

ISA RESEARCH FORUM

Oracular Speech, Collective Consciousness, and the Ideology of Absence

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Seminar room 1, A-1030 Wien, Apostelgasse 23

In many parts of the world, including India, possession by gods and spirits is accompanied by an 'ideology of absence' according to which persons who are possessed have no memory of what they experienced or said during their trance. Yet many aspects of possession events seem to contradict this. How can we analyze oracular speech from a rational point of view, while still respecting local beliefs? In this essay, I attempt to answer this question based on ethnographic material from the Rawain region of the Central Himalayas. In this region there is a well-developed system of 'divine kingship' in which local gods rule small territories and solve disputes, partly by speaking through their oracles. Based on a number of case studies from this area, I argue that in many cases, these divine oracles are in fact articulating the collective consciousness of the communities that they represent.

William S. ('Bo') Sax studied at Banaras Hindu University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Washington (Seattle), where he received bachelor's degrees (high honours) in South Asian Studies as well as in Asian Languages and Literatures in 1980. From there he went to the University of Chicago, where he earned his M.A. in Anthropology in 1980, and his PhD in 1987. From 1987 to 1989 he was lecturer in Anthropology at Harvard University, and post-doctoral fellow in the Harvard Academy. After that he fulfilled a life-long dream by moving to Christchurch, New Zealand, where he taught Hinduism in the Department of Philosophy and Religious studies for eleven years. In 2000 he took up the Chair of Ethnology at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg. Prof. Sax has published extensively on pilgrimage, gender, theater, aesthetics, ritual healing and medical anthropology.



His major works include *Mountain Goddess: gender and politics in a Central Himalayan Pilgrimage* (1991); *The Gods at Play: Lila in South Asia* (1995); *Dancing the Self: personhood and performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal* (2002); *God of Justice: ritual healing and social justice in the Central Himalayas* (2008); and *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (2010, with Johannes Quack and Jan Weinhold).