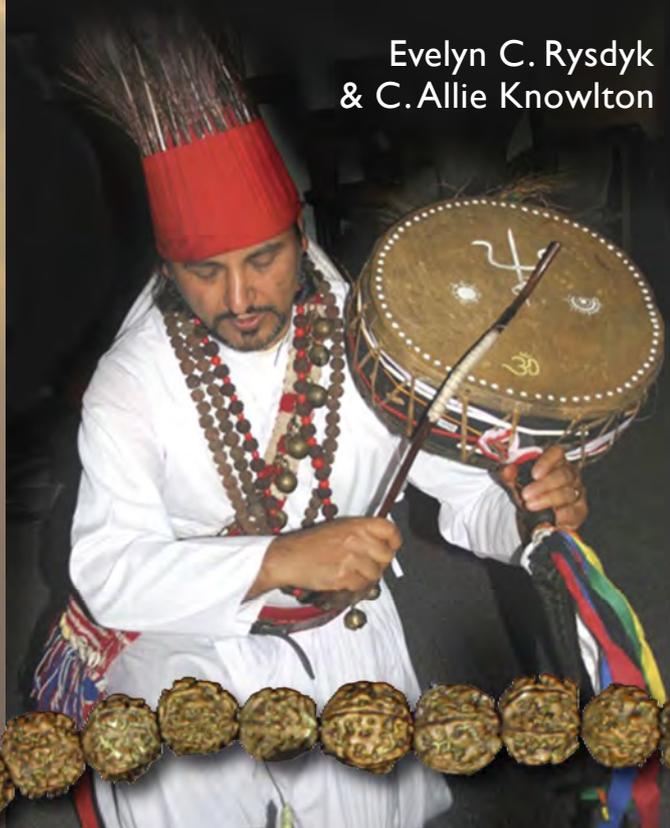


Lotus Lakes & Mountain Gods

A Sacred Journey to Nepal with
shaman Bhola Nath Banstola

Evelyn C. Rysdyk
& C. Allie Knowlton



Above: Bhola
Nath Banstola
in ceremony

(Photo © Evelyn Rysdyk)

Main photo:
Boudhanath Stupa

Inset: Rudraksha seeds,
strung together to form
a mala (prayer beads)

Bhola Nath Banstola is a traditional Nepalese *jhankri* (shaman) who is the product of twenty-seven consecutive generations of Himalayan healer shamans in his family. We have been hosting Bhola's visits to New England in the United States for six years, and over that time we have grown fond of him as a person, and learned to trust him as a teacher and healer.

While he had been leading trips from Europe to Asia for many years, Bhola hadn't ever considered taking a group from North America as it was too difficult to organise. Since Bhola divides his time between Italy and Nepal he would have had to do the organisational and promotional work in absentia. So after some discussion, we agreed to arrange the states-side aspects of the trip if he led the journey in Nepal, and so the first excursion from North America was born!

We flew into Kathmandu on October 14th, 2012, a group of 20 in all. After shuffling through the airport and obtaining our visas, we went out to get our luggage, and once we had our bags in our hand, we exited the airport into an enormous bustling crowd of shouting cab drivers! Amidst the chaos, Bhola stood smiling and waving to us.

We walked over and were

met with hugs and flower garlands. After two-

days of air travel, it was good to be out in the sunlight again and welcomed so warmly!

SHAMANIC ASPECTS OF DURGA

Our visit to Nepal coincided with the Dashain festival. This is a fifteen-day festival of which nine days are dedicated to honoring the Goddess Durga.

Nepal is a Hindu country, and so follows much of the religious calendar of India, however there are differences. Since Nepal also retains a strong shamanic culture, it is possible to see the blending of older, nature honouring traditions in the country's Dashain celebrations. In addition, the honouring of the feminine principles of creation, nurturance and destruction are a very clear in the shamanic versions of the rituals.

Each of the nine days of the festival honor a different manifestation of Durga, who can be equated with Mahadevi or Shakti the Supreme Great Mother Goddess. Her other

manifestations include

Shailputri, Brahmachaarini, Chandraghantaa, Kushmaandaa, Skandmaataa, Kaatyaayani, Kaalaraatri, Mahagauri, and Siddhidaatri. These different aspects celebrate different facets of Durga's

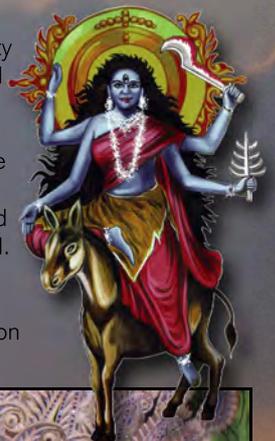
powers. We could certainly see the shamanic elements of Dashain in the first aspect of Durga, the Goddess Shailputri. Shailputri is considered the goddess of nature and the daughter of the Himalayas. Everything on Earth is a part of Shailputri, she exhorts humans to maintain balance with nature and to live in harmony. In her hands she carries a trident and a lotus. She and Shiva - who is the primary deity and first shaman - are not separate but one being. She bestows good health.

The second aspect of Durga is Brahmachaarini who never deviates from the spiritual path. She is the spiritual strength of the shaman that increases all that is good in the world.

The aspect Chandraghantaa provides extreme peace, ultimate good and reward, which are the benefits a shaman receives and brings to their patients by working with the helpful healing spirits.

Kushmaandaa has the capacity to heal and eliminate sorrow, and this aspect may be seen as the role shamans have as healers through their relationship with the spirits - discerning what spiritual energies need to be released and that which needs to be increased.

Skandmaataa, who is like the Sun, bestows divine light on the earth. She is the radiant protection shamans attain while inspired.



Right: The Goddess Durga
 Insets: aspects of the Goddess

Siddhidaatri grants supernatural powers. Some believe that Shiva attained his shamanic abilities through her. She also represents the shaman's victory over negative energies and chaos



Kaत्याayani grants protection from negativity in the same way that shamans are kept safe through the protection of their tutelary spirits and power animals.

Kaalaraatri carries an iron thorn like a *phurba* (ritual dagger). She destroys evil spirits, protects from wild beasts and removes fear. She also offers rebirth. This can be seen as the action performed while a shaman is doing healing work.

Mahagauri helps to keep the thoughts of her devotees on the path of virtue, destroys illusion and anything that interrupts with the flow of creation. This represents the shaman's task of clearing away anything that interferes with harmony and health. This action allows for primordial balance and good health to be reborn.

The final aspect of Durga is Siddhidaatri who grants supernatural powers. Some believe that Shiva attained his shamanic abilities through her. She also represents fulfillment and success - the shaman's victory over negative energies and chaos.

While the names of these goddesses

seemed foreign, the energies certainly felt completely aligned with the way we already understood our shamanic practice.

BEGINNING OUR WORK

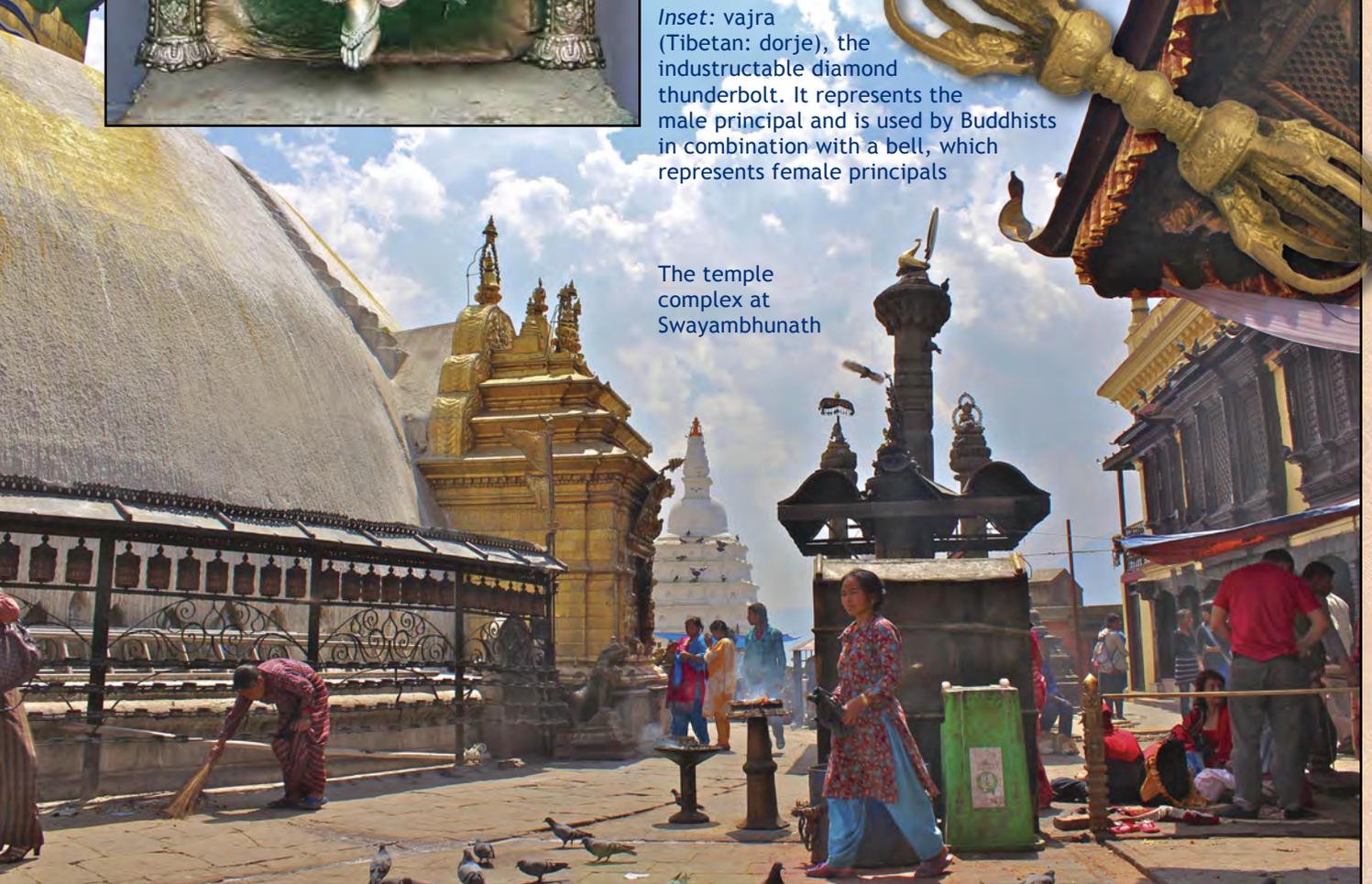
We were all staying in Hotel Vajra, and each day began early when the neighborhood band would begin playing. This music was to raise the spirits of the people and announce the arrival of the day's Goddess. The first morning we visited the Swayambhunath religious complex, reached by way of a long stairway of 365 steps culminating at an enormous *vajra* (*dorje* in Tibetan). This object symbolises the incorruptible energy of the enlightened mind, or the lightning bolt-like radiance of spiritual illumination. Standing as it does above the long stairway, it represents both the fruit of the Buddhist path and the treasure of spiritual wisdom that may be found on the shaman's journey.

The next two days we immersed ourselves in Bhola's workshop and he provided each of us with a shoulder pouch of sacred objects that we used

Inset: vajra (Tibetan: dorje), the indestructible diamond thunderbolt. It represents the male principal and is used by Buddhists in combination with a bell, which represents female principals



The temple complex at Swayambhunath



during ceremonies. We received a *mala* (prayer beads) of rudraksha seeds, drilled and made into beads, a red cloth bandana, a quartz crystal, a coin, a *shaligram* fossil (ammonite), an extraction broom (a sanctified version of small, hand held broom used in Nepali homes) a plate and vase for offerings, rice, a candle and some cotton cloth streamers. These days of teaching, shamanic journeys and rituals set the stage for all that we would experience during the rest of our visit.

The workshop was held in an amazing rooftop space at the Hotel Vajra with 360° views of the Kathmandu valley. From this marvelous perch, we had a clear view of Swayambhunath, the enormous temple complex that sits atop a hill. It is believed that this sacred site created itself. According to the mythic stories of the region, the hill stands in the place that was once a great lotus growing in the lake that is now the Kathmandu valley. Once the great lake drained, the temple sprang from what was the lotus flower.

A HEALING WITH EGGS

As part of our time we set out to meet a shaman in Durwakot, a rural village in the Bhaktapur district of Nepal. This man was Hari Bahadur Khadka, who didn't begin his shamanic career until he was fifty-eight years old.

While he began his spiritual training with his father at the age of eleven, Mr. Khadka did not initially pursue a shamanic calling, instead serving in the military, becoming a police officer and working as an administrator for the Ministry of Finance. It wasn't until his father died that the 'egg shaman' of Nepal finally began his shamanic practice.

He is known all over that country for his ability as a spiritual healer and diviner. His form of shamanic healing was passed down in his family for several generations. His method has been proven effective for a variety of mental and physical diseases and conditions. He has helped people suffering from AIDS, cancer, paralysis, tuberculosis, infertility and ulcers.

Each of us on the visit brought him three eggs, three limes and a half a kilo of rice, along with a small monetary offering. While the rest of our group waited in a front parlor, one person at a time would be escorted into a hallway to be seated in a plastic garden chair. The shaman would begin by asking why we sought healing, after which he began his work. Mr. Khadka rubbed eggs over our body very vigorously. While he did this he would whistle sharp calls to the spirits.

This shamanic technique with eggs is different to the *limpia* practiced in Latin America, here in Nepal these eggs didn't just function as diagnostic devices, but rather actually took on the energies of the spiritual illness present in the patient's body.

Once the eggs were deemed to be full, the shaman would forcefully crack the eggs on the top of the head of his patient! Fortunately, rather than raw egg, what came out of the shells were long streamers of colored cloth. These streamers were the captured illness.

Once the three eggs had completed their work, the patient was asked to take the shells and streamers and put them into a flowing stream or river to be taken away. While releasing the remains, the patient was told to completely let go of any thoughts of the illness to complete the healing.

The next day we visited the temple Pashupatinath (Lord of the Animals) who is the guardian deity of Nepal. This complex of several sacred sites and temples sits along the banks of the sacred Bagmati River. There, we experienced the



Above left: *shaligram* (fossil ammonite) used to represent the God Vishnu

Above: group altar made during Bhola's workshop in Hotel Vajra

religious diversity of Nepal. Hindu worshippers walked barefoot and bearing offerings to the temple dedicated to Shiva, sadhus sat praying in shady niches, a man dressed as Hanuman the Monkey God danced and played the tambourine, and at the same time a cremation ceremony unfolded across the river. A strange mix of celebration, joy and sadness, the experience of being there was moving beyond measure.



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THE LAST OF THE LHAPA

The next day we flew to the city of Pokhara. After we had landed, the drive to our hotel wound along the streets until the view began to open up. We rounded a turn and there we began to see the Annapurna range of the Himalayas! We were able to stop in an area without obstructions to take pictures and say prayers to the mountain spirits.

After a while we boarded the bus again to our hotel, Fishtail Lodge, situated on a peninsula with the Fewa Lake on one side and a forest-covered hill on the other. The hotel offered spectacular views of the Himalayas, especially the peak named Machapuchare or 'Fishtail,' which is considered sacred to Shiva.

In the morning we journeyed to the nearby Tarshi Palkhiel Tibetan Refugee Settlement, and there we were able to meet with the last living Tibetan shaman or *lhapa* in Nepal, Pau Nyima Dhondup.

Pau Nyima, now in his early 70's, was born in the Bungpa, Kepyand part of Tibet. He practices a shamanic tradition that has been passed down through his maternal bloodline from grandfather to grandson, or from uncle to nephew. When Pau Nyima entered puberty, he was spontaneously chosen by the spirits to continue his family's healing tradition. At that time, the powerful mountain deity, Nyenchen Thanglha entered his body and the young *lhapa* began having the visual and auditory initiatory experiences that signaled his calling.

Unfortunately, this critical time in Pau Nyima's initiation occurred during the period when China was



invading Tibet, and as a result, he spent the next ten years having spiritual experiences with no one to guide him. At the age of twenty-five his gift was recognised by the Buddhist lama, Sakya Trizin Gongma Rinpoche. The lama recognised that Nyima was a shaman with the power of Nyenchen Thanglha, the mountain spirit. Finally, when Pau Nyima was in his late twenties, he was able to apprentice with two other *lhapas*.

Like many other Tibetan people, Nyima was forced to flee his homeland, and since that time, he has resided in this settlement on the outskirts of Pokhara where he performs healings in his modest home.

When working with his patients, his first act was to set up his altar on a small table, and there were placed three bowls, piled high with rice. The center bowl represented Mount Kailash a mountain sacred to Tibetan Buddhists, Hindus, Bön practitioners and Nepali shamans alike, and against this center rice mound was sat a large *melong* or shaman's mirror.

As the ritual progressed, this mirror became a great hall, into which the shaman's deities arrive. To facilitate their arrival a *dipa* (butter lamp) was lit in front of this central bowl. The two other bowls heaped with rice were considered shrines, and into these miniature *thangkhas* (paintings) were placed. These were images of the protectors and deities who worked with the *lhapa*.

Accompanying these bowls, there were also bowls of water, milk and tea, as well as an incense burner.

While entering into his diagnostic trance, the *lhapa* played a double headed damaru drum in his right hand and rang a cone shaped Bön *shang* bell in his left. Once he received the information about his patient, he donned an elaborate headdress with wide rainbow wings on either side, then he chanted, danced and played the instruments wildly, until he was deeply inspirited.

While doing his work, the *lhapa* merged with Nyenchen Thanglha and other spirits, including a fierce wild canine that bit and sucked out illness from the patients' bodies. During these healings, the entranced shaman revealed actual objects to show the patient the sources of their illness.

The healings are so powerful that people from around the world have found their way down the grassy lane to his home to receive blessings by his spirits.

Since the *lhapa* only works with ten people at a time, we had the opportunity to visit his home over the course of two days. At each visit, the entire group crammed into Pau Nyima's humble home to bare witness and support each person's healing with their heart energy. While the *lhapa* worked, his brother assisted him and his daughter provided language translation for the group.

THE MOTHER SHAMAN

Back in Kathmandu again, we visited the famous Boudhanath stupa complex. There, we circumnavigated the stupa, turned prayer wheel after prayer wheel, witnessed monks and nuns in prayer and observed devotees prostrating themselves or sitting in sacred spaces reciting mantras with their prayer beads. It was in this area we also met the Tamang shaman Buddhi Maya Lama, who is better known as Aama Bombo or 'Mother Shaman.'

Aama Bombo began life in Nepal's North-central hill country. Aama's people are the indigenous inhabitants of the Himalayan regions of Nepal, and are the largest ethnic group found there. They are a Tibeto-Burmese speaking people, who trace their ancient ancestry to the Tibetan plateau.

Aama wanted to be a shaman from as early as five-years-old,

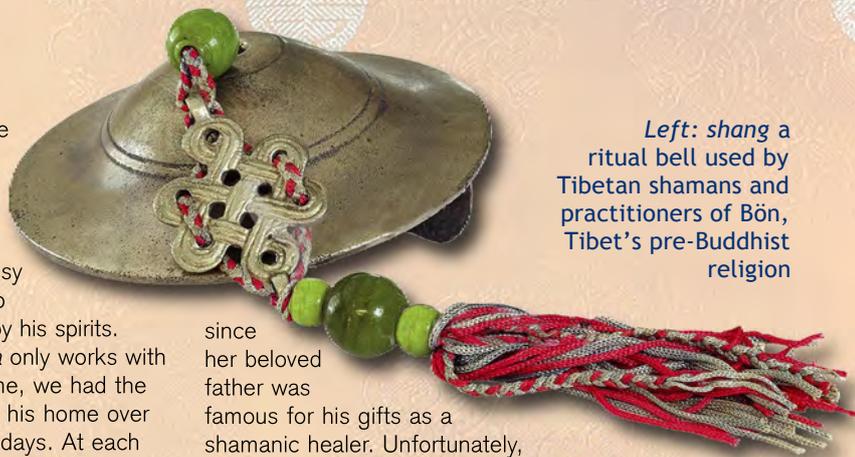
since her beloved father was famous for his gifts as a shamanic healer. Unfortunately, traditional Tamang culture prohibits women from practicing shamanism, and so her father discouraged her desire to follow in his footsteps.

When Aama was sixteen, she moved with her husband to his military residence in Kathmandu, and while she was in the city, her father grew ill. Before she was able to return home her father died. This was a terrible blow to her as she lost both her father and her connections to his spiritual world.

At the age of twenty-five, Aama suddenly began shaking uncontrollably, and her family took her to the hospital as she was thought to be mentally unstable - however soon the convulsions ended.

A while later, her shaking began again and continued, off and on, for fourteen months. However, this time Aama was fortunate to have been taken to a Buddhist lama who determined that her problem was spiritual in nature as the lama told her that the spirit of her late father was trying to work through her.

Aama's father had died without finding a suitable person who could receive his shamanic power, and his spirit believed that, in spite of the Tamang cultural prohibitions,



Left: shang a ritual bell used by Tibetan shamans and practitioners of Bön, Tibet's pre-Buddhist religion

Opposite: Tibetan lhapa (shaman) Pau Nyima Dhondup. He wears a five Dhyani Buddha crown which represents many things, including the elements of earth, air, fire, water and space. He wears a melong (mirror) around his neck and holds a sang bell in his one hand a large doubled headed damaru drum (often called a chod drum when large like this) in his other

(Photos © Larry Peters)

Below: Looking across towards Pokhara and the peak of Fishtail (Machapuchare)



it was only his daughter Aama who had a pure enough heart to work with the power of the gods and his other healing spirits.

And so, Aama immediately began to work with the spirit of her father, as well as the Goddess Kali, the monkey God Hanuman, and local deities of mountains, water, land and sky, as well as other spirits from nature.

At first, the transition to this experience was very difficult for her, as Aama found that it was nearly impossible to control the spirits' power. These spirits would often strike her patients quite sharply, and behave in an erratic manner, which frightened those who needed healing. Over time, Aama was able to resolve how she and her spiritual guides could work together in a harmonious way.

Since that time, Aama has continued her work of healing people. Each morning, she starts her day with prayers to Shiva, the deity that is most sacred to Nepalese shamans, and then proceeds back to her home near the Boudhanath stupa. There, she sees up to one hundred clients a day from all walks of life for healing, divination and blessing. Now seventy-three years old, Aama is widely recognised as a powerful shaman, healer and member of the Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers.

In her healings, we were seated in a room filled with beautiful *thangkas*, and each of us in turn, took a seat in front of her. Aama consulted her spirits, and then she cleansed us with a small broom, laid her hands on our heads and body, sang softly, and then offered us water. To sanctify this water for each healing, Aama poured a small amount into a copper cup and used a slender knife to stir it while she chanted prayers - this had the effect of imbuing the water with healing energies.

THE MOTHER OF THE WORLD

We had all experienced so many moving experiences on this journey, and they were all rounded out with a flight along the eastern range of the Himalayas.

Flying the aptly named 'Buddha Air,' we were seated in a small plane that afforded us each our own window. Once the mountains came into view, no one spoke a word, and at the half-way point in our flight we were able to have a close encounter with Mount Everest. The mountain is called Sagarmāthā in Nepali and Chomolungma in Tibetan, which means 'Goddess Mother of the World,' and there, at the roof of the world, we each said our prayers for all our relations and for Mother Earth herself.

On the final day of our Nepal adventure we had a ceremony of thanksgiving and celebration. The eldest man and eldest woman of our group blessed us with jamara (barley grass) that we had all sewn as seeds on our first day in Nepal. This grass was placed above our ear (men on their

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right ear and women on their left). On our foreheads was placed a vermilion *tika*, which is a mixture of rice, yogurt and powdered pigment. This *tika* blesses the wearer with abundance for the coming year. The red color also symbolises the blood ties that unite us all. There could have been no better way to end our journey to Nepal. We had been filled with so many sights, sounds, healings and other extraordinary experiences on our journey-- enough to fill many more pages. Like a wax seal on a letter, the *tika* felt like a way to hold the many blessings we received snugly inside of us.

Evelyn C. Rysdyk and C. Allie Knowlton LCSW, DCSW, are teachers of shamanism and healers in joint practice as 'Spirit Passages,' their training center for advanced experiential shamanism. As founding members of 'True North,' an integrated medical center in Falmouth, Maine, they also collaborate with physicians, nurses, a psychiatrist, naturopath and other complementary health practitioners. They are featured in the book 'Spirited Medicine: Shamanism in Contemporary Healthcare' (Society for Shamanic Practitioners, 2013).

Evelyn's latest book, 'Spirit Walking, A Course In Shamanic Power,' (RedWheel/Weiser, 2013) focuses upon the pivotal role healthy and vibrant relationships play in a shaman's ability to be effective in the world.

Bhola Banstola will be teaching in Maine on June 8 & 9, 2013. Spirit Passages is also organising another trip to Nepal with Bhola for October.

www.spiritpassages.com

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Larry Peters for the use of the photos of Aama Bombo and Pau Nyima Dhondup. www.lpshaman.com

Below: The shaman Aama Bombo in a ceremony with other Nepali shamans in Kathmandu

(Photo © Larry Peters)

