

Witchcraft in Nepal: A *Tragedy to Women*

Chhatra Mani Sharma

Agricultural University of Norway

Noragric, P.O.Box 5001

N-1432, Ås

Norway.

1. Introduction

Witchcraft is defined on the basis of the act of witches by Evans-Pritchard (1937) as “A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act”. He also described that witches do not know their being a witch until and unless they are accused of being the witch. The difference is that witches in Nepal are supposed to be known their magic power unlike mentioned by Evans.

Meaning of the witchcraft has been explained as “an innate quality, an evolutionary personal trait, deriving from a physiological peculiarity which can be discovered by autopsy” by Thomas (1971:41). He further explains that the witch exercise is malevolent power by accult means, and needs no words, rite, spell or potion. His is a purely psychic act. Eriksen (2001: 217) mentions that “unlike magic, which involves medicines and magical formulas, witchcraft is a purely spiritual, generally involuntary activity: the witchcraft power frequently commits its act while the carrier (the witch) is asleep”.

Witchcraft is a matter of concern to the civilization of people. It generally gives the glimpses of the society and helps to measure the degree of civilization, sometimes. In the context of Nepal, though witchcraft is taken as an undesirable and harmful phenomenon for the society, it still exists in some of the rural areas. Some cases of witchcrafts can be read in the newspapers in those areas and it is regarded as the destructive magical activity of women in the society. Mayer (1954: 56) also mentioned that adult women are very often charged for being a witch (based on the myth definition).

Sometimes innocent people are blamed to be witches and they are treated very badly by the whole society (some cases are described in the later part of this paper). Mostly women are baselessly doubted as the witches. The witches are called ‘**Boksi**^[1]’ in Nepali language. There is also existence of some male magicians called ‘**Jhankris**^[2]’ (singular- Jhankri) in the society who are regarded as witch-doctors and they point out the witches. Jhankris can blame any woman as being a witch. If once blamed, it is very difficult to get rid of this charge. Rest of the women in the village also equally participate in blaming the witch after indication by the Jhankri. Even children start to

tease the blamed women when they meet her and frighten to go near her. Therefore, this tradition is really a big tragedy to women.

It is believed that this tradition had given legal status before (in nineteenth century, Rana regime). In Rana regime there was a strong belief on the existence of the witchcraft. It might be due to a view to maintain some discipline on that affair. It was considered legal and there was a severe punishment to those women who were proved to be witches (based on a conversation to an old man).

Witches are supposed to have some kind of magical powers and they tend to give trouble some to the local people. It is

believed that magical power of the witches is responsible for the illness of the local people. Then local people become so excited against the witches that they start to give mental and physical torture to the women who are pointed out as the witches. Jhankris are consulted to cure of different kind of diseases in the society. Though these Jhankris do not provide ample evidences against the witches, people become so blind and believe to the Jhankri that they can not think other options beside giving torture to these blamed witches. Therefore, the witchcraft is one of the worst tragic to women in the society of Nepal.

Objective of the study:

The main objective of this paper is to bring out some issues regarding the witchcraft in Nepal and its impact in the society, especially to women. This paper also tends to point out some of the causes against such tradition. Finally, some recommendations are also mentioned to mitigate such problems. In addition, the paper also tries to compare the witchcraft in Nepalese society to the other societies in the world.

Justification:

I think witchcraft is one of the main problems for women in the developing countries like Nepal where males are dominant. Such issues can very often be read in newspapers that are of great interest to the people. Witchcraft also leaves a bad imprint in the mind of small children which is not good for their mental health. This topic has been chosen for the term paper to address such problems.

Limitation of the study:

There are very limited studies related to the witchcraft in Nepal. This paper has been written on the basis of writer's own experiences and some news from the local national newspapers. Comparisons of the witchcraft among different places have been done with the help of literatures on witchcraft focussing on the other parts of the world (specially Africa).

2. What is Witchcraft?

Witchcraft is already defined in the introduction part of the paper as a psychic act. According to the local indigenous knowledge, it is considered that witchcraft is a phenomenon of magicians by which they tend to give troubles to other people. This concept is not compatible to the definition given in the texts. In Nepal women are blamed to be witches.

During night, they are supposed to bewitch the people. The people feel suffocation during the night which is supposed to be the attack of the witches. In most of the instances, the victim finds himself full of sweat when he suddenly wakes up; and fears a lot. This process is called **Aithan**^[3] in local language. People tell the next morning that they were attacked by a witch the last night. Some times people show some blue patches on their skin and consider these patches as the witch bites. These patches are believed to be the blood sucking sites of witches. Therefore, witches are also blamed for blood sucking from the people during night when they are sleeping.

It is believed that the process of witchcraft passes on from one generation to the other, but not necessarily to the direct descendants. Teacher may belong to the different family or cast. Any way, it is the matter of continuation of witchcraft from one generation to the other.

I remember one of the instances when a woman was charged for being a witch in my village (Karahiya-1, Rupandehi, about 300 km southwest from the capital city Kathmandu):

A man around 30 started to behave as a mad man for some days. He was a man of good behaviours, as per I know. Villager's mind stroke towards his changed behaviour and they started to think of the witches as the main cause. They decided to invite a Jhankri for his cure. Jhankri came and started his process by remembering the name of his god. He tied the victim with a leather cord and started to give torture to him by inserting the fingers in both the ears. Blood came from the ears of the victim. Interpreter of the Jhankri told that the blood was coming from the body of the witch, not from the victim. He also mentioned that the witch would be suffered from this torture but not the victim. All villagers believed him. Then villagers insisted the Jhankri to detect the witch and to

tell in front of them. Jhankri then charged a woman as being the witch. He also claimed that this woman was responsible for the mad behaviour of the victim. The woman accused for being the witch was close neighbour of the victim. When she knew that she was charged for being the witch, she started to cry and weep in her house. People said that she was crying and weeping due to the torture given by the Jhankri through the victim. Children also flew to the same house to see her (to see the Boksi).

People also wanted to make a symbol in face of the witch. For this, the victim should have been touched with a red and hot iron rod. If the red hot rod were touched to the body of the victim, it would automatically go to the witch, according to the belief. But the Jhankri did not perform this phenomenon at that time. I did not know the cause for his rejection because I was a child at that time. I did not get the chance to see if the marks given to the victim goes to the witch or not.

Family of the victim waited for many days to see the effect of Jhankri. There was no progress in the condition of the victim. The victim was finally suffered from some more wounds in his ears. Finally, they took him to the hospital.

In this way a woman was baselessly charged for being a witch. The local people treated her in an improper way after that event. She could communicate to very less people in the village and remained inside the house most of the times. Now, her condition not so bad but people still feel uneasy to talk to her.

3. Where does it Situate?

Generally, when we think of anything or any object, we try to create its picture in the mind. We also want to know the shape and size of this thing. Similarly, human mind (at least mine) is very curious about the shape and size of witches, if any? In Nepalese society witches have given no special shape or size. But children are told that it has a pair of large tusks in the corners of the mouth; it has long, black and uncombed hair; therefore it looks very dangerous. Witches are believed to be normal women with a very high magic power who can change their appearance at the time of attack. All these shapes are imaginary.

4. Who Blame Whom?

There is a special procedure to identify the witch. There are some male magicians who are believed to be more powerful than witches. These people are called Jhankris as already mentioned in this paper. People consult Jhankris to cure of the disease as already mentioned. Therefore, Jhankris may be considered as traditional non-medical doctors.

Then Jhankris make some special preparation to detect the cause of the disease. They take some grains of lentils or rice and divide it into many groups. They shift grains from one group to another in their own way that is difficult to understand by the local people. In this way they finally declare the cause of that particular disease. They may claim on either witches or something else.

If Jhankris blame on witches, they demand some special things to cure the victim. According to the Jhankris, these demands are based on the demand of the witches. Actually, it is believed that all these demands are from the side of witches. Sometimes, cocks with alcohol, some clothes, money or some other general things are demanded to cure the disease. Local people believe that they are cured of the diseases if all the demands of witches are fulfilled.

Sometimes local people become so irritated and excited that they force Jhankris to point out the responsible witch (as already mentioned in the paper). Jhankris then point out one of the women as a witch. Then local people blindly support this claim and start to give torture to the woman who is accused of being the witch. Some special news (published in local and national newspapers) about the tortures given to the women are also described in this paper.

The blaming of witchcraft by local people have also deviated the mind of Parliamentarian. National Assembly Chairman has given directives to Ministries concerned to present details relating to the manhandling and insulting of local women at Simardahi of Mahottari district on allegations of being witches, to take action against the guilty as early as possible and see it to that such incidents do not recur in future (The Kathmandu Post, Aug 17, 2000).

5. Who are Jhankris?

The witch-doctor is a person who seeks to doctor and cure those who are believed to have been bewitched. He is honoured and works in public, whereas the witch is supposed to work in secret and is greatly feared (Geoffrey Parrinder 1970:15, cited from Hallen and Sodipo, 1997: 86). In Nepalese society Jhankris are regarded as the witch-doctors or faith healers who are also magicians and they are generally men. Sometimes, they are also known as Lama (by local people).

It is believed that some special Gods take small children (boys) to their caves and they teach them 'Jhankri Bidhya' [\[4\]](#).

When Jhankris start their Jhankri Bidhya, first of all they remember their teacher, the God. Then they start to vibrate their whole body (it is believed that the process is automatic) that remains until they finish the task. At this time they also use one special musical instrument called **Damphu**^[5] that creates a special sound. Jhankris then spread grains of lentils or rice around the area. It is believed that this area is safe and witches can not enter into this area during the process. Other people are not allowed to go out and come in during the process without special permission of the Jhankri. At this time it is believed that the Jhankri also tells the fate of people if people make a request to him. Generally, one special assistant is there to ask the questions and curiosities of local people to Jhankri. It is also believed that the Jhankri can communicate to the witch and can tell all of her demands, if any. It is supposed that witches give trouble to the people by bonding them magically if,

- the person is her enemy, or
- they are not satisfied with the behaviour of the local people, or
- they demand something from the local people.

It is believed that Jhankri can easily identify the demands of witches. These demands are then explained in front of the family of the victim. If those demands are fulfilled, the victim will be cured automatically. It is supposed that the witch releases her magic bond with the victim after fulfilling her demand.

I have been in contact with a Jhankri for a long time. He still works in the same traditional way and cures the bewitched people. He told me about his life. He also told me how he became Jhankri:

A long time before when he was a child, he was picked up by an unknown god. The god took him to an unknown place (inside a cave). He had been taught Jhankri Bidhya for many days. He was fed with many unusual food materials at that time, e.g., caterpillar pickle. He said that the food was delicious at that time. But he does not like it anymore now. He learnt the Jhankri Bidhya very easily and he faced no difficulties at that time. After learning the Bidhya he was returned in the same place from where he was picked away. Nowadays, he remembers the name of the god at first before starting the process.

6. Status of Witchcraft in Nepal

At present, the existence of witchcraft is not much believed by educated people. But its existence can not be discarded, specially in the remote areas where the literacy rate is very low. When I tried

to find out the news about witchcraft in one of the national daily newspaper called 'The Kathmandu Post', I found 49 hits (15 October, 2001) from the newspapers of one-year duration. Such a huge number of news ultimately leads towards the existence of witchcraft, I think. Some cases of witchcraft blaming are also described in this paper on the basis of newspapers.

7. Some Cases of Witchcraft Blaming in Nepal

In this paper, four cases are included as the examples of the witchcraft blaming in Nepal. These cases are extracted from the local newspapers of Nepal.

In the first case, (The Kathmandu Post, Nov. 04, 2000), a nursing mother was killed by her own family members because she was accused for being a witch. She was killed in such a manner that nobody can imagine. She was pierced through her private part and the stomach. All the teeth were also pulled out and gums were cut out. The family members made the decision to kill her because they were afraid of the warning of the faith healer that there will be fatal consequences to all their family members if she remains alive. By studying this news, we can imagine the strength of the belief on witchcraft.

In the second case in Dhankuta (The Kathmandu Post, May 05, 2000), a seventy years old woman was fed with human excreta and bodily harmed by the local people on being accused of witch. Such events are considered a usual occurrence in the hilly remote areas. This event happened when the faith healer did not succeed to cure a boy. The faith healer accused the old woman for being a witch to save his own prestige. Later on police arrested some of the people involved in this case.

In the third case (The Kathmandu Post, August 17, 2001), a social dispute is described in which a group of people ruthlessly attacked a woman. She was hospitalised and was not in the good condition to return to her home. In this case, Jhankri was not involved for accusing the woman as being a witch. A neighbour of the woman was charging her of spelling a black magic on his 16-year-old son, an epilepsy victim who died in the late June. Simply a neighbour can destroy the life of a woman in this manner. It also indicates the thought of local people towards the witchcraft.

But in another news (Kathmandu Post, June 18, 2000), a success story of one woman is described who was initially suspected as a witch and treated badly by the local people. Later on she proved herself a wise lady and started to live a leading life. This case shows the patience of a lady who changed the mind of the society against witchcraft.

8. Discussion

We have already given a glance on some of the cases of witchcraft blaming in Nepal. It can be inferred that the witchcraft in Nepal is different from the other parts of the world to some extent. In other parts (e.g. Azande), the witchcraft is deviated from the concept of normal magic. But in the context of Nepal, we can not distinctly separate witchcraft from the magical phenomenon. But baseless blaming to some of the members of the society is similar in all parts. Such kind of social evils exist in many parts of the world. The witches (mostly women) always work secretly during night as mentioned by Mayer (1954) on the basis of myth definition also holds same in the context of Nepalese society. But the physical stigmata, as mentioned by Mayer, are not common in the witches of Nepal and it is difficult to identify the witches by the presence of such marks. In some places men are charged for being the witch where as in other places women are charged.

Evans Pritchard (1937) distinguishes the witchcraft from sorcery (mainly based on the Azande) by mentioning that: "An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe that sorcerers may do them (Azande) ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines". Macfarlane (1970: 46) differentiates witchcraft and sorcery by writing "witchcraft is predominantly the pursuit of harmful ends by implicit means/internal means. Sorcery combines harmful ends with explicit means". In Nepal, there are no clear separate views for the differentiation between witchcraft and sorcery.

According to Raymond Firth (1956), the magic as commonly accepted, can be broadly classified as productive, protective and destructive. In the context of Nepalese society, witchcraft can be categorised as the destructive magic. This is because it always found to be utilized for something harm to the others.

The presence of Jhankris in the society also helps to believe the existence of the witchcraft. These two things are very much related with each other and can be regarded as complementary things.

Below are some probable causes and recommendations to alleviate the problems of witchcraft in Nepalese society.

a) Probable Causes of the Witchcraft in Nepal

Actually, witchcraft is a tradition in the society that passes on from one generation to the other generations automatically. Until and unless people become educated and think wisely the reality of this tradition, it is very difficult to erase this feeling from their mind. Following things can be considered as the flourishing agents for this witchcraft in Nepal:

1. Low literacy rate (illiteracy): Education is regarded as the backbone of the country. It makes the people to think in a broad way and to distinguish bad things from good things. It

also helps people to analyse the things in a proper way. Lack of education certainly suppresses the thinking of people and they can not express their views in front of the others even if they stand against such tradition.

2. Initially this tradition might have been introduced in the society to make the discipline which later on fixed in the mind of local people in such a way that it became a tradition. It is also said that a law had been made against the witchcraft in Rana Regime, nineteenth century B.S. [6] (based on the conversation to an old man).

3. Male dominated society may be another cause for continuing this tradition in society. Uneducated males try to keep their dominating power strongly over the women that can easily be understood by communicating to the local people (based on the communication to some local people).

4. In my opinion, the impression in the mind of children is very difficult to erase. The parents are playing the important role for retaining this tradition in the mind of the children. When children make mistakes, they are threatened by saying that they would be bewitched on repeating such things again. If they want to go somewhere outside their home during night, they are often told about the existence of such witches. Such practices create bad impression in the mind of the children rather than developing the discipline.

b) Some Good Steps to Alleviate the Witchcraft

When we look to the scenario of the extent of witchcraft in Nepal, it is generally found that educated people are trying to take it as an evil thing and avoid it. The top people in the society should motivate the local people and change their thought about such ill tradition. Such motivation can be expected from some educated people.

We have studied a case in Biratnagar that local people tried to ill-treat a woman and attempted to feed human excreta to her. Later on she motivated local in such a way that she is now treated as one of the best, helpful, and believable person in the village. This case also shows her patience that helped her to motivate the people.

In another case in Dhankuta, A 70 years women was fed human excreta on the charge of being a witch. Some of the people, involved in the charge, are arrested by the police. Such initiation by the government sector also helps to reduce the beliefs from the mind of the people, I guess.

I have already mentioned that parents are responsible for retaining this tradition in the society. If parents carefully tell the truth and do not threaten their children with the help of imaginary witches, this tradition can easily be alleviated.

The news was published in a newspaper (Kantipur Daily, November 22, 2001) that a women got

success to free her self from the charge for being a witch from the court. The court charged the people involved for manhandling her (Rs. 1000 per person). It took two years to give the decision about this case. It is late but not the least.

9. Conclusion

Witchcraft is regarded as the magical power in the society of Nepal. Though the witchcraft is defined separately from the act of sorcery, it is difficult to separate these two things in the context of Nepal. It may be due to the lack of intensive studies in this particular area of thought. There are productive and protective kinds of magical powers and the witchcraft is regarded as the destructive magic. Its concept may vary from place to place. In Nepal, women are blamed as being witches. Mayer (1994) also mentions similar facts in his paper. It may be due to male dominated society which always tend to dominate over women. It is also notable that the local people cannot confirm the existence of witches but simply rely on witch-doctors and follow their misleading guidance.

Witchcraft is mainly related with the problems of women in Nepalese society because they are often charged of being witch. In other parts of the world like Africa men are charged of being witches (both are charged in Tanzania, based on the conversation to one of my friends) and they do not know their magic power until they are charged. But in case of Nepal it is supposed that women witch are aware of their power. But this is not confirmed. It is very bad for a woman to be charged for being a witch baselessly. Once charged, all the society people start to give mental and physical torture to the accused women. Then it would be very difficult to stay in the society. Not only the society people, but also the family members start to give torture to the accused women. Sometimes this situation may lead to the murder or suicide.

Jhankris (or the witch-doctors) also act as the complementary aspect of the witchcraft and help to add the evidences in favour of the witchcraft.

When I went through the news published in newspapers, I found that witchcraft cases are frequent in the remote areas of the country. These remote areas mostly have low literacy rates. I have mentioned in the discussion part that illiteracy is the main cause behind the retaining of this evil in the mind of the local people. Therefore, we have to educate the people first. Education brings new thoughts in people and such evils easily can be removed from the mind of the people. The government should not encourage such evil things and should punish those involving in accusing the people for being the witch.

The traditional belief itself passes on from one generation to the other generation. In my opinion, the imprint of the childhood is very difficult to erase from the mind. Therefore, children should not

be taught imaginary bad lesions by their parents.

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The Kathmandu Post (National Daily Newspaper) (June 18, 2000)

She serves the people who blamed and tortured her:

<http://www.nepalnews.com.np/contents/englishdaily/ktmpost/2000/jun/jun18/local1.htm>.

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- [1] Boksi are witches (women are charged for being a witch in Nepal).
 - [2] Jhankris are the witch-doctors who are supposed to cure bewitched people.
 - [3] Aithan is a kind of suffocation during night which is supposed to be due to the witch.
 - [4] Jhankri Bidhya is a kind of education which is taught by the special God to small boys to make a Jhankri.
 - [5] Damphu is a kind of musical instrument which is used by Jhankris.
 - [6] Bikram Sambat is the National Calendar of Nepal which is about 57 years ahead of the A.D. Calendar.