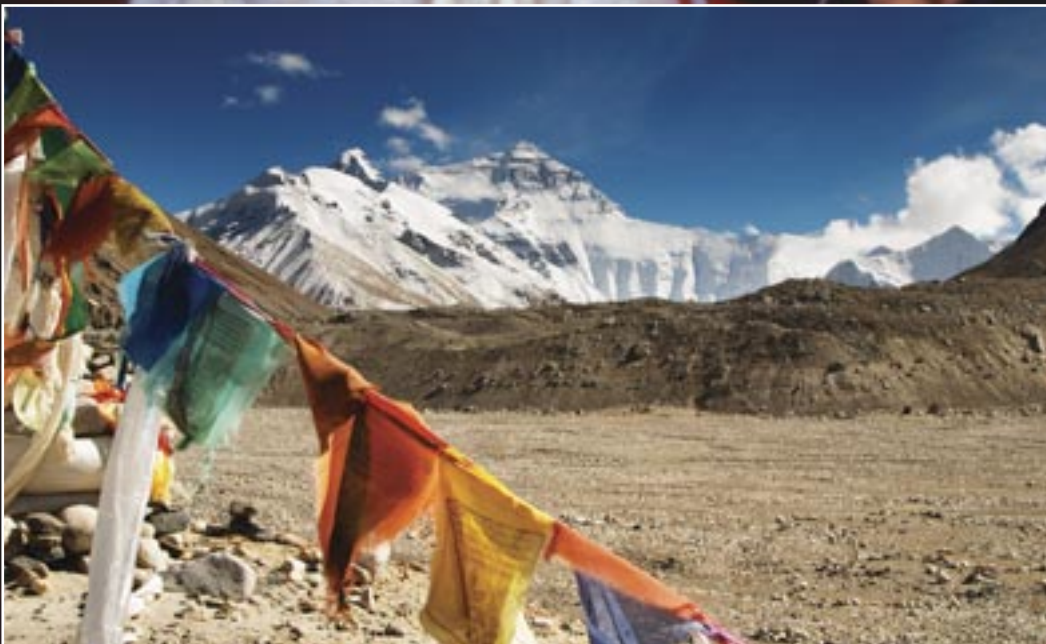


Jhankri

The Shamans of Nepal

Bhola nath Banstola

I was born in 1966 in the mountain district of Bhojpur, to the south of Mount Everest. At a very young age I was chosen by the spirits of my ancestors to carry their messages and healing traditions. But being chosen by the spirits was really not enough because even though I had been, I felt isolated and different from the rest of my family and friends, and so I had a great sense that I was not in harmony with myself.



My grandfather, who was a very skilful and well known local shaman, found out that I was going through what I would perhaps call a 'divine embodiment' - an intuitive communication with the spirits - and so he tried to help me. One night he performed a special ceremony to find out what was happening inside me, how the contact with the spirits was affecting me and what they wanted from me.

Having completed the ceremony, he found out the reason the spirits had chosen me, and so my grandfather started teaching me himself. If you want to be a shaman, having a human teacher as a guide is a must, as human teachers show you the best way to explore and work with the spiritual worlds; and they can teach you how to perform healing rites and rituals as well. Finally, after I had learnt what I needed to learn I was initiated.

Back then it was not easy to work as a healer, as I was a young student at the time too, but the process of honouring the spirits continued none the less. I remember my family and the local shamans used to get together during annual ancestral clan-deity festivals, held at our ancestral home. During these ceremonies, clan relatives and members construct a sacred space at the edge of the village including a thatch-roofed spirit house with carved stone figures, representing clan deities, Mother Earth, nagas (serpent spirits) and other spirit beings. All the stone carvings use would be smeared in colourful vermilion and yellow powder (*tika*).

All the people at the festival would make offerings of flowers, fruits, honey, water and milk. The keeper and protector of the animals (Mahadeo), the archtypal forest shaman (Banjhankri) and the hunting spirits of the forest (Sikari) were also given special veneration during this time.

Along with my grandfather and other shamans of the clan, I used to make the offerings and sometimes the spirits use to inspire me and speak through me. When the offerings to the spirits were over, everyone used to prepare special rice pudding out of milk they had collected from their homes and rice.

But as I grew up more, I found I had began to drift away from my shamanic calling, and I started to feel more and more uneasy and gloomy. Gradually I began to understand that it was because I was suppressing the natural flow of spiritual energies which my spirits were putting into me, and that was making me sick. This made me realise that however busy I was as a student, I had to reconnect with my spirits again, and so I started practising shamanism once more.

After graduating from university, I studied alternative medicines. For six years I learnt about and used herbal medicines, combining them with the shamanic practices I had learnt in order to help the needy. When I got reconnected with the helping spirits, everything became very fluid, my clients did not only ask for herbal preparations but spiritual healings also. During this period I travelled extensively to collect rare plants and herbs and also to immerse myself deeply in shamanic practices from different teachers in Nepal, North-east India, Bhutan and parts of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

In 1997 I met Mariarosa Genitrini, my wife, in Kathmandu. I met her at the house of a shaman where she had gone to do some interviews. We got married in Kathmandu, and In 1998, I was invited to Italy, and it was then that I started travelling to the West.

After this first visit to Italy, my wife and I started organising cultural and shamanic field study tours in Nepal, Tibet and India and I also teach workshops with my wife too. I'm a member of the Society of Shamanic Practitioners (SSP) too, which is how I came to the UK last year, attending their UK conference at Glastonbury. But despite all the traveling, I still feel connected to the ancient ways I learned in Nepal as a child.

In Nepal, a shaman is called a *dhami* or a *jhankri*, two terms which are used interchangeably. The shamanism found in Nepal is both animistic and polydeistic. By this I mean it sees everything in nature as being alive, and also sees that there are many larger spirits which are responsible for different aspects of creation, such as the weather. The traditions teach how we should embrace the spiritual life force that is to be found within all the natural phenomena of the world around us.

Because of this, the shamans work a lot with the five gross elements of creation: 'earth, water, fire, air and ether,' and they always bear these in mind while they are preparing a sacred space for healing rituals etc

The shamans sing the songs of these elements and their qualities, as they understand that these



Left - main photo: a Nepalese shaman in his ritual clothes plays his drum
(photo: Mariarosa Genitrini)

Bottom left: Mount Everest

Bottom centre: Bhola Nath Banstola prepares to start a healing ceremony
(photo: Mark Lomax)

Bottom right: Lake Tichilo, a sacred lake 4,949 meters above sea level in the Annapurna range of the Nepalese Himalays

Right: A shaman's mala (prayer beads) made the seeds of the rudraksha bush





Above: wooden blade to a shaman's ritual phurba dagger

Below: a shaman plays his drum with skin tensioned by blue plastic rop
(photo: Mariarosa Genitrini)

Perhaps the strangest way a person can be called to be a shaman is when they are abducted and taught by Ban Jhankri the shaman spirit of the forest, a being half human and half animal

elements make the whole universe as well as our bodies and all aspects of us. They understand that the earth element is related to the solid physical body; the water is emotions; fire is the vital body energy force. The shamans identify the cause of a person's problem, whether elemental spirits or other problems, and they concentrate on whatever level they have to work to do the healing. The direct use of these elements and their spiritual essences in healing practices is a unique part of Nepali shamanism.

I became a shaman because the spirits chose me, but there are several ways someone can become a shaman but the most important way is because they are 'chosen' by the spirits.

Other ways can be by 'hereditary transmission' if you have shamans in your family you might receive direct transmissions and teachings from these ancestral powers, but remember a human teacher is still a must.

Sometimes spontaneous selection happens too. We say this is a 'call' or an 'election.' When this happens the person destined to be a future shaman is spontaneously possessed by the spirits, they go into trance and the spirits come really close to them and effect them greatly. In most cases the first spirit to come is the spirit of an animal, which slowly opens up ways of contacts for other shamanic guides and spirits.

Sometimes people become shamans through personal choice. When this happens the student undertakes a sort of quest, they are interested in shamanism, and a dedicated person will look for a teacher and seek to apprentice with them. Proper shamanic apprenticeships take a long time, and during them students learn how to explore the levels of spiritual existence, as well as find out about the spirits and learn all the mantras, shamanic songs, drum rhythms, dances, mythology and healing techniques etc.

Perhaps the strangest way a person can be called to be a shaman is when they are abducted and taught by Ban Jhankri. Ban Jhankri is the shaman spirit of the forest, he is a being half human and half animal. He appears as a small creature about a metre high, with his whole body covered by fur. His legs are turned backwards, and he has a pointed nose. In his left hand he holds a special wooden container to take cows milk and a drum and holds a curved drum stick in his right hand. Sometimes he takes

physical form, but most of the time he does not physically manifest.

He takes young boys or girls from the villages and keeps them in his cave, which is behind a waterfall. There he makes them stay for a period of time, teaching them all they need to learn. When he feels that their teaching is complete, he brings the student back to the village and leaves them there. Then the student comes back to their normal senses, but falls into what we call a 'divine illness' and is helped by a local master shaman, who

cures them and helps them become a shaman themselves.

Divine illness is not a physical body ailment but is the spiritual manifestations of being called to be a shaman. The master shamans either journey or make divination, or by looking at the person can find out what spirit or ancestral deity is trying to manifest through them. The person in the process of this manifestation seems to have a double personality: his own and that of the manifesting spirit. You just imagine what one feels when the dual personalities work together in one body.

Shamans are the first line of help that a villager looks for in many situations, and there is still a strong presence of shamans both in the villages and the towns.

Of course, in the last ten to fifteen years the health of the shamanic traditions has declined, all the problems caused by the rise of the neo-political movements which are found in Nepal have discouraged many local healers, and made it difficult for them to practise their art of healing. Many people have had to leave their birth places and migrate to the towns or even to neighbouring India to look for their livelihood. Almost the whole country has been affected, and the oppression and lack of respect for the traditional ways, which the political movement has instigated, has forced some shamans to give up their ancient practices completely. But despite this decline, shamanism is still a living tradition in Nepal.

Shamans traditionally have a prominent role in Nepalese society. Their main role of course is to access the spiritworlds, and work as mediators between the spirits and individuals, or the society as a whole. They are the centres of the society, and they advise on the social and health affairs of the people. They are musicians, herbalists, match-makers, diviners, protectors and much more beyond. Shamans are creators of sacred space within an individual, to bring in healing energies. In some societies they also do the work of a psychopomp, accompanying and guiding the souls of the dead to their next lives.

THREE WORLDS AND SPIRITS

Nepali shamans believe in the existence of three worlds like many shamanic traditions the world over.



These three worlds are the Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds, of which we live in the Middle World. The Upper World is seen as having seven distinct levels, and the Lower World also has its own seven distinct levels too.

These three worlds and their several levels are seen as being connected together by an upside down tree called *Kalpa Vriksha* (the tree of immortality), which has its roots in the sky and its branches and leaves in the lower world. The shamans travel between these worlds either to get information or to find the lost soul parts of sick people. Different deities and spirits inhabit these three worlds, both compassionate and malignant.

Nepalese shamans work in the Middle World level most of the time, as it is their point of departure for the other worlds. The shamans rarely use hallucinogenic substances or alcohol.

Our shamans have a double headed drum which has a very high vibration, and which is held in front of the chest and the face. The shaman starts drumming and 'opens' his body to receive the spirits that he works with. He protects his body by different creating layers of colors and protective spiritual energies, placing his helping spirits in the left and right side, and front and back of his body; invoking the spirits of the different directions. By doing this a shaman connects with the whole universe.

When this invocation is completed, the shaman sings the song of his helping spirits and remembers and re-lives the

moment when the spirits first came into contact, when the shaman was initiated. At this time the shaman feels a physical sensation of cold in the heart region and burning in the umbilical region and his body starts shaking. As the intention for the ceremony or ritual is already made, the shaman journeys to that level or direction.

Shamans also have to know the spirit keepers of the power places they are connected too as well, places like sacred mountains, lakes, rivers, etc., and the shaman has to



Nepal is mostly a rural country where the people have developed sophisticated ways to farm and on the often steep hill and mountain sides (photo: Mariarosa Genitrini)

be able to work with these spirits in order to establish a very good relationship with them. In our tradition, it is only then that exploration of the Lower and Upper Worlds can start; without having this base at the Middle World and a good relationship with the spirits here, it is impossible to work with the other worlds. Without this connection and deep relationship a journey to the Lower or Middle Worlds would be merely an intellectual journey devoid of real meaning.

The shamans have to work in partnership with the spirits, and if they do, then the whole healing process is also a partnership between the shaman and the needy.

HINDUS - BUDDHISTS - SHAMANS

It is believed that shamanism is the most ancient form of spiritual work found on Earth. In the beginning there was a harmonious relationship between the Creator, the spirits of

nature, humans, animals, plants and all that was created. The humans alive at this time were our primordial ancestors who had the

vision of the divine and started communicating with the spirit worlds in times of hard natural calamity and also in times of great joy.

The divine Creator, humans, spirits and all the components of creation walked hand in hand. When humans started reasoning and made presumptions, they lost this communication with the divine. Then diseases came, and the malignant

spirits came into existence.

Humans started looking towards the sky and the spirits, asking for help, and so the divine Creator bestowed power on selected humans so they would be able to communicate with the spiritual world, not only for their welfare, but for the well being of all that was created. Here the first shamans came into being.

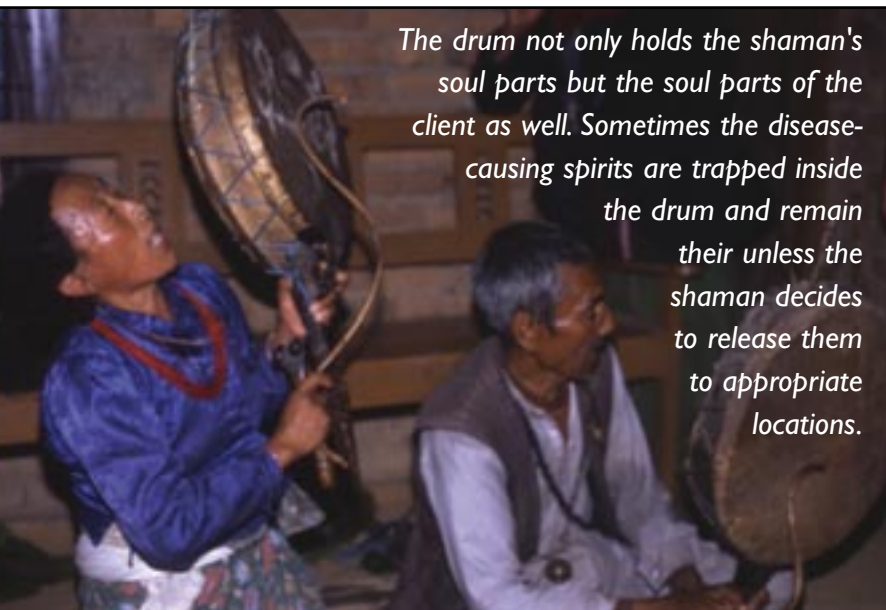
Like the element ether, shamanism is everywhere. If we go deep in Hinduism and Buddhism, we find they have their base in shamanism, although now there is a difference between these institutionalised religions and shamanism - the original earth spirituality. But shamans on the whole get on well with Buddhists and Hindus, there are shamans who follow these religions as members of the community, but they still practise shamanism. The shamans do healing, divination, exorcism and in some cases peace making - acting as mediators, whereas the religious priests may not do these tasks. So there is no real contradiction between shamanic practitioners and religious practitioners, and the religious practitioners seek the help of the shamans, and the shamans go to the priests and lamas for religious instruction. It is a harmonious co-existence, and we believe this harmony will remain in the days to come also.

WORKING WITH THE DRUM

Nepalese shaman's drums (*dhyangro*) are double headed, and covered by animal hide the drums are made of special wood. The animal hide used nowadays is either mountain goat, deer or a domesticated goat or sheep.



Left: part of a set of shaman's bells, fixed to a chain the shaman wears them over thier shoulder and they ring as the shaman dances



The drum not only holds the shaman's soul parts but the soul parts of the client as well. Sometimes the disease-causing spirits are trapped inside the drum and remain there unless the shaman decides to release them to appropriate locations.

Shamans play their drums

(photo: Mariarosa Genitri)

The shaman himself or the drum maker, before closing the drum with the hides, inserts a copper coin or a rudraksha seed bead (*eleocarpus spericus*) to represent the main spirit of the shaman. Sometimes these sacred items escape from the drum without the notice of the shaman.

As the drum is one of the most important instruments of the shaman it is decorated by colored threads, porcupine quills, peacock feathers, different stripes of coloured cloths, or leaves from sacred plants.

The drum in some cases not only holds the presiding shaman's soul parts but the soul parts of the client as well. Sometimes the disease-causing spirits are trapped inside the drum and remain there unless the shaman decides to release them to appropriate locations.

Below: beautiful vivid coloured 'tika' powder, used to make offerings on shrines and altars and thrown at people during certain Hindu festivals



They also have a handle in the shape of a ritual dagger (often known in the West by it's Tibetan name *phurba*) which has three sides to its blade, which in its three dimensional way represents all the cosmos. On one side of this trianglur bladed handle there is the beak of the regal eagle, or perhaps an owl or a horse or a thunderbolt or an

elephant. This is the male side of the drum, so when we hold the drum in front of our face, this male side should be facing outside.

The spirits hardly make any difference between a male and a female shaman, as the drum is the universal instrument used by both the sexes it makes no difference. Some shamans respect the male and female sides of the drum, but some shamans don't, it depends upon the instructions they have received from their teachers and the spirits.

If the shaman works with the male and female sides of the drum differently, the male side is used in the beginning of a shaman's ceremony to call in the spirits. The female side is used towards the end of the ceremony or ritual to send away the helping spirits.

The shaman starts to drum with a 1/4 beat [O O O O O], during which they will observe their whole body to look for tensions, performing deep breathing in order to relax, They will then invite their spirits and ancestors in to help them, and make their intentions for the ceremony or healing clear.

Suddenly the shaman's drumming will change rhythm to a 4/4 beat [O o o o O o o o O o o o], during which the shaman starts feeling sensations of heat and cold in their body as the spirits come closer and start inspiring them.

When the body of the shaman starts to move and shake, or they start to dance, the rhythm of the drumming becomes very random.

Towards the end of the session the female side of the drum is used,

and then the rhythm becomes a 3/4 beat [O o o O o o O o]. During this time the shaman starts calming and slowing down, and eventually the beat changes to a 2/4 [O o O o O o O o] and eventually a 1/4 [O O O O O O O] before it comes to a stop.

TOOLS OF THE SHAMANS

Shamans generally wear special clothes or ritual costumes when they perform ceremonies. Many wear crowns or head dresses when they perform ceremony too. I use peacock feathers and porcupine quills in my head gear to represent the animal and bird kingdoms.

They also wear a lot of red and white, perhaps as streamers or as turbans. These colours represent the male (white) and female (red) energies. the costume also generally has a white shirt and a white skirt, bandoliers or a belt, a medicine bag with some offerings and prayer rosaries (*mala*).

The shamans also wear some small bells made from iron or copper, and these are fixed onto metal chains. They may also have special necklaces of stones or some special woods and bamboo.

Necklaces and *mala* are passed down through the generations or the shaman is asked to wear them by the spirits. Some shamans also wear snake vertebra necklaces, but most keep these in their sacred space. Snake vertebra represent the lower world or the world of rain making and fertility spirits (*naga*).

The other objects they generally have are representations of the five gross elements of nature (earth, air, fire, water and ether). The earth element is represented by rice or crystal rocks; water by the water in a sacred vase (*kalasa*); fire by a candle or oil burner; air by bird feathers; and ether by songs and sacred chants.

They also have a ritual knife, used to cut threads used in ceremony or offerings. These can be a little curved or sometimes are shaped like a sickle. Sometimes that are also kept inside the sacred healing bag of the shaman to protect them from the malign spirits, as the knife drives away any dark forces that might threaten the shaman.

Some shamans also use tridents made of iron. These represent the three worlds; the three parts of the body; the three moments of birth, death and rebirth. They also hold and represent the fire element

which is the principal element of transformation.

Other items will include candles or burning wicks, a shamanic mirror, incense, sacred fire ash, and a ritual dagger (*khurpi* in Nepali or *phurba* in Tibetan).

Shamans often make offerings to the spirits, and the helper spirits accept whatever you offer. There are some wrathful spirits who want non vegetarian offerings and sacrifices too, but really it all depends upon the shaman. If you habituate your spirits with what is available in the place where you are, they will accept it, but if you make the habit of giving some particular offerings, then they will long for that and will not be pleased if you do not offer it them.

I usually offer, water, milk, sweets, flowers, fruits, multi-coloured strips of cloths, yellow and red powders (*tika*), the sacred grains of creation (rice, wheat etc.), oil, wicks and candles, corn flour and plant leaves.

The shaman's relationship with the spirits and the sacred depends upon the personal relationship they have with themselves. If they have a very deep relationship with themselves, high awareness, an open heart, deep confidence in what they do, and a belief in themselves, than their relationship with the outside world will be always harmonious. This strong inner confidence and harmonious relationship with the outer world helps a shaman to create a fluid relationship with the spirits - a good relationship with the spiritual world.

THE SHAMAN AS HEALER

When I was in Glastonbury last year at the SSP conference, I performed a large ceremony for everyone gathered there. It was a group healing, where every participant had an opportunity to transfer their pain, sorrow, suffering, obstacles, sadness, and trauma into positive healing energy. In that ceremony we used sacred grains and a sacred earth mandala as a part of the process. The sacred earth mandala is called the *Jhankri* mandala (shaman mandala). It is the anthropomorphic representation of the universe. The four directions are represented by four figurative heads and the cardinal directions by four figurative hands connecting the heads. It has three outer three circles represents the three worlds

of the shamans, with tridents in four outer most directions representing the process of transmutation.

The inner most space of the mandala is divided up into nine square 'boxes' like the game 'noughts and crosses'. These nine boxes represent nine 'houses' or 'rooms', and are created to represent the nine planets. These are the seven planets plus the head of the dragon (*rahu*) and tail of the dragon (*ketu*) which makes nine. As misplaced planets are sometimes the causes of problems they are represented here.

It was a very deep and strong ceremony. The spirits worked through me, making me dance, whistle, and drum during the whole thing. I have found that if the intensity of suffering felt by the people taking part in a ceremony is high, then the dance will be strong and long lasting. The more the spirits inspire, the greater the dance and greater the healing takes place.

But shamans are not really the healers, they are the facilitators and creators of the sacred space within which an individual can receive the healing energies brought by the spirits. The creation of a sacred space takes place by singing a song of peace, harmony and joy; drumming a harmonious rhythm, cleansing the environment; purifying the outer spiritual body of the sick person the ceremony is being held for; relighting the candle of hope; awaking the slow life forces and penetrating inside the profound vital energy that safeguards the whole mechanism of an individual.

As I said before, shamanic healing is a partnership between the client and the healer. Healing is not only meant for curing the affected body parts, but also should bring about a profound harmony between the spiritual, emotional, energetic and soul parts.

Nepalese shamans believe that only having a

healthy physical body is not enough, we need to have healthy relationships with our environment, our family, friends, ancestors and all the spiritual realms.

Shamanic healing takes place in a very safe and calm environment where the client and the shaman can express themselves, feel safe and well protected. Healing can be a long process for some, but for others it may happen during the first session itself. The more we are open and collaborative, the faster the healing takes place.

The shaman in his altered state of consciousness (shamanic trance state) travels through imagery landscapes, symbols, colours, shadows and lights. During this journey they try to find out the causes of the clients problems and through songs, metaphors, symbolic actions and myths bring back the harmony within their client.

In some cases the shaman creates a safe environment for the soul parts to come back to its place of origin. Sometimes very dramatic healings take place due to the strong presence of malignant spirits and dark opposing forces which the shaman drives out.

But really, there are no words to explain a healing session, it is an individual feeling, and one should try and see how it feels oneself by taking part.

Namaste...

Bhola nath Banstola is a Nepalese shaman.

He will be in the UK during August and September 2008 to teach workshops and do individual healings. Please phone for details.

Aug 30-31 Penzance, (workshop)

Sept 1-2 Penzance area, (healings)

Contact: Claire Belsham
clairebelsham@hotmail.com
(07887) 838 710

Sept 4-7 Society for Shamanic Practitioners Conference, Gaunts House, Dorset

Contact: Howard or Elsa Malpas: warriorinthehear @tiscali.co.uk
(020) 8758 9950

Sept 10 Glastonbury (dance ceremony)

Contact: office@isleofavalonfoundation.com
(01458) 833 933

Sept 13-14 Brecon Beacons, Wales (workshops and healings)

Contact: Sarah Howcroft-Lane, sara

@shamanismwales.co.uk
(01874) 611 996

Sept 20 Alternatives, London (workshop)

www.alternatives.org.uk
(020) 7287 6711

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Mariarosa Genitrini for the kind permission she gave to use some of her photos in this article



Bhola dances in trance during a healing ceremony held during last year's UK Society for Shamanic Practitioners Conference

(photos: Marks Lomax)

