



# A HEARTH WITH A BRIGHT FIRE

Nicholas Breeze Wood  
Talks to Bhola Banstola

About his work documenting the shamanic traditions of his homeland Nepal, and about a Shamanic Summit he is organising there in 2020

**Above:** Nepalese stand in their colourful ritual clothes

**Nicholas:** You've worked incredibly hard for many years, travelling the world, bringing the teachings of your Nepalese shamanic tradition to people. What has been your motivation for doing that?

**Bhola:** Learning and experiencing has deepened my understanding of the tradition and it has brought me a lot of clarity. It helped me to share with a new community - people in the West - who are 'evolving' in their view and understanding about the rituals, ceremonies and myths which have

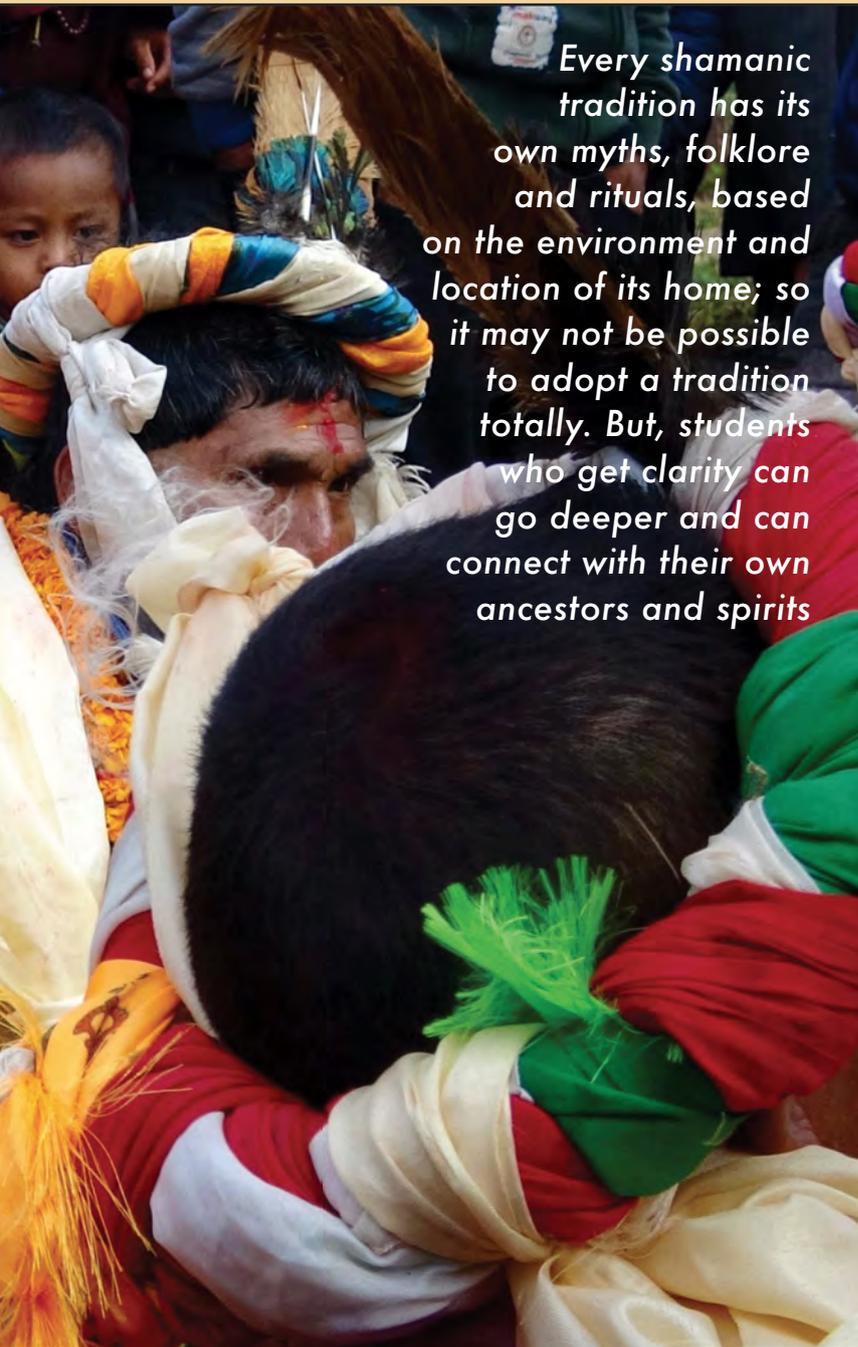
been passed on for generations in my culture. In Nepal - with the changes of recent times, such as the need for people to have more material possessions, and with people leaving the place of their birth in order to search for better possibilities in life - there is a general lack of interest in shamanism shown by the younger generation. They are not really interested very much about the traditional practices and the long lineage traditions of their ancestors.

By carrying the 'knowing,' which is deeply embedded in me, and with the renaissance - or at least a deep

interest - in 'reconnecting the ways of the ancestors,' an interest which is arising throughout the whole world at this time, I have been invited to travel to different corners of the world to share my tradition.

Sharing and teaching traditional ways of going deeper into the shamanic path has been a self-motivator for me, and this has motivated others in the path.

Every shamanic tradition has its own myths, folklore and rituals, all based on the environment and geographical location of its home; so it may not be possible to adopt a tradition totally. However, the



*Every shamanic tradition has its own myths, folklore and rituals, based on the environment and location of its home; so it may not be possible to adopt a tradition totally. But, students who get clarity can go deeper and can connect with their own ancestors and spirits*

left Nepalese stand in their colourful ritual clothes

The second documentary is; 'Honouring the Shamans and the Annual Celebration.' This film is about the services of the shamans to their communities, in the far west of Nepal, where the Khaas indigenous group live.

This documentary presents an overlap between their shamanic practices, and old Vedic practices, which co-exist in the society. Both traditions show great respect for each other. It is proof about how the Vedic Brahmana priests and Dhami-shamans work together. It also shows the role of traditional musicians, who accompany the shamans when they enter into a trance state by the means of specific rhythms to attract specific spirits. There is also a film of public ceremonies done to honour the shamans and the elders.

In order to fully develop this project, there is a need for an active and expert collaboration by documentary film makers, technicians, and of course, some financial support. But, we are doing well nonetheless, going at our own pace.

### Why is this work important?

Well firstly, it's imperative for us now to understand the healing and spiritual work of different communities, who are scattered about in far off places.

Secondly, it has an importance for the respective communities, because it is a document of source material, and is a reference for future generations.

A third aspect is it brings awareness to the communities about the importance of their shamanism, because for so many reasons, many traditions have dwindled over the past years.

And finally, a fourth reason is that it encourages the next generation to preserve their heritage - which has been transmitted to them by their ancestors - so that it is not lost in the days to come.

### How is the work of documenting them going?

So far, I've done all of it by myself, gathering the raw video from different places in Nepal, as well as some other countries. Now I'm working on creating a team in the

participants and students who get clarity can go deeper, and - with different ways and ceremonies - can connect with their own ancestors and spirits.

### In recent years I've seen you working hard to document and preserve information about the Nepalese shamanistic traditions. How has that work developed?

This project is a self-motivating one, coming from a profound desire I have to put the stories, healing and cultural aspects of 'the

people' together, and so I have been collecting videos of pilgrimages, healing sessions and ceremonies. Lately, I have found out that creating documentary films is not a lesser form than writing a book on the subject.

Three short trailers and two documentary films are ready to go out. One is about the 100th birthday celebration of my father Moti Banstola, under the title, 'Century Long, The journey of a Shaman.' This year my father celebrates ninety-two years of healing and service to his community.

field, with technical expertise, so they can collect both film and stories from different parts of Nepal, in order to create an archive.

It is much more complicated than I had envisioned three years ago when I started, but in my way, I have done some work. Nevertheless, in future projects, there is a considerable need for support in different ways.

**Are the shamanic traditions of Nepal and the world under threat? And if so, why? And if so, what do we need to do about it - why should we care?**

Yes, I think that the shamanic traditions throughout the world really are under threat, and yet - on the other hand - there is a growing interest in them, and a revival of shamanism in new ways. This is even happening in places where shamanism has been either put aside, or forgotten. And this has helped some communities and cultures to deeply reflect on its importance.

The worldwide travel of people to study authentic shamanic traditions

- and some tradition carriers who have gone out, carrying the the message of their ancestors to other parts of the world - has generated curiosity and interest.

But there is a flip side of this of course, such as the rampant influx of money to poverty-stricken societies - where shamanism was, or is the backbone - has threatened the living heritage.

In order to protect and preserve shamanic traditions, the younger generations should be educated about the importance of their lineage tradition - which is the soul of every member of that society.

The elders should be more generous in sharing and transmitting knowledge too. Medical set-ups should be trained to diagnose both the physical and spiritual symptoms of a disease, and look for the cause of a diseases by looking at the disharmony that has created it.

The traditions must be shared -or at least those parts of the traditions which it is possible to openly share - to wider communities.

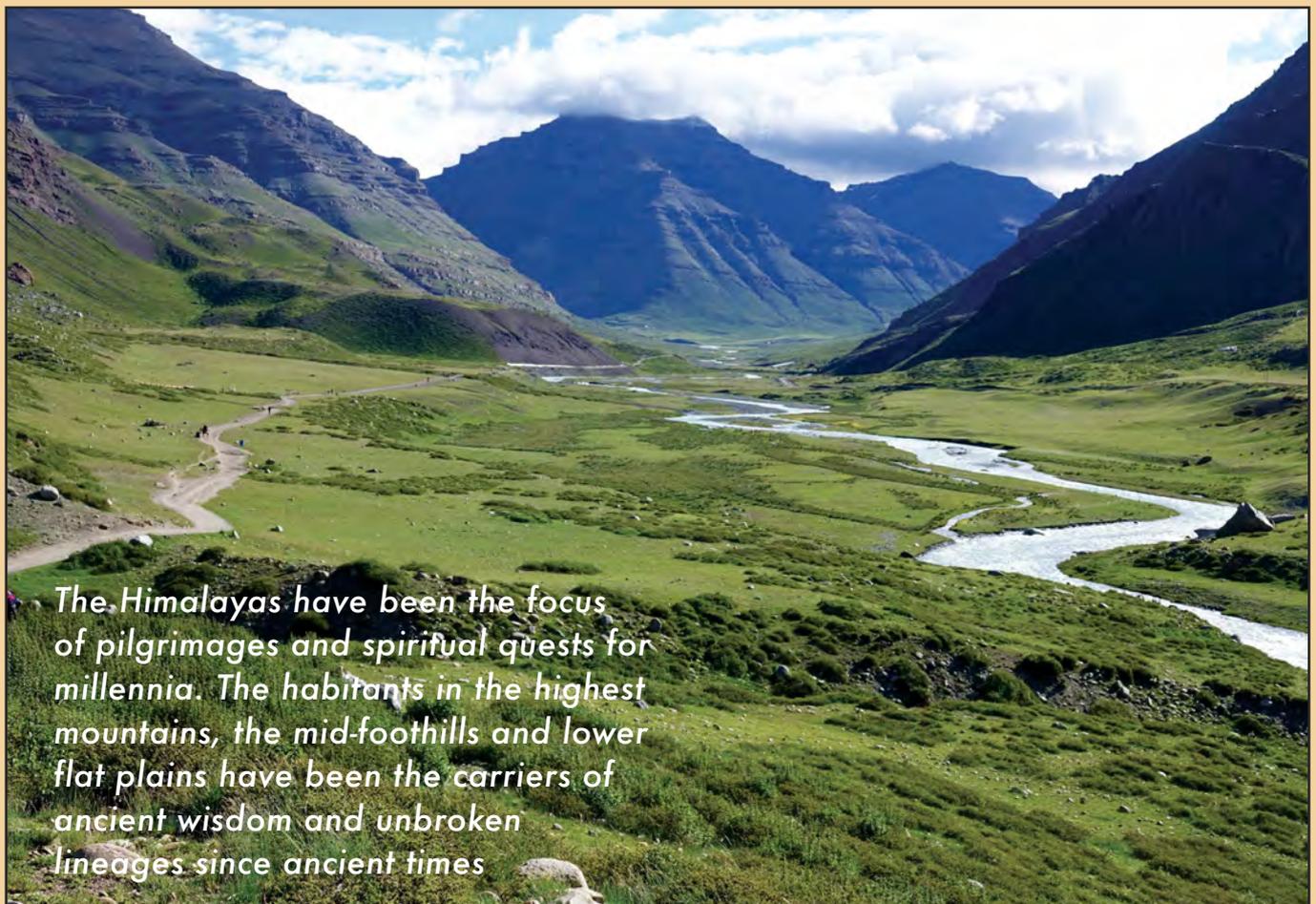
It is time to care about these traditions; if we lose this chance, they may not remain much longer; although, of course, the spirits will remain.

In order to take care of these spirits, the spirits choose a person who needs to work hard to create purity within - and without - themselves, so that a safe space is created for the spirits to be incorporated, to come close, or into that person.

As the world shifted from a nomadic to an agrarian society, to a cosmopolitan urban culture, it was easy to leave everything behind and brand it as 'superstitious.' In order to preserve, transmit and keep these - the most ancient of human heritages - flourishing, there is a very big need to document, make films and write books, things which can be easily understood.

We need to give regular teachings and transmissions, create regular gatherings and exchanges among the tradition carriers and students. We need to

*Below: the beautiful landscape of Nepal*



*The Himalayas have been the focus of pilgrimages and spiritual quests for millennia. The habitants in the highest mountains, the mid-foothills and lower flat plains have been the carriers of ancient wisdom and unbroken lineages since ancient times*

show respect and recognise tradition carriers and teachers. If we lose them we will become 'body without a soul,' 'food without salt,' 'a brain without reasoning,' 'trees without leaves,' 'a river without waters,' 'a hearth without fire,' 'a house without a roof.'

**You are inviting shamans and medicine people from all over the world to Nepal in October 2020. Why? What is the aim of this, and what do you hope to achieve?**

Yes, I am, and the main reason for organising this summit is to share the diverse Nepali shamanic traditions and culture with the world community. I want to do this through the participation of global shamans and medicine men and women.

The Himalayas have been the focus of pilgrimages and spiritual quests for millennia. The habitants in the highest mountains, the mid-foothills and lower flat plains have been the carriers of ancient wisdom and unbroken lineages since ancient times. Untouched by outside influences, and undiluted by other traditions, the Nepali-Himalayan regions - and their surrounding areas - have maintained pure earth-based animistic and shamanistic traditions.

Therefore, global tradition carriers, and long lineage teachers, are warmly invited to participate and share their traditions, in order to encourage our brothers and sisters to preserve and share their own ancient wisdom.

This summit's main objective is to create a concrete relationship between all the world's traditions, and for us all to meet, and hopefully continue to meet from time to time. This meeting will be in Nepal, and it will be the first time such a meeting has happened in Nepal itself - all these diverse groups meeting under the context of shamanism.

We hope to create a healthy world relationship amongst all the shamans and medicine people, so as to enliven and foster a strong bond between them all. We need to chalk out plans for the conservation of sacred places in nature and create common ceremonies and dances, so that we can join in - anytime, and from any part of the world - for peace;



*Above: elder and young apprentice shamans perform a ceremony*

healing and to support each other.

Environmental protection, and teachings about the importance of the spirits of nature have been carried out for millennia by shamans and community elders, so to share and work together would surely help us all, on many levels.

**What are the plans you have for this gathering?**

Well, we have plans to present and share the shamanic traditions from all of the seven provinces of Nepal, and these will include pre-shamanic ceremonies, as well as group healings. There will also be the presentation of papers, and

cultural events, such as traditional dances from each group.

And, in the same way, there will be representation from other groups globally, where the delegates will speak about their own traditions and share ceremonies. The summit will be addressed by Nepali cultural experts, academicians, shamans and healers.

After the summit, the participants and presenters are welcome to join Nepali shamans on pilgrimages to two powerful shamanic spirit renewal power places in the mid-Himalayas.

**What do you want the people coming to it to get from it?**

*Below: a line of shamans perform a ceremony honouring the nagas while they stand in water*





**Above:**  
Nepalese  
shamans  
performing a  
ceremony

I know people all over the world who have an interest in shamanism, and I want the worldwide participants - those who love shamanism, ancient healing traditions; and the Himalayas and the vibrant Nepali culture too - to be most welcome.

In the four days of the summit, they can learn, and gain a direct understanding of the importance of these ancient healing traditions, and their application and relevance today.

There will be healing sessions too, with active participation from the public, and we are planning several empowerment ceremonies, performed by different elders and shamans.

And on a more academic level, books and documentary films about Nepali and other shamanic traditions will also be available, and round table conferences will also be part of the summit.

#### **Is this open to everyone?**

Oh yes, absolutely, anyone interested can join this summit, but a pre-reservation is needed; you have to book, you can't just turn up on the day so to speak..

#### **Do you think shamans need to get together? Is it important for them to share their teachings together?**

For me, I would say most certainly yes. It is because of the lack of getting together, the lack of trust between them - and not knowing each other - that the traditions are in such a diluted state. I think it is crucial to share our personal experiences, share our traditions as much as the traditional communities allow, and to support each other, in order to create an active worldwide community that helps maintain each other's uniqueness and identity.

#### **How do the people of the West get to establish a deep and strong shamanic tradition? We don't have one, so is it Ok to borrow traditions from other cultures - like Nepal or Mongolia?**

I would say, first and foremost, there is a need for homework. People need to find a teacher from any lineage they feel drawn to, and get a rigorous training for however long a time as may be needed.

This kind of training helps us to establish a healthy relationship with the ancestors, and at the same time generates a cordial relationship with the spirit keepers of the land and the environment where we are. The old humans, they made shrines and stone structures, or shrines with sacred trees. These incorporated and

presented the dream reality, held it during their active shamanic journeys.

Following a genuine and severe path, and creating a new community of like-minded people can help us to connect with our ancestors. And by the support of the ancestors, through journey work and rituals, it is possible to recover - if they still exist - the lineage of community, the lineage shamans and rituals of that path.

It is possible to learn from anyone, or from sources anywhere, but this does not necessitate the adoption of sacred attire, ritual costumes and sacred objects. When the relationship to the spirits is being cultivated, and the spirits harnessed, there is no need for outer gowns and elaborate objects; a layperson in a simple dress can easily do work, without anyone's knowledge, in a sacred way.

#### **What can we do to help the world's shamanic traditions be strong and healthy?**

Create communities and active shamanic groups, educate children from a young age about the importance of tradition, ancestry and spirituality. Teach them how they need to respect their tradition - and respect others too - and how they need to learn explicit knowledge about the environment and ecology.

For the survival of shamanic practices, and to help keep them alive, regular gatherings, discussions, and sharing within the lineage tradition - and with other lineage carriers - is critical.

#### **What do we do about New Age teachings that weaken the traditions and share or teach false things?**

Modern thoughts and ways are the offshoots of traditions from some corner of the planet or another. When there are no traditional teachers to transmit the tradition, but there are interested people, these people will look for a fast track.

The New Age, modern approach is a product of an accelerating time, product of a hunger for learning, and a desire to receive a transmission immediately. It is about making a trademark. That is in part why there is

sometimes a reluctance on the part of the tradition keepers to share teachings and empowerment transmissions.

I have found that everything is needed for the human spiritual evolution, and all things contribute to that, but there is need for the lead person to either be chosen by the spirits, or by a group of people from a true and real shamanic tradition.

**We live in such a time of change - not all of it good - what do we need right now? How can shamanism and the ancient sacred traditions help humanity?**

There are still vast possibilities as to what we can do to keep the fire of shamanism alive and healthy.

The first thing is to help the cultures in which it is still alive to preserve it, and make it more accessible - both within that culture, and also to the public.

Secondly, we need to learn to generate a strong bond of relationship with the traditions, and receive teachings and empowerments, and practise what is possible for us.

The third thing we can do is to help translate the oral wisdom of these cultures into a written form, and document it with pictures and videos of the ways of working which are still alive. And we need to meet regularly and share that work. But we must be careful not to interpret that traditional knowledge, if the person who collects it and writes it down is not a part of the lineage of the community from where the knowledge came.

I would say that the backbone of all civilization is animism or shamanism, in all its different forms. If we go deep into any established religion, we find that most of them have a base in animism or shamanism.

Shamanism and animism help us to recognise and remember that we are all related, and connected at so many levels. We are the creation of the same elements, just in different forms.

From a shamanic point of view: honouring the ancestors and nature is a form of self-honour. Sacred rhythmic drumming and singing create a bridge, which connects all

beings and realms. Ceremonies open us to multiple dimensions, which a rational mind cannot grasp.

Respect for Mother Earth, Father Sky, Sister Stars, and all the rest of creation is fundamental. All that is created carries a spirit, and that needs protection, respect and a recognition of the cycle of change.

Personally, I think at the moment, reminding people we need to protect all the pollinators, in order to keep life going on our earth, is the most important message of shamanism and all the world's sacred traditions.

It is time we revisited the ways of our ancestors, their sacred visions and views of the environment and ecology. We need to learn and practise how they respected all that has been created.

It is time to care about the sacred ways; if we lose this chance, they may not remain much longer.

And as I said before, if we lose them we will become like 'a body without a soul,' 'food without salt...'

Bhola Banstola is a traditional long lineage carrier Jhankri-shaman from Nepal. He travels worldwide to share his tradition and has organised experiential shamanic learning trips and pilgrimages to Nepal and the Himalayas for more than two decades.

A co-written book of his tradition 'The Nepalese Shamanic Path: Practices for Negotiating the Spirit World' is available in leading bookshops.

By his own efforts, he is documenting the shamanic healing practices from different communities of Nepal for the benefit of the next generation.

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Details about the Nepalese Shamanic Summit in 2020  
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*Below:  
drums  
belonging  
to Nepalese  
shaman's  
during a  
ceremony*

