*. These *boksi* are malicious, noxious, and evil creatures. They conduct ceremonies late at night, place candles on their heads and go to special temples to worship at midnight and they sacrifice their husbands like goats."

There are many that believe in the maleficent powers of these *boksi*. The following incident, which took place in Jire while we were conducting fieldwork there, is revealing. Late one rainy afternoon in June, 1999, a Sherpa man came walking up to the Jiri police post. He was drenched and covered in blood and carried the severed head of an old woman in one hand, and in the other carried a large *Khukuri* (the curved Gurkha Nepali knife). He had come to the police to surrender. Upon seeing this horrific scene, the poor fellow on duty was so shaken that he was unable to put a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle in order to stop the knife-wielding man. Finally, one of the officers had to intervene, grabbing the rifle, loading it, and then capturing the Sherpa man.

In the investigation that followed, it was revealed that the man believed that the old woman was a *boksi* using her magic to de-stabilize his mind. He had also wanted to kill the old woman's daughter, whom he also suspected of doing evil magic; but he had been unable to locate her. Instead, he killed her goat that was tied outside her door.

The *boksi* are the enemies of the *Phombos*. They will strike out, it is said, so *Phombos* must protect themselves with mantras. Like the witch, in the ethnographic literature, the *boksi* do not actually exist; they are merely a figure of belief and myth (see Sidky 1997), but the belief functions to explain various misfortunes. By blaming conflicts and problems, such as psychosomatic illnesses due to interpersonal conflicts, on these imaginary noxious figures, the *Phombo* depersonalizes and diffuses them. All of the *Phombos* we spoke to claim that they know the identities of the *boksi* living in their villages; but none would point one out, stating that identifying these agents of evil would lead to retaliations and would cause social disharmony.

Another genus of evil entity, with which the *Phombo* must contend, is the *Bir Masan*. These creatures are demons. *Bir Masan* frequent cremation grounds and riverbanks, sometimes taking on the shape of horses, pigs, or humans who lack faces (called *Murkutta* in the latter form). If a person comes across such beings late at night he will be attacked. Some *boksi* enter into compacts with *Bir Masan* and offer them a special *puja* in return for supernatural powers; and some evil *Jhankris* may also have a special *puja* with a *Bir Masan*, offering them sacrifice. Similarly, in return, they obtain additional supernatural powers.

The *Bir Masan* are said to be exceptionally dangerous evil spirits. They roam at night through the villages, galloping on horses. They throw stones at people's houses and make strange sounds, as if someone were walking around the house. There are numerous types of *Bir Masans*, and they often vary in color. Some are black—while others are green. When one of these creatures encounters a person face-to-face, they will engulf him. The victim will feel unbearable pain in his body, vomit blood, and will die if not treated immediately. The Jirels believe that if a *Bir Masan* attacks from a long distance, the victim will become weak, lose his appetite, and eventually die.

One informant told us of how such supernatural assaults can occur: "when we go to the forest all of a sudden something hurts, or you feel as if a thing has entered your body that is how you know that a spirit has attacked you. Modern doctors cannot cure you of these afflictions. In fact, the doctor's medicine, will make your condition worse. So we go to the *Phombo*. He then tells us the cause of our sickness and what to do about it." A *Phombo* can kill a *Bir Masan* by using two tiger bones, which represent the "right hand of Kali," or a magical spear, called a *barsa* (see below).

The restless ghosts of individuals who were not given proper burial comprises another type of harmful supernatural beings, called *Pichas*, *Chorla*, and *Bayu*, depending on their caste. They are restless, they haunt houses, and enter into peoples' bodies causing unbearable heart pain. This is an illness that physicians are unable to cure. Only *Phombos* can see these beings, and only after midnight, because that is when evil spirits become active. This is why *Phombos* always perform their healing rituals at night. To cure afflicted people, the *Phombo* makes offerings to the gods and inquires why the ghosts are causing trouble and asks what will appease them. The *Phombo* then directs the patient to perform the appropriate procedures, such as offering a sacrifice.

Finally, other sources of calamity and disease are the gods and goddesses themselves. Offending *Loo* or *Naya* (see Sidky et al., "Jirel Religion: A Preliminary Look at the Rites and Rituals of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume), or any one of the multitudes of deities can lead to illness or death. Here again, people resort to the aid of the *Phombo*, who must determine which god or goddess was offended, why, and how the situation is to be rectified. Most often the gods will demand a sacrifice before they can be placated.

As one practitioner said, "*Phombos* are like doctors, we treat people who are suffering from spirits, in other words, those who are stricken with

illnesses that are of a supernatural origin. We do it with mantras, herbal medicine, and the help of our own spirits."

The Jirel tell of a most famous *Phombo*, Bikasim, who could do amazing things, which, according to our informants, no other *Phombo* was able to accomplish. The following is a description of one of his encounters with a *boksi*, related to us by an elderly informant. The account provides interesting insights into the operational procedures of the *Phombos*. It was said that a *boksi* had attacked a small child, damaging his liver. The child's parents took the little boy to a famous *Jhankri* (Nepali faith healer or shaman). The *boksi* and the *Jhankri* then entered into a psychic battle using mantras. The *Jhankri* failed and was killed by the *boksi*. Then the boy's parents went to a second *Jhankri*. He also failed and died for his efforts. Finally the parents sought out Bikasim. His method of diagnosis was to feel the boy's pulse, rather than asking him questions. By this means he immediately determined the identity of the *boksi*. He used holy water and turmeric as part of his cure, and his mantras were so powerful that the *boksi* died and the boy was saved. It is said that this Bikasim could make people faint with just a whistle. "There are Jirel *Phombos* nowadays," our informant told us, "but never has there been one like Bikasim."

This account also reveals that the *Phombo* relies heavily on his reputation for the successful cures he has accomplished in the past. This reputation gives him legitimacy and authority.

### The *Phombo's* Healing Performance

The *Phombo* claims to have a direct and personal relationship with the supernatural world. He compels the noxious and pathogenic supernatural entities which afflict the patient to identify themselves, for he is the master of spirits, and unlike his patient, is not mastered by these evil agencies (cf. Miller 1997:261).

We must view the role of the *Phombo* in terms of how sickness is conceptualized. In Jiri, as elsewhere in the hills of Nepal, poverty, absence of basic modern medical infrastructure, isolation, and lack of education have impeded the diffusion of the Western scientific viewpoint about illness and disease. Illness and misfortune are presumed to be due to the intrusion of spirits and demons (see Tausig et al., "Mental Illness in Jiri, Nepal," in this volume). The way to remedy such illnesses is therefore to seek out the services of men who tremble, men who are the master of spirits, the *Phombos*.

In order to make contact with the spirit world, the *Phombo* employs a variety of ritual objects and procedures. The *nga* (*dhyangro* in Nepali) is a

double-headed drum with a single handle carved with images of various gods. This drum, which is beaten with a stick, called a *nagading*, has been ritually dedicated to the gods and goddesses. Our informants noted that the drum is used to communicate with the supernatural entities and the *Phombo* conveys the divine words to the people while pounding the instrument. Chimes (*jhaurta*), which resemble small cymbals, are used to let the spirits know that the *Phombo* is present. He also possesses a *barsa*, or magical spear. This spear must be made from the metal of a *Khukuri* knife (*thue* in Jirel) and a sickle (*hashiya*) obtained from a cremation ground, where normally the property of a dead person is buried after his body is cremated. It is thought that this metal, which has been obtained from holy ground, possesses magical properties. This is the weapon used to kill the *Bir Masan*, who often frequent cremation grounds. Two different bladed weapons, called *kurmi* and *burba* (*phurba* in Nepali) are used as the main defense against the evil spirits and supernatural attacks by other *Phombos*. Finally, the *Phombo* wears beads, called *tehenga*, and a belt of bells. When the *Phombo* is shivering, the bells ring constantly and are said to ward off evil spirits.

The healing ceremony always takes place late at night and can last anywhere from a few hours to the entire night. It takes place inside the *Phombo's* house. The atmosphere is highly charged, with the patient's family and neighbors assembled together in one room demonstrating their concern for the sick individual. The *Phombo's* assistant heats the drum over a central hearth to make the skin taut, while the *Phombo* himself dons his ritual apparel. This comprises a long pleated white shirt, about ankle length, along with beads, bells, and a head-dress, which consists of five sections, each bearing the image of a Buddhist deity. In contrast the *Jhankri* head-dresses are usually made up of porcupine quills or peacock feathers held in a cloth band. The *Phombo* then lights incense, places his weapons on the ground, and sets up an altar, which includes human bones, crystals, statues of gods and goddess, an offering of uncooked rice, a container of *chang*, deer horns, and a special vessel called a *bumbo*. The *bumbo* is a receptacle which contains holy water and flowers. According to our informant, the ritual use of *bumbo* is unique to the *Phombo's* repertoire, and does not appear in the practices of Nepali *Jhankris*.

Then the *Phombo* offers *chang* to the gods and begins to pound his drum and prays to the clan god, *Chyomu*, and his own god, *Papachernji*, as well as invoking the spirits of the ancestors for help, while chanting in a high-pitched voice. His assistant plays the chimes. All the while the *Phombo* pounds his drum with an increasing tempo. He begins to shiver and tremble violently, making the bells he wears ring loudly. Now in a deep trance-like

state, and sweating profusely, the *Phombo* is believed to be possessed by supernatural beings, ancestral spirits, or particular deities. Once possessed, he begins to shake and shiver even more violently, this being the tangible manifestation that the gods or spirits have entered into his body. The *Phombo* incarnates the spirits and deities, but is also able to control and restrain them. He then communicates with these gods, who may speak through him, and compels the noxious spirits to reveal their identity and the reasons why they are afflicting the patient.

The *Phombo* then rises up and starts to dance still beating his drum and moving around the room in a counter-clockwise fashion. Usually after about an hour of chanting and beating, with periodic breaks to take a sip of *chang* and a mouthful of chewing tobacco, he sits down by the altar and asks that the patient be brought next to him. He then relates to the patient the cause of his or her troubles. (In one case we observed, the patient was told that she had neglected to offer a sacrifice she had promised to make at one of the shrines. After this he instructed the patient to fulfill her obligation to the gods.) Then the *Phombo* makes the patient drink some of the holy water from the *bumbo*, which he then places upon his own head. Standing up, he again dances around the room for another hour or so, chanting all the while, balancing the vessel on his head. Using mantras he magically ensures that the *bumbo* does not fall off as he dances. He then magically transfers the essence of the supernatural cause into this vessel, and thus effects the cure.

One common feature of the healing sessions that we were able to observe, was that often the patients emerged from the experience emotionally and psychologically benefited. Even if not physically cured, although such miraculous cures have been known to take place, the patients seem to be at least psychologically in a better state to fight whatever ails them.

### ***Phombos* and Modern Doctors**

The *Phombos* call themselves "doctors," and we were curious to find out their attitudes towards modern medicine. One practitioner explained his views: "When a patient comes to me I will conduct *jokhana herne mo tachyate*, a spiritual diagnosis. Usually the illness is caused by evil spirits or the harmful magic of others. It may produce heartburn, headaches, itching all over the body, dizziness, tingling sensations on the four limbs, light or heavy headedness, and nightmares involving deceased people. If my diagnosis reveals a supernatural cause, then I will proceed with treatment. If not, I will refer the patient to a doctor. Also, if a bodily ailment fails to respond to my repeated attempts to cure it, I will send the patient to a physician. Problems that we cannot cure are those that involve physical

damage to the body, such as broken legs, severed limbs and cuts. These patients must seek modern medical treatment."

### **Jirel Views Regarding the *Phombos***

Although many Jirels resort to the *Phombos*, they also rely upon the limited modern medical facilities available to them. A few individuals, however, are a bit skeptical about the healing abilities of the *Phombos*. Two elderly informants remarked: "You get sick. You go to the *Phombo*. He tells you a *boksi* made you sick, or a ghost, or a *Bir Masan*. This is what the *Phombo* tells us. We don't see these things. We've never seen a *boksi*, or a ghost, or a *Bir Masan*. We don't believe or trust them [the *Phombos*]. Besides, you can never tell if you are cured or not. They make money from their services, and they ask for rice, chickens, *raksi* [a distilled alcoholic drink]. We must give them the best food. The sick person may be almost dead, but they want the best food, otherwise they get mad."

Miller (1997: 264), noted that sometimes skepticism may be expressed to anthropologists during interviews, but in practice this incredulity melts away, and the *Phombo* (or *Jhankri*) is called upon often, because in the hills of Nepal, he is the people's doctor.

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