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Death of a Headman or Shaman's Logic

Philippe Sagant

The events that follow occurred in the sixties, in north-eastern Nepal among the Tibeto-Burmese speaking Yakthumba, or Limbu as the Nepali call them.

Two brothers, both headmen, were locked in a struggle for power. The first, and eldest, had temporarily given up on local action. He was looking to a national position. The second, the unhappy hero of the tale, seized the occasion to consolidate his position: he rendered justice, extended his jurisdiction and grew wealthy. He was criticized for overstepping the remaining rights that the king of Nepal had left the Yakthumba headman of the time: he imposed excessive fines and made use of violence. He held hostages unlawfully. And above all, he was accused of settling cases which should by rights have been judged in Nepali courts.

At long last a coalition of malcontents leagued together: they lodged complaints against him, and proceedings were instituted. At this time the whole country was in the throes of major reform which, among others, put an end to the powers of the Yakthumba headmen. A prefect sent by the king of Nepal arrived from Kathmandu. He took the Yakthumba headman with him to the neighboring valley where he had just established his headquarters. And as punishment he sent him high into the mountains, near the Tibetan border, where, with the aid of a handful of Nepali soldiers, he was to set up a check post at the gateway leading out of the village of Walunchung and to collect customs duties on the trans-Himalayan trade route.

Unfortunately, there was a long-standing political feud between the household of the Tibetan headman of Walunchung and that of the Yakthumba headman. The Yakthumba headman stayed up at his check post for six months. And the Tibetan headman made him pay dearly for his former affronts.

When the Yakthumba headman came back down to his own village, he was a changed man. He who used to have boundless energy just sat on a bench in the sun, in front of his house, downcast, not saying a word for days on end. He was a broken man. People said 'his face is hot,' or something more like 'he has lost face.' They said that his life force,¹ the force that dwells at the top of the head, had received a direct blow.

Some weeks later, the Yakthumba headman was bitten, while in the forest, by a snake. The men with him made a tourniquet and took turns carrying him home as fast as possible. He was in pain. As soon as they got him back, they burned the wound deeply with a firebrand. His eighteen-year-old son immediately sent his men out into the valley with orders to bring back the greatest shamans, those reputed to be the most powerful. The headman from a nearby village even came with a Western-trained Nepali doctor, but not having the necessary medication, he could do nothing. And when the shamans began their ceremonies, he pretended to be asleep.

Later one of the shamans gave me an account of the events. He felt that things had been badly handled from the start: before burning the wound, incense should have been offered to Yuma, the Grandmother, one of the major Yakthumba divinities, guardian of the house and the body: this had not been done, and Yuma had become angry. This reasoning seemed to me a subsequent reconstruction to make sense of events that had been learned only later.

However that may be, all sorts of rituals were performed. The whole house was in an uproar. With the help of his mother and the neighboring headman, the son had bravely taken matters in hand. He saw his father in increasing pain. He realized fairly quickly that the rituals were hav-

ing no effect and that something else had to be done. He confronted the shamans with their responsibilities. A sort of council was held to try to save the patient; the shamans decided to kill a cow.

Kill a cow! A stupefying decision! In Nepal, the last Hindu kingdom, killing a cow was one of the five major crimes in the legal code,² equivalent to murdering a Brahman or the worst type of incest. It must also be pointed out that, in these times of political change, the Hindu gods were beginning to prevail over the Yakthumba gods, who had so far managed to preserve their potency.

The cow was killed. But the violation of this major prohibition had no effect. On the contrary, soon afterwards the patient's condition steadily worsened. In his delirium he said he heard a goat bleating. Those in the house understood: one of his souls had already left him to set out on the paths to the other world, the paths of unnatural death. And sure enough, the man died within the next two days.

The death of the headman came as no surprise to anyone in the village. When I later returned to the village, those who spoke to me about it made three succinct remarks, often virtually the same. First of all, they said that 'killing the cow was the only thing to do.' Above all, they repeated that 'getting bitten by a snake was bound to happen.' And they would add: 'It's true, when someone has a 'hot face,' he can't live like that for long, something has to be done.'

What interests me in this affair is the relation the Yakthumba themselves see between three things: the transgression of a major prohibition, the notion of 'hot face,' and the snakebite. Moreover, the consensus of the various testimonies seems important: if people offer the same explanation, there is no doubt some logic in the relationship they see between the three facts. It may be that this logic is different from ours, but I would like to understand it.

To enter into this reasoning, I have to say a few words about some very general frameworks of thought: first of all, time, which they conceive differently from us. Next, space, which, like time, is not the same. Finally I will try to show that the notions of life and death, health and sickness, life force, pride, wealth, power, and luck are loosely linked to ideas about time and space: and these elements are all bound up with one another. These notions can be apprehended as a highly ramified system, of which I will be presenting only a few aspects.

The main object of this article is to compare for the logic behind this story about Yakthumba shamans applies not only to shamans and not only to Yakthumba ones; beyond shamanic cures, it underlies many other institutions in a

number of other Asian societies, large and small, old and contemporary. I will try to evoke a few of these.

The Age of Catastrophes

In Tibet, during the reign of the Yarlung kings (7th-9th centuries), mankind was thought to pass through different ages. These ages³ lasted thousands of years. There was the distant time of origins: a thousand legends tell how mankind emerged from primordial chaos. The founder of the dynasty appears on a mountain top; he kills a wild yak that has charged him; the whole population makes him their king. This era, when kings seemed to possess the strength of a wild animal, lasts ten thousand years. It is characterized by harmony, strength and vitality.

Then comes the first decline. Until this time, a fiend named Zozo, had been kept captive underground. Unfortunately he is set free by King Bronzileg: the king's body is stricken and two elements go out of him. This is the beginning of the fall. An evil religion makes its appearance. The power of the fiends is on the rise.

Mankind goes from bad to worse. The fiends' influence grows, little by little the gods withdraw, and because of the fiends, humans behave more and more badly: they forsake religion, their force declines, their lifespan shrinks; suffering, sickness and hunger increase. Their bodies grow smaller. This is a time of allpervading feuds, political power started to crumble.

Finally the age of catastrophes arrives. The earth shakes, the heavens begin to slip. Fiends overwhelm the sun and the moon: there is an eclipse. A red wind blows over the earth. Harvests fail due to a succession of hail, floods and drought. On earth a black-faced king has now seized power. Thieves are admired. When a rich man makes a joke, people laugh, even if it isn't funny. Now everyone disregards the bonds of kinship that can tie people together. No one can tell an honest man from a rogue. Women become wiser than men, or at least that's what they think. They are now the ones who make the advances. One lover after another passes through their bed at night, and they are still not satisfied. They make trouble everywhere they go. They set the son against his father. Bad times have come: men no longer know shame. They no longer have any power, any religion. There are only two ways out of such a situation: either the disgrace remains and it is the end of the world, or the disgrace disappears and the gods return.

In Yarlung, there is a close link between the king's body, society and the cosmos. In the first age of decline, the king's body loses its power. Society itself disintegrates,

and with it the world. It is therefore logical to think that, conversely, if the king's body is strong, society will go by the rules and the cosmos will remain in order: no eclipses, no mountains that crumble.

The idea that a human could have power over eclipses was already present in Ancient China, some thousands of years ago. It is also present in many small populations today.⁴

A few years ago the Yakthumba, the ethnic group of the man who died of a snakebite, used to say that the shaman was the master of the cosmos: if he raised a finger, rain would fall to make the fields rich. If he drew a line in the sky, lightning would not cross it. He could step over the rainbow.

More than a thousand years after Yarlung, the Yakthumba were also in the habit of saying that if someone commits incest, the wind rises, the tiger prowls around the village roaring, lightning strikes, the ground opens up. And hail begins to fall.⁵ One year this actually happened: in April the first corn leaves had just come out when a hailstorm struck the fields. The old people began grumbling: 'Hail in April, now! Since when?' Later a wild cat wandered into the village in the middle of the night: people got up and in their darkened houses began to beat on pots and pans.⁶ Later again that season, when the corn was ripe, a whirlwind devastated the crop. That was the last straw! The headmen and the shaman met on the terrace of one of the houses. They said: 'we've got to find out what's going on in this village.' They began to investigate. And a few nights later two young people ran away, a boy and a girl. They had been spending time together for several months; at night they danced, and they didn't have the right. In the end they committed incest. And so the shaman, together with others, performed a major ritual: he 'closed' the village; he purified it; he called back the gods.

As we can see, the ideas of Yarlung can be found among the Yakthumba: disorder in society attracts natural catastrophes: if incest occurs, then hail falls, a wild animal wanders into the village, a whirlwind ravages the crops, etc. The shaman steps in: he tries to find out what is wrong. If a Westerner finds it hard to believe that incest brings on hail, it's up to them! But they have to admit that hail leads to the flight of the incestuous couple. And so the village is closed once more: there is no longer any reason for hail to fall. Because of his power, the Yakthumba is indeed the master of the cosmos, like the king at Yarlung.

This logic is not ours. But it is a logic all the same and it is the basis of efficacious practices. And its mechanisms are as old as Ancient China. As Granet once said: 'It is no use

acting on the outside if the inside is not in order.' No use trying to control hailstorms if there is incest in the village.

At Yarlung it was also said that, in these times of trouble threatened with catastrophes, there are nevertheless still a few wise men who go on practicing the religion of old. But these survivors of a bygone era occupy an odd position: instead of advocating a return to a past order, they wish to speed up the course of time. At their own risk, they take this task upon themselves. In order to hasten the advent of the age of catastrophes, they voluntarily become outlaws. In their own lifetime they act in such a way that lightning may fall, the mountain may crumble and floods may sweep away the village.

These wise men who would speed up the course of time are already in modern times. In 1840, at the time of the first opium war, Manchuria had just endured the Western gunboat blockade. The doors were now open to colonial powers. Awakened from a long sleep, secret societies were recruiting: Boxers, Triads, Red Spikes. They too had their wise men. Not only did they confront foreign barbarians in the major ports, they also widely transgressed the Confucian order to hasten the day when the stars would fall from the sky and the earth quake: that would be proof that the Son of Heaven had lost his heavenly mandate. Mankind could take its bath of youth in the primordial chaos and step out perhaps with the animal strength of its origins. And once again the world would be clear. In fact one of the boxers said just as much himself: if he practiced boxing, it was to make the rain fall. Like the Yakthumba shaman or the king of Yarlung, through his art, he was master of the cosmos.

Of course, the gods determine the course of time in the first place. In Ancient India, when Vishnu sees that the world order is disintegrating, the creator god turns destroyer, so that the dilapidated cosmos may recover its substance as quickly as possible.⁸

But humans, too, can act on time: they can stabilize it as did the king of Yarlung at the height of his power or the Yakthumba shaman who drove the incestuous couple to flight.

Conversely, by killing a cow on behalf of the Yakthumba headman bitten by the snake, the shamans acted like the Yarlung wise men who wanted time to go faster, or the Manchurian boxer who turned to banditry to hasten the age of catastrophes; they gave the Yakthumba headman two choices: either disappear lock, stock, and barrel, struck down by lightning or swept away by the floodwaters, or recover the primeval force as quickly as possible.

Beyond the Pale

Having started with the notion of cyclical time, we are now in possession of a few facts about space: in the account of the hailstorm, it is said that the shaman draws a line that the lightning cannot cross. When the wild cat enters the village, the people in their houses beat on pots and pans: if there is an inside, this means there is an outside. And once the incestuous couple has gone, the village is closed behind them by a 'closing ritual' led by the shaman.⁹

It is on the notion of space that I would like to concentrate my analysis. What is referred to as the age of catastrophes is the result, in terms of space, of the passage from an enclosed world, protected by the gods, to a world that has become open: as the result of the transgression of a taboo, a rampart has fallen. The forces from 'beyond the pale' come sweeping through, or those of the 'forest' or those of the 'wild world.'

Civilization, as well as the strength, wealth and 'luck' that go with it, is always an enclosed world. M. Granet expresses the same idea when he says: 'the world is in order only when it is enclosed, like a dwelling.'¹⁰ Then the gods stand guard. The idea is valid for the whole of Asia and, so it seems, well beyond, down to the present day. In Cambodia, for instance, in 1970, during the civil war, when Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge were fighting at Lon Nol, Sihanouk had a helicopter lay down around the city of Pnom Penh a protective line of sand that had been blessed by Buddhist monks.¹¹

In other words, when the village closed behind them, the two incestuous young Yakthumba were condemned to advance beyond the pale. Can one come back alive from such a journey?

Another Yakthumba, Motta, told me that one year he joined a small group of migrants to try to earn a little money across the border in Sikkim. They left their village, which was near the border, and walked through Chyangthapu forest. Night was coming on and it looked like rain: they took shelter under a boulder. Sometime around midnight an exceedingly violent storm broke. Lightning fell, and the clap was so loud that two of the men remained deaf until the next day. In the morning, the sky was blue again, and the forest calm: they were curious to see where the lightning had hit and, next to their boulder, they discovered the bodies of two young people, struck down by the bolt, a boy and a girl. A few hours later they came to the other side of the forest: there was a village nearby, and they raised the alarm. The villagers said that they already knew: the day before, at nightfall, the young couple had run away. They had committed incest.

Motta said that, until the lovers are separated, lightning, wild beasts, the earth opening up are a constant threat: they are like banished criminals who have lost the gods' protection, condemned to live in the terror that drives people mad. As Granet says again, writing on Ancient China: 'To banish a man beyond the pale is to kill him.'¹² And the Yakthumba say of such a man *hara shi*, 'he dies fast.'

And yet people are banished and manage to return alive and well from beyond the pale: in Bhutan, for instance, there is a 'hidden country' inhabited by a small population called Gdung, of which little is known: These people claim that their ancestors came from Tibet a long time ago, as companions of a Yarlung prince, son of king Thisong Detsen, who built the Samye monastery in Lhasa in 775. The prince's name was Murum Tsanpo, also known as Khyi-kha Ra-thod.¹³

The texts say that Thisong Detsen had four wives and that Khyi-kha Rathod was the offspring of the fourth. The king honored each of his wives in turn. In the case of the fourth wife, however, three years went by without a visit from the king. And yet, it became obvious that the queen was expecting a child. Everyone at court wondered who the father was. But a shepherd and a beggar were the only ones who knew. The shepherd had seen the queen in her palace coupling with a billy goat on the lower floor. The beggar, on the other hand, had seen her on the upper floor, with a dog. When the ten lunar months had elapsed, the queen gave birth to a child, which she kept with her. It was not until he was nine years old that the boy was presented to the king. And then, in the yard in front of the Samye monastery, the whole court saw that the child's skull was shaped like a goat's (ra-thod) and that his face was like that of a dog (khyi-kha). The king was horror-stricken. The birth of such a monster was the sign of imminent catastrophes for Tibet. It was decided to banish the child and mother, and the mother's attendants. The bon-po priests and Buddhist monks presided over the banishment on the occasion of an important annual ceremony. Each of those banished was given a sack of seed. And they were expelled beyond the pale, that is beyond the borders of the kingdom of Yarlung, just as the incestuous couple was sent beyond the borders of the Yakthumba village.

There is, however, an important difference between the incestuous couple and king Khyi-kha Ra-thod. The incestuous lovers never came back from the pale; they were struck down by a bolt of lightning. King Khyi-kha Ra-thod, on the other hand, managed to establish himself in Bhutan. And the Gdung, who are the descendants of the queen's attendants, are still there today, proof that the prince of Yarlung, after his long trek across the lands beyond the

pale, reached the other shore, alive, and was taken once again under the protection of the gods.

It is therefore not possible to affirm, like the Yakthumba speaking through Motta, and the Ancient Chinese speaking through Granet, that to banish a man beyond the pale is always with the aim of killing him. And yet the absolute conviction expressed in these two instances cannot but raise a question. If we are to understand the dangers a man encounters on his journey beyond the pale, we would do well to learn more about the nature of this place.

In Tibetan, the word *mtha'* designates the border, the enclosure. R. A. Stein's etymological study of the term and of others associated with it¹⁴ sheds light on the nature of the lands bordering the enclosed space where the world is in order and the gods stand guard.

The land beyond the pale is perpetually wrapped in a thick dark red, almost black fog which is reminiscent of the red wind that sweeps over the earth in the age of catastrophes.

There is life beyond the pale, there are beings. But those who live there are thick-skulled barbarians, the dregs of the population, low-down evil-minded beings, primitive and diabolical, who live in a state of heresy, low-life idiots, blind from birth or worse, people who don't even know how to talk.

The man who wanders beyond the pale also has red eyes. Weighed down by a kind of torpor, he is preyed upon by terrifying boredom, eaten away by melancholy, overwhelmed by a deep depression. His soul is deprived of light.

Driven by terror, he gives himself up to violence. He is on the verge of going mad.

It is with space as it is with time: the worlds are 'nested.'

'The world is in order only when it is enclosed like a dwelling. Then the gods stand guard.' What is true for the Manchurian Empire, the kingdom of Yarlung or the Yakthumba village is also true for the human body. The body, too, is in order only when it is enclosed like a dwelling. On the inside the rules are applied: and so the gods stand guard on the shoulders and the head. The person is lively and joyful, bursting with health, vitality and strength. He is 'lucky.'

Conversely, beyond the enclosed orderly world lie the lands beyond the pale where barbarity holds sway. These spaces of torpor and terror are in the grip of wild beasts and epidemics. They lie open to bombardment by the cosmos: lightning, the crumbling mountain, the slipping heavens, the hailstorm, the rising floodwaters; the gods have vanished.

And so too it is with the human body. The man beyond the pale lives with his 'body open.'¹⁵ Following the breaking of a taboo, a return to barbarity, his soul has forsaken him. A rampart has fallen. Then weakness, illness, terror, confusion of mind, prostration, shame make an appearance. And the body is laid open to every aggression, as the village is to hailstorms or Manchuria to foreign arms.

The man with an 'open body' is a common notion in the literature; such a man is logically doomed to an unnatural death. When a Yakthumba falls to his death from a bridge, the first thing the shaman does when the corpse is found is to 'close' the bodily orifices. For the dead man obviously had an 'open body.' Otherwise he would not have died. And that is why it is thought that those who die an unnatural death deserve what they got: no one knew but somehow they were living outside the law of the land.

Let us return to the death of the Yakthumba headman: the shaman's decision to kill a cow can be understood in terms of time. But it is in terms of space that the snakebite must be explained. The man had an 'open body': no one can live for long in such a state.

The Primeval Force

As we advance, we are obliged to recognize that in trying to answer two simple questions, about space and time, material from a variety of populations has been piling up and becoming increasingly burdensome, dragging at our feet like a ball and chain, and raising questions that have not even been formulated. Let us therefore try to pose some of them.

Wondering about the logic behind the slain cow made me think about other shocking transgressions. Incest came up twice. And bestiality, with the king with the skull of a billy goat and the face of a dog, a being that was neither altogether human nor altogether animal. Now if we join Lévi-Strauss in considering that the incest taboo is what founds human society, we begin to see a common thread running through all these transgressions. They all send a civilized human back to the barbaric state beyond the pale, back to a time before his separation from the animals and the gods: life was there, but man did not yet exist.

Other material raises the question of constant ambiguity: wise men attempt to tip the scales towards the age of catastrophes, but unlike the others, they do it in the name of law and order. This is also true of the headman bitten by the snake: he is placed in the situation of a man who speeds up the course of time, the sooner to bring back the golden age. But at the same time, he has a 'hot face' and an 'open body,' and he remains downcast like a wild barbarian.

A similar ambivalence characterizes the fate of those who are condemned to wander beyond the pale. Banished or having run away for fear of banishment, they all start from the same point: backed against the wall of a civilized world that has closed the door on them, leaving no choice but to advance towards the land of torpor, engulfed by the red fog beyond the pale. But the very night they ran away, the incestuous couple of Chyangthapu forest was struck by lightning. Whereas king Billy-goat-skull Dog-face survived: when all have committed a major transgression, why a violent death for the ones and a kingdom for the other? Is it only a matter of chance, as Westerners might think?

Whatever the answer may be, one thing is certain: one goes beyond the pale with a 'hot face,' downcast, sometimes in a state of terror that can lead to madness. But those who manage to come out alive return with the 'animal force' of primeval man: they have conquered their confusion of mind. There is no middle ground: there is only an unnatural death or renewed vitality with health, strength and wealth. Between the two, beyond the pale, something happens then. And that is what has intrigued me from the start.

In Asia or in other parts of the world, there are still communities that say their founding ancestor came from somewhere else, suddenly emerging from beyond the pale and settling in the land where his descendants live today. They even sometimes say that the ancestor was pursuing a wild animal with horns and that he built his house on the spot where the animal was slain, thus demonstrating that he was once again protected by the gods.

In these small societies, each year at the changing of the seasons, it is said that the gods leave the country, which becomes 'open,' like barbarian lands beyond the pale. It is therefore indispensable that at least one man be able to repeat the ancestors feat, for if not, the community will vanish, lock, stock and barrel. Like the ancestor, this man sets out into the forest in search of a wild animal.

These 'ritual hunts'¹⁶ are attested in ancient times. They were already highly elaborate in the fifth century BC among the Salva of Ancient India. They also existed in Ancient China several thousand years ago. They were found over an enormous geographical area: in Asia and Europe, as well as in America.

This type of hunt was still in existence a short time ago among the Sharwa of Amdo, in eastern Tibet. In the spring-time, when the animals would go up to pasture, the little spot of civilization on the valley floor was left 'open' to the 'wild' world of the forest. In the fall, when the herds came back down, the place had to be 'closed' once more and the

protecting gods recalled: this was the object of the ritual hunt.

These hunts are considered to be very dangerous. Not just anyone may set out. There were two or three men among the Sharwa, or three or four, depending on the year. Only one needed to succeed for the local god to return.

One morning at dawn they would set out from the village with provisions for several weeks. They rode all day through the forest towards the mountain where the altar of the local god was located. The first night was spent by the fire singing their Epic. At daybreak they would perform a short ritual. They would look to the sky and shout their request: 'A stag! A nice fat one! With big antlers!' At the same time they would ask for the energy and strength needed to succeed in the hunt.

They would leave at the crack of dawn. They would track their prey, sometimes for over a month, not on horseback, but on foot with no dogs. This particular morning the hunters would pay close attention to the signs in the forest. And if they saw a crow flying towards them, they would say 'I have a friend.' That was the first important moment of the hunt.

The second was when they saw the animal for the first time. One year there were four hunters. They came out of the forest, they climbed up through the high pastures: one of them, Anyok, climbed the ridge to look over the other side: he found himself face to face with a stag. It is said that it is the stag that allows itself to be seen.

The third important moment was when the hunter killed the animal. As soon as Anyok saw the stag, he ran as hard as he could towards the pass, higher up. Just as he reached it, the stag came running up the other side straight towards him. It is said that the gun goes off by itself, that it is the stag that allows itself to be killed. That day Anyok won the reputation that he maintained in old age: 'Anyok, the man as fleet as a stag.'

The stag was then dismembered on the spot. The hunter who made the kill no doubt ate the heart. The head and the hide were his by right. The others shared the 'bottom' of the carcass: this was the 'creative dismemberment,'¹⁷ a crucial time for the little society: 'the pale had been brought under control.'

The return of the hunters was not greeted with any particular ceremony. When they emerged from the forest and entered the village, the people were watching from the terraces of their houses. And the news spread: 'the hunters are back. Anyok is carrying the head of a big stag behind his saddle.' They also said: 'Anyok has forced the friendship

of the god of the land, and the god of the land has given him strength.' And because of this strength, Anyok was made headman until the following year: he was the headman elected by the gods and tacitly acknowledged by men.

With the stag's hide Anyok made himself a cloak. And when he went to the big festivals that brought all the Sharwa together into the forecourt of a bon-po monastery, people made way for Anyok and the men attending him. And as he passed, people would murmur: 'That's Anyok, the wild boy. That's Anyok, the son of the mountain god.'

These hunts are dangerous, Pachenpo can vouch for that. Once Pachenpo was a young man with a future. He was courting political power. One fall day, he announced that he was going out alone to hunt stag. People said: 'If Pachenpo kills a big stag, he will be a man of the first order, like Anyok.' That year Pachenpo spent several weeks in the forest. One day he emerged, but empty handed. People said: 'When you shout from the rooftops that you are going to hunt stag, it's not to come home empty-handed.' And they added: 'Pachenpo was very lucky to come back alive.' Pachenpo never went hunting stag again. He said it was too dangerous. But he enjoyed hunting and he went out for bear. It is said that hunting bear, even one that is wounded and in its den, is much less dangerous than hunting stag.

Why is hunting stag regarded as so dangerous? Because the mountain god is the 'master of wild animal.' All big antlered herbivores, stag, blue sheep, wild yak, are his: these are his herd. It is an act of overweening pride on the part of a hunter to brave the gods! Only a hero or a madman dares take up such a challenge!

Conclusion

One ventures beyond the pale like a criminal banished for transgressing the law of the land, like a wise man with a will to speed the course of time, or like a Sharwa hunter driven by necessity. Each year he must prove that he is capable—like the original ancestor—of subjugating the gods of the land, or see his community vanish. Each is in the same situation, however: forsaken by the gods, they do not know what their fate will be.

At best, the only way to return from beyond the pale is through a new transgression, a defiant act of overweening pride thrown down by man before the gods. In this case, one returns with the primeval animal 'force,' bringing back to one's own people civilization and the gods to watch over them. It is a sort of trial by fire. There is no middle way. Either the man is recognized as a son of the gods or he dies a violent death.

Let us now come back to the death of the Yakthumba headman and to the shaman's attempts to save his life. The underlying logic is the same as that of the Sharwa ritual hunt: following his humiliation on the Tibetan border, the headman has a 'hot face.' It is as though he has been banished and forsaken by the gods. His life force is diminished. Back home he remains downcast, doesn't react. It therefore comes as no surprise to anyone in the village that he is bitten by a snake: no one can live for long with an 'open body.' Whence the shamans' decision, in an attempt to make him react, to transgress a major taboo on his behalf. Did they really think that they could save the man? Probably. Killing a cow is no worse than slaying one of the mountain god's wild animals.

Whatever they may have thought, the shamanic cure exhibits the three features analyzed in the article: cyclical time, a space that is open or closed, and ideas about the life force: these are all closely intertwined. One can see the shaman's idea: acting on the course of time can have an effect on the life force.

I have tried to show that the logic underlying the shaman's action can be found point for point in institutions other than the cure. The same logic is present in the ritual hunt, the search for the 'hidden country,' the capacity to make it rain, social banditry, banishment, subjugating the gods of the land. And many others: depositing the child on the ground, etc.

Moreover, despite the extreme refinement of theories that have developed here and there over time, political life is conceived in the same way everywhere, at least for populations that worship mountains: the legitimacy of political power is always founded on ideas that flow from the notions of 'head held high,' 'life force.' This is true of the Sharwa hunter as it is of the 'great man' of the Nepali Sherpa or the Kafir of the Hindu Kush. It is true of the Yakthumba village headman. It is also true, in Bhutan of king Khyi-kha Ra-thod, of the Tibetan kings of Yarlung, of the Ancient Chinese Son of Heaven. The greatest examples of centralized political power have been realized in the name of the prince's monopoly of the strength of the wild man.

Lastly, the notion of life force still seems, after thousands of years, to be the central issue in both minor and major religions. Like the Sharwa hunter, every great man used to be capable of recovering the primeval force without the help of any celebrant. Over time those we call shamans managed to impose themselves as mediators between the civilized world and the wild. Thereafter it was they who would travel every year to the very frontiers of the country to restore the life force of their clients, now 'laymen.' Then, one after the other, came the Buddhist hermit who

had 'mastery over wild animals,' the Taoist sage who was capable of making contact once again with the 'undifferentiated,' the bon-po who, by his ritual, guaranteed the legitimacy of the king of Yarlung, etc.

A last word about the Yakhumba shaman's cure. It is wholly oriented towards a single goal: to restore to their client, who is in a state of weakness inherent in having a 'hot face,' his 'life force.' In two other accounts of cures,¹⁸ I tried to show that this passage required that the sick man carry out a complex analysis of himself. Getting rid of 'confusion of mind' is the sole aim of the cure, which is a sort of reconstruction of the past, or as Granet might say, an attempt to 'see' what is wrong inside. In this article I have tried something different: I have tried to show that the logic behind the Yakhumba shaman's cure is common to Asia as a whole. No use looking for the runaway soul or trying to extract the illness if the patient does not try to find out what is wrong inside. No use acting on the outside if the inside is not in order.

Perhaps there is some relationship between the effort asked of the shaman's patient and that of the mystics of the great religions: they too go into the wilderness in the hope of acquiring power.

Readers are advised that Phillippe Sagant and his work are further discussed in Stéphane Gros and Grégoire Schlemmer's "Thoughts on Disappearing Worlds," featured later in this issue.

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Endnotes

1. Concerning the connection between shame and life force, cf. Sagant (1981: 154-159).
2. On the five major crimes of the Nepali code of law, cf. Höfer (1979: 197).
3. On cyclical time in Yarlung, cf. A. Macdonald (1971: 360-366).
4. On the eclipse in Ancient China, cf. Granet (1968a: 81, 290; 1982: 19). Any disorder in their customs would have disorganized the entire universe. Needham (1973: 48) writes that, from the fifth century BC, a systematic connection was made between these phenomena.
5. For shamans and hail in Yakhumba culture, cf. Sagant (1982).
6. On the 'concert of pots and pans' and the 'law of silence and noise,' cf. for Tibet: Norbu (1977); for China: Chavannes (1910: 478-501); for India: Crooke (1896: 62, 167, 22). Comparisons can be made with America: Lévi-Strauss (1964: 292-300); France: Gaignebet (1974: 127), etc.
7. Chesneaux (1965: 171, 175, 181).
8. Zimmer (1951: 41).
9. For comparative material on closing rites in Southeast Asia, see A.W. Macdonald (1957).
10. Granet (1968: 285).
11. Martin (1989: 133).
12. Granet (1968a: 248); Uvy (1977: 97).
13. Aris (1980: 60-82).
14. Stein (1941: 214).
15. On the 'open body,' for China: Granet (1968a: 360); Tibet: Stein (1956: 110); India: Bonnerjea (1927: 90); Central Asia: Lot-Falck (1970: 119), Harva (1959: 201-202). The notion also existed in medieval France.
16. On the Sharwa ritual hunt, cf. Karmay and Sagant, 1998; for China, cf. Maspero-Balasz (1967: 3, 12, 12th century BC), Chavannes (1910: 510), Granet (1981: 91, 93, 107, 162; 1982: 179); for Tibet: cf. Pelliot (1961: 2), sixth-seventh

century, according to Chinese sources, but we do not know whether or not these hunts were 'ritual' in the sense of our definition: he writes that the Tibetans 'when they give a feast,' 'always track down a yak that they allow their host to kill with bow and arrow, and they serve the meat at the banquet'; for India: Przyluski (1929). For contemporary ritual hunts: cf. among others, Macdonald (1955: 101-118) for central and northeastern India.

17. On 'creative dismemberment,' cf. among others Macdonald (1971: 265, 276) for Yarlung Tibet; Shirokogoroff (1935: 219-220) for Manchuria; Randa (1986: 190) for the Inuit. Mus (1935: 116) points out that 'the myth of dismemberment is the oldest myth of the Indian Aryan corpus'; Kaltenmark (1959) shows that the dismemberment of P'an-Kou is connected with the Man (Yao) myth of origins; Esnoul (1959) makes the same demonstration for India with the dismemberment of Prajapati and Purusha. Macdonald (1980) demonstrates the link between the dismemberment of a yak and the origin of the Sherpa clans.

18. Cf. Sagant (1988); Michailovsky and Sagant (1992).

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