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Fragments of a Transient Affliction: “Mass Hysteria” and the Question of Subjectivity

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A study of “mass hysteria” is a study of fragments of a phenomenon in its absence. Absent because of its transient nature; the affliction appears suddenly, without warning, spreading and transferring from one person to another, and then suddenly it dissipates and is gone. People cautiously return to their lives, unsure when another outbreak might occur. How to study a phenomenon in its absence? How to understand a limit-experience of affliction, when those who underwent it only come to know it through the words, photographs, and moving images captured and mediated by others? How to approach a form of affliction that is decentered from the individual, and instead transfers and circulates between bodies and the world?

From the collective possession of nuns in 17th century Loudun (De Certeau 1996) to contemporary cases of collective twitching among teenage girls in upstate New York (Goldstein and Hall 2015), such shared affliction remains a mysterious, uncertain, and underexamined aspect of life. This is due, in part, to the methodological challenges of working with a transient, fragmentary affliction, and the fact that this phenomenon does not easily fit into dominant models of subjectivity in which affliction is centered within the life of one individual.

The transient dimension of so-called “mass hysteria” has required me to think with fragments. The afflictions seemed to occur at random, they would appear and then quickly disappear. For the first three months of my fieldwork, I traveled through districts in Central and Mid-Western Nepal, following cases which had always already subsided by the time I arrived. The students had recovered. I could never observe the event with my own eyes, always only through the grainy images and narratives of others. Then I found what I was looking for—a friend tore out a small article from the local newspaper and gave me the shred of paper. The headline read “Ghost Shuts School.*”* By chance, a young psychology student I had met in Kathmandu had a relative who worked as a government school teacher in the same district. Within 24 hours she located and contacted the school headmaster, and suggested her brother accompany me to the site. We left Kathmandu as quickly as possible and traveled 14 hours east by shared jeep to a district in the middle hills of eastern Nepal. We arrived in time.

After staying in the village for 10 days and observing the active case, the community invited me to return for my extended study. I returned one month later to begin the long-term work. But by then all the students had recovered. I remained in the village for a stretch of five more months, yet throughout that period the affliction itself was largely absent. I found I could only study it in traces and fragments—in cell phone videos and audio recordings, in casual discussions of the presence of ghosts and spirits, in evenings when a neighbor suddenly became possessed by a wandering ghost, in stories of deaths and their locations in the landscape. The affliction seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at all.

My research explores cases of adolescent "mass hysteria" in the Nepal Himalayas, where in a context of the recent expansion of Global Mental Health and psychosocial interventions in the post-conflict and then post-disaster period, counselors and psychiatrists have identified outbreaks of what they call "mass conversion disorder" as a difficult problem in need of psychosocial intervention. Over the course of two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal, I followed cases of "mass hysteria" and their interventions across Kathmandu-based NGO offices, psychiatric out-patient clinics, bazaar towns on the Indian border, and small farming settlements in rural hill districts. As I moved through these various sites I tracked the shifting conceptualizations of an uncertain phenomenon between indigenous and psychiatric worlds—as a form of shared affliction with the ghosts and spirits of those who died a misfortunate or untimely death, a class and caste-based symptom of life under patriarchy, an internalized problem of repressed desire, and as "mass conversion disorder," a disorder in which unconscious trauma and anger is released from the mind into the body through processes of somatization.

In Nepal, the newspaper article that led me to the case in Eastern Nepal referred to it as "mass hysteria," and indeed this was one of at least 70 cases that had been reported in Nepali newspapers between 2012-2016. In these articles, the description of the situation is almost always identical—groups of around 15 adolescent girls suddenly become afflicted in a government school. The students say they have seen a ghost or spirit. The newspaper reports such events as proof of the ongoing "problem" of superstitious belief among villagers (c.f. Pigg 1996). Yet the question remains, why are groups of young girls becoming possessed in schools?

Within anthropology, much work has been done on spirit possession as a gendered "idiom of protest" (Boddy 1989; Lewis 1971; Nichter 1981; Ong 2010). In Aihwa Ong's classic ethnography *Spirits of Resistance* (1987)*,* sheargues that in Malaysian factories episodes of "mass hysteria" among the female labor force were forms of retaliation against gendered relations of domination in the industrial work place. Building on a crypto-Freudian notion of the unconscious, Ong writes that

she wishes to discover "in the vocabulary of spirit possession, the unconscious beginning of an idiom of protest against labor discipline and male control in the modern industrial situation" (Ong 2010, 207).

Such analyses, while captivating, have been complicated by studies of gender and resistance that demonstrate how feminist theories of the subject have historically drawn their definition from a Western liberal tradition that "seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power" (Mahmood 2001, 203) but which may be an inadequate model for making sense of agency among women cultivated in non-liberal traditions (Abu-Lughod 2002; Mahmood 2005). Likewise, the psychiatric diagnosis of "conversion disorder" relies on a distinctly Euro-American concept of personhood in which unconscious trauma may be converted from the mind so that it might "speak" through the body (Kirmayer and Young 1998).

These discussions may seem merely theoretical, but in Nepal, affected communities and girls disputed psychosocial counselors and anthropologists on these very conceptual grounds. These conflicts ultimately revolved around two distinct understandings of the subject of affliction. The subject of "mass hysteria" takes a liberal form in which symptoms reveal resistance to power, and somatic symptoms communicate unresolved conflict and repressed desire, while for the subject afflicted by ghosts and spirits, *bhut-pret lagne*, symptoms reveal the intertwined relationality between bodies and the world.

Inspired by this impasse, my research develops a symmetrical approach to theory in psychological anthropology in order to rethink Euro-American analytical terms of subjectivity and psychosomatization in dialogue with Nepali concepts of affliction. In doing so I open a space for dialogue between indigenous and psychiatric worlds in which we might consider Nepali conceptualizations not as data to be analyzed, but as an analytic with the potential to transform our own theorizations.

This approach does not intend to deny the possibility that embodied symptoms diagnosed as "conversion disorder" in Nepal or elsewhere may, especially in individual cases, be a form of somatization and idiom of distress. Yet in my work I have tried to provide an ethnographic glimpse into the politics of conceptualization currently at play in Nepal's psychosocial turn, and how we might re-conceptualize, expand, and alter our theories of affliction by remaining aware of the ontological assumptions embedded in psychiatric diagnostic theories and experimenting with the possibilities of thinking from elsewhere.

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