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3

Quaderni del Centro Studi Asiatico

I *Quaderni del CSA* ospitano articoli e studi che riflettano su alcuni fenomeni religiosi, socio-economici, politici, culturali e missionari delle Regioni Saveriane presenti in Asia. Essi si propongono anche di far conoscere eventi o esperienze che possano arricchire ed essere di aiuto ad altri missionari coinvolti nelle stesse attività.

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INDICE

VOLUME 15, N. 3

2020

- 165 *Il Paese d'oro* di Endō Shūsaku
Introduzione
Francis MATHY

RELIGIONI E MISSIONE

- 175 Christianity and Islam at the Crossroads
Cassien NSHIMIRIMANA and Patrick FORNAH ABDUL
- 179 What is the Dizigui?
Umberto BRESCIANI

CULTURA E SOCIETÀ

- 197 The Secret Language of the Rishi
Sergio TARGA
- 225 Novelle Bengalesi — XI
Il mercante prodigio / Jamini e Kamini / Choto Bhai
Antonio GERMANO

IN MARGINE

- 233 Una persona alla ricerca di Dio
CHERRY

Il Paese d'oro di Endo Shusaku

Introduzione

FRANCIS MATHY

Il Paese d'oro¹ è il prequel del romanzo *Silenzio*, il capolavoro dello scrittore cattolico giapponese Endō Shūsaku. Pubblicato nel 1969, il testo sviluppa la stessa trama di *Silenzio*. Ambientato durante le persecuzioni scoppiate in Giappone nel XVII secolo, si narra del missionario gesuita portoghese Cristóvão Ferreira che deve vivere e amministrare i sacramenti di nascosto per non essere catturato e costretto ad abiurare sotto tortura. Tuttavia, ciò che differenzia *Il Paese d'oro* dal romanzo è innanzitutto il fatto che il testo si presenta come un'opera teatrale, la quale, essendo composta da una rapida sequenza di dialoghi, coinvolge maggiormente il lettore avvicinandolo in prima persona nel dramma religioso e umano che si svolge sotto i suoi occhi. In secondo luogo, i protagonisti del racconto sono qui, oltre a Cristóvão Ferreira (in *Silenzio* il protagonista era invece padre Sebastian Rodrigues che, dopo aver appreso dell'abiura del padre Ferreira, era giunto dall'Europa in Giappone insieme ad altri suoi compagni nella speranza di rintracciare il gesuita e convincerlo a ricongiungersi alla fede cristiana), anche che i cristiani giapponesi e il magistrato Inoue. Ciò offre uno spaccato più ampio e variegato sui dubbi, le resistenze e le sofferenze incontrati dalle persone nell'aderire o (rin)negare il messaggio evangelico. Infine, *Il Paese d'oro*, a differenza del romanzo, termina con una nota di speranza: se infatti in *Silenzio*, l'attenzione era posta sulla terra nipponica intesa come una «palude» che inghiotte e soffoca la novità del Cristianesimo, in quest'opera teatrale Endō vede invece il Giappone come un Paese sul quale, malgrado le dense nubi delle persecuzioni continuino ad addensarsi minacciose sullo sfondo, i missionari continuano a sbarcare e a proclamare il messaggio d'amore di Cristo incuranti della sorte a cui andranno incontro.

Questa prima traduzione italiana dell'opera teatrale di Endō Shūsaku — che verrà inserita in puntate successive sui prossimi Quaderni del CSA, e che inizia con questo numero presentando l'Introduzione del curatore in inglese dell'opera —, è stata realizzata da TIZIANO TOSOLINI.



Nei cento anni trascorsi tra il 1597, quando ventisei cristiani furono crocifissi sulla collina che si affaccia su Nagasaki, e il 1697, quando ebbe luogo l'ultimo martirio nella provincia di Mino con almeno trentacinque martiri, migliaia di cristiani hanno dato la vita testimoniando la loro fede. Si ritiene che nel 1600 in Giappone vivessero almeno 700.000 cristiani su una popolazione di circa 20 milioni.² Nel 1700 il Cristianesimo

1. S. Endō, *The Golden Country*. A Play translated from the Japanese (*Ōgon no Kuni*) and with an Introduction by Francis Mathy. London: Peter Owen, 1989, pp. 128.

2. Queste statistiche mi sono state fornite da p. Hubert Cieslik sj, uno delle autorità riconosciute sul

scomparve dal Paese e continuò a sopravvivere solo in comunità nascoste che riuscirono a mantenere e a trasmettere segretamente le loro tradizioni religiose fino al ritorno dei missionari, avvenuto nel 1865.

Fin dall'inizio, i persecutori erano intenzionati a creare degli apostati piuttosto che dei martiri. Poiché le pene di morte ordinarie per decapitazione e crocifissione destavano ammirazione per i martiri, i quali si apprestavano a morire con gioia, cantando inni e incitando la folla, si escogitarono torture sempre più cruente. Per prolungare l'agonia delle vittime mandate al rogo, oltre che per concedere loro più tempo onde riconsiderare la loro decisione, la legna veniva posta a una certa distanza dal corpo così che i condannati bruciassero lentamente. Acqua bollente proveniente dalle roventi sorgenti giapponesi veniva versata senza fretta, un mestolo alla volta, sulle carni delle vittime. I cristiani venivano legati a dei pali conficcati durante la bassa marea, perché morissero lentamente quando la marea si alzava. Infine, fu inventata la più crudele delle torture — quella della fossa. La vittima veniva legata e sospesa a testa in giù in una buca profonda. Un foro veniva praticato nella tempia per permettere al sangue di colare goccia dopo goccia, impedendo così che il soggetto morisse troppo velocemente a causa di un'ostruzione circolatoria. La vittima poteva rimanere appesa almeno una settimana, fino a quando l'alta pressione sanguigna l'avrebbe spossata e la fame ne avrebbe indebolito le forze fisiche — o fino a quando la vittima, vinta dal dolore e dalla solitudine, avrebbe ceduto alla tortura e avrebbe rinnegato la propria fede. La fossa si rivelò così un metodo davvero efficace per costringere gli individui ad abiurare.

Questo è il contesto storico de *Il Paese d'oro* (*Ōgon no Kuni*), l'opera teatrale di Endō Shūsaku. Il protagonista principale è il missionario gesuita Cristóvão Ferreira. Nel 1633 fu catturato e appeso nella fossa; dopo cinque ore di dolorosa tortura, rinunciò alla sua fede cristiana, diventò un collaboratore dei suoi persecutori e fino alla morte, avvenuta nel 1650, si adoperò per convincere altri cristiani ad abiurare.

Cristóvão Ferreira era nato a Lisbona verso il 1580. Entrò nel noviziato della Compagnia di Gesù all'età di sedici anni. Dopo quattro anni fu scelto come missionario per l'Estremo Oriente, imbarcandosi prima per Goa e in seguito per Macao, dove concluse i suoi studi teologici e fu ordinato sacerdote nel 1608. Giunse in Giappone nel 1609 e, dopo un periodo di apprendimento della lingua, fu assegnato alla missione di Kyoto. Quando,

Cristianesimo in Giappone. Sulla base dei suoi studi, p. Cieslik ritiene che ci siano stati più di 60.000 martiri, sebbene se ne conosca il nome di solo 4.000. P. Cieslik ha anche scritto un'autorevole biografia su Cristóvão Ferreira, il prete apostata che compare sia ne *Il Paese d'oro* che in *Silenio* (*Monumenta Nipponica*, 1974, XXIX: 1–54). Il resoconto delle vicende riguardanti Padre Ferreira incluse in questa introduzione si basa sullo studio di P. Cieslik.

subito dopo il suo arrivo, a tutti i preti e religiosi fu ordinato di recarsi a Nagasaki, Ferreira rimase di nascosto nella capitale per aiutare i cristiani. In seguito fu chiamato in gran segreto a Nagasaki, dove fu eletto nuovo Provinciale e procuratore. In qualità di professore più anziano, alla morte del Provinciale si occupò dell'amministrazione della Provincia, fino a quando non ricevette la nomina formale da Roma. Redasse i rapporti annuali sulla situazione della missione per gli anni 1628, 1629, 1630 e 1631, e in ciascuno di essi offre una descrizione vivida e commovente delle torture subite dai cristiani, oltre che del loro glorioso trionfo nel ricevere la corona del martirio.

Quando la persecuzione raggiunse il suo apice, lo stesso Ferreira fu catturato a Nagasaki e appeso nella fossa. Dopo la sua abiura, gli fu dato il nome di un condannato a morte, Sawano Chuan, e si unì ai suoi persecutori nella loro attività investigativa.

Nel 1636 Ferreira scrisse un trattato dal titolo *Kengi roku (Una divulgazione di menzogne)*, che rappresenta un lucido attacco al Cristianesimo, e tradusse alcuni libri occidentali di medicina e di astronomia. Negli anni seguenti, il suo nome è menzionato in alcuni tribunali nei quali dovevano comparire dei cristiani. Nel 1639, ad esempio, fu presente in un tribunale di Edo, nel quale fu condannato a morte il Padre gesuita giapponese Kibe (menzionato di passaggio nell'Atto secondo, scena seconda). Padre Kibe e i suoi ultimi attimi di vita colmi di zelo avevano inizialmente ispirato Ferreira a ritornare a praticare la fede, ma inutilmente.

La defezione di Ferreira fu un trauma per tutto il mondo cattolico, ancor più perché il rapporto iniziale aveva descritto il suo glorioso martirio. Tre furono i tentativi compiuti per contattare Ferreira e persuaderlo a revocare l'abiura. Durante il terzo tentativo, il gesuita Antonio Rubino guidò un gruppo di nove padri, un fratello e diversi catechisti provenienti da Manila. Furono tutti immediatamente catturati, scortati a Nagasaki e appesi alla fossa. Molti di loro abiurarono, tra cui Giuseppe Chiara, il protagonista del romanzo di Endō *Silenzio (Chinmoku)*. Con molta probabilità, il drammatico dialogo tra Ferreira e Rodrigues (Chiara) incluso nel romanzo ebbe effettivamente luogo, dato che al tempo Ferreira fungeva da interprete nel processo svoltosi a Edo contro il gruppo di Rubino. Ferreira morì nel 1650, all'età di settant'anni. Alcune cronache affermano che Ferreira, costretto a letto dalla malattia e dalla stanchezza, abbia ritrattato la sua apostasia e sia stato di nuovo condannato alla fossa, dove morì. Tuttavia, è molto difficile sapere con certezza se queste narrazioni siano autentiche o frutto di una pia leggenda.

Perché Ferreira abiurò? Il Ferreira dell'opera teatrale di Endō calpesta il volto di Cristo per varie ragioni. Egli è convinto di aver sentito la voce di Cristo che lo esortava a calpestarlo al fine di salvare se stesso e gli altri cristiani. Inoue attribuisce invece l'apo-

stasia di Ferreira all'insalubre "palude" del Giappone, la quale avvizzisce tutti i semi che le vengono gettati. Nella scena conclusiva, Inoue rammenta a Ferreira che le sue parole sono ora più buddhiste che cristiane, e termina asserendo: "Alla fin fine Lei non è stato sconfitto da me, ma da questa palude chiamata Giappone".

Le azioni di Ferreira si prestano anche ad un'ulteriore interpretazione. Prima di consegnarsi ai suoi persecutori con l'intento di salvare i cristiani, Ferreira passa la notte nell'angoscia e nella disperazione, in modo molto simile a quella trascorsa da Gesù nel giardino dei Getsèmani. Quando finalmente vince la tentazione di credere che Dio lo abbia abbandonato e trova il coraggio di recarsi all'Ufficio Investigativo pur sapendo che si trattava di una trappola, Ferreira raggiunge un livello di nobiltà e di santità così elevato che rende il seguito della vicenda piuttosto deludente. Si ha l'impressione che il Ferreira che ha abiurato sia un uomo distrutto e incapace di agire liberamente. L'impressione è rafforzata dalle sprezzanti parole che Inoue pronuncia nei suoi confronti:

Mediante la tortura della fossa, per domani Lei avrà perso qualsiasi capacità di giudizio e di raziocinio. Avrà perso la libertà di controbattere alle mie parole. Ciò che io dirò che si trova a sinistra, Lei dirà che è a sinistra. Ciò che io dirò che si trova a destra, Lei dirà che è a destra. Quando dirò: "Abiuri", Lei abiurerà.

I cristiani che assistono all'atto deplorabile del loro amato pastore sono convinti che sia uscito completamente di senno.

Endō si dimostra più comprensivo circa le motivazioni che hanno spinto Ferreira ad abiurare di quanto i fatti effettivamente testimonino. In primo luogo, al tempo della sua cattura e tortura, non c'era alcun contadino in prigione, o minacciato di morte, che il gesuita si sentisse in dovere di proteggere. Accanto a lui nella fossa c'erano invece quattro preti e tre seminaristi. Costoro sopportarono la tortura fino alla morte, che sopraggiunse dopo vari giorni. Ferreira, al contrario, abiurò dopo solo cinque ore. Nel caso degli altri preti che apostatarono sotto tortura, incluso Chiara, sussistono le prove delle loro successive ritrattazioni, ed essi furono obbligati a spendere il resto della loro vita in prigione, a dimostrazione di quanto poco i persecutori si fidassero di loro. Ferreira, invece, fu subito liberato dai suoi aguzzini e in seguito collaborò energicamente con loro. La vera ragione della sua defezione rimarrà perciò un mistero.

Da quanto detto finora si comprende come mai la persona di Cristóvão Ferreira abbia così tanto attratto e, allo stesso tempo, provocato uno scrittore come Endō. La sua vita contiene tutti gli elementi della tragedia. Consacrato in giovane età al servizio di Dio e alla diffusione del Suo regno, ha dovuto affrontare molte prove per vivere da missionario

in Giappone. Non era certo ignaro dei pericoli di quella missione, dato che era arrivato in Giappone dopo che erano iniziate le persecuzioni e dopo che alcuni suoi confratelli avevano già ricevuto la corona del martirio. Missionario dinamico e abile amministratore, al principio era stato tenuto in grande considerazione dai suoi superiori e confratelli, ed era stato scelto per le cariche più alte che un gesuita potesse ricoprire in missione. Le lettere che inviava a Roma, soprattutto i suoi vividi resoconti della fede e del coraggio dei martiri, hanno ispirato una giovane generazione di gesuiti rendendoli desiderosi di unirsi a lui nella pericolosa e gloriosa missione del Giappone. Tuttavia, dopo solo cinque ore nella fossa, la sua personalità subì un radicale cambiamento, tanto che dieci anni più tardi arringava i gesuiti catturati del gruppo di Rubino nel modo seguente:

Qual è il potere del Dio cristiano? Può forse venirvi in aiuto? Come mai allora dite che è onnipotente? Dov'è la sua misericordia? Siete convinti, nella vostra testardaggine, di continuare la vostra missione pensando di ricevere un grande premio da Dio... e acconsentite che i vostri corpi vengano torturati. Ve lo chiedo ancora una volta: perché Dio non viene in vostro soccorso? Di certo la vostra vita non è nelle Sue mani, ma nelle mani dell'Imperatore del Giappone.³

Cristóvão Ferreira è certamente una delle figure più drammatiche di uno dei più drammatici episodi della storia giapponese.

Dalle modifiche introdotte nella vicenda, si nota come Endō non sia semplicemente interessato a presentare dei fatti storici. Egli ha modellato il suo materiale in un'opera teatrale complessa, incentrata su alcuni temi che già in precedenza erano stati sviluppati in testi quali *Uomo giallo* (*Kiiroi hito*), *Vulcano* (*Kazan*) e *Silenzio*, un testo parallelo a quest'opera teatrale.

In questi e altri scritti, Endō intendeva esplorare il divario esistente tra la cultura occidentale e quella orientale. In un saggio giovanile dal titolo di "Io e il Cristianesimo", Endō ebbe a scrivere che, se il Cristianesimo, seppur sfidato o bistrattato, si trovava ancora al centro della cultura occidentale, in Giappone non esisteva alcuna storia, tradizione, sensibilità o patrimonio culturale cristiano. "Di più", scriveva Endō, "c'è un qualcosa che la sensibilità giapponese non accetta della visione cristiana. E sin dalla giovinezza ho avvertito questa enigmatica sensibilità giapponese intorno a me, e perfino dentro di me". Egli prosegue poi indicando come questa "enigmatica sensibilità giapponese" sia triplice: un'indifferenza nei confronti di Dio (tale che il giapponese non si pone minimamente il problema dell'esistenza o non esistenza di Dio); un'indifferenza nei confronti del pecca-

3. A. Montanus, *Atlas Japannensis: Being Remarkable Addresses*, London, 1970, cit. in Cieslik, *op. cit.*, 34-5.

to; un'indifferenza nei confronti della morte. Endō afferma così come sia assolutamente difficile convertire al Cristianesimo un popolo come quello giapponese, il quale odia ogni estremismo nei confronti del male e del peccato, e si dimostra insensibile al problema di Dio.

Tutti questi sentimenti vengono espressi ne *Il Paese d'oro* da Inoue. Inoue è un personaggio relativamente complesso. Con un passato da cristiano, in seguito ebbe modo di rifiutare il Cristianesimo quando si accorse che era inadatto e sconveniente per il Giappone. Tuttavia, anche quando si adopera per perseguitare i cristiani e tenta in tutti i modi di sradicare la religione dal Paese, Inoue si affida alla speranza che, alla fin fine, egli si stia sbagliando. Nell'Atto secondo, scena seconda, Inoue dice a Tomonaga di aver respinto il Cristianesimo quando si era reso conto che gli insegnamenti di Cristo non avrebbero mai messo radici nel suolo giapponese:

Non si tratta tanto del fatto che i germogli del Cristianesimo siano cattivi. E neppure che questo Paese, il Giappone, sia cattivo. Su questo anch'io sono d'accordo. Ma quando una certa pianta non attecchisce in un determinato terreno, non importa quanto tentativi si compiano per farla crescere, allora anche il più stupido dei contadini sa che o si deve cambiare il terreno o si devono sradicare le pianticelle. Il suolo è però questo nostro Giappone. E non c'è modo di cambiarlo. Stando così le cose, non c'è altra scelta che sradicare le piantine.

E quando Tomonaga ribatte che le piantine stavano crescendo rigogliose fino a quando non è scoppiata la persecuzione, Inoue risponde che ciò è vero solo in apparenza:

A volte provo antipatia per questo nostro Paese. O, più ancora che antipatia, paura. Questo Giappone è una palude molto più spaventosa di quello che i cristiani chiamano Inferno. Non importa che tipo di germogli si cerchi di trapiantare da un altro Paese, essi avvizziscono e muoiono. Oppure producono un fiore o un frutto che solo all'apparenza è simile a quelli veri.

Ora, fino a che punto Endō si identifica con questi sentimenti? Lui stesso è un cristiano attivo e ha, di fatto, aiutato molti dei suoi amici scrittori e intellettuali a scoprire la fede cristiana. Tuttavia, stando alle sue affermazioni, Endō ha sempre sperimentato un conflitto interiore tra il suo essere cristiano e il suo essere giapponese. In un'intervista su un settimanale, egli ha sostenuto che, dopo aver ricevuto il battesimo da bambino, per lunghi tratti il suo Cattolicesimo era simile ad un abito occidentale che non si adattava alla sua figura, e che ha dovuto lottare per trasformarlo in un *kimono*.

Ci sono stati molti momenti in cui sentivo che volevo disfarmi del mio Cattolicesimo,

ma non ne sono mai stato capace... Tuttavia, ho sempre avuto la sensazione che fosse qualcosa di preso in prestito, e ho continuato a riflettere su quell'altro mio io giapponese. È questa, credo, la "palude" giapponese che è in me. Da quando ho iniziato a scrivere romanzi fino ad oggi, il contrasto tra il mio io cattolico e quell'altro mio io giapponese, ha echeggiato e riecheggiato nel mio lavoro come il continuo ritornello di un idiota. Sentivo che dovevo escogitare un modo per riconciliarli entrambi.

La vicenda di *Il Paese d'oro* è incentrata sulla tensione tra il Cristianesimo e la "palude", una tensione che esiste prima di tutto in Endō. Nel romanzo *Silenzio* è la palude che vince il confronto. Non così invece in quest'opera teatrale redatta subito dopo. L'impressione che aleggia in quest'opera, e che permane più a lungo nello spettatore, è quella del coraggio, della nobiltà e dell'amore dei martiri. Contro questa immagine concreta, le astratte tesi di Inoue sono impotenti.

Nei romanzi successivi Endō ha drammatizzato questa fuga dalla palude con l'aiuto di numerosi personaggi, a volte accennando all'amore di Cristo, a volte, invece, dando vita a un protagonista che assomigliasse a Cristo. Ne *Il balordo* (*Obaka san*), per esempio, gli altri personaggi intravedono nell'intervento di un ex seminarista francese una via d'uscita da quella "palude" dell'indifferenza in cui la società sembra affogare e, in quello che è forse il più bel romanzo di Endō, *Il samurai*, un guerriero di basso rango, i cui possedimenti erano letteralmente delle paludi, muore anch'esso da martire. Una delle recenti novelle di Endō, *Scandalo* (*Sukyandaru*) utilizza il motivo del *Doppelgänger* per un confronto diretto tra i due io. Shūsaku Endō continua così a sviluppare, mediante la sua personale lotta interiore, nuovo materiale per scrivere racconti che non smettono mai di interessare e coinvolgere il lettore, il quale, seppure non giapponese, scopre anch'egli di possedere in se stesso una palude simile⁴.

4. F. Mathy, «Introduction,» in S. Endō, *The Golden Country*, op. cit., pp. 7-14.

Religioni e missione



Christianity and Islam at the Crossroads

CASSIEN NSHIMIRIMANA and

PATRICK FORNAH ABDUL

What is the Dizigui?

UMBERTO BRESCIANI

Christianity and Islam at the Crossroads

CASSIEN NSHIMIRIMANA AND PATRICK FORNAH ABDUL

Rooted in Xaverian Charism and responding to the needs of the local Church-the Catholic Church in the Philippines will dedicate the year 2020 to Ecumenism, Inter-Religious Dialogue, and Indigenous People local Church-, the International Xaverian Theologate of Manila is moving forwards by integrating the interreligious dialogue as part of necessary dimension for the present and future missionaries. Besides the conferences on interfaith dialogue organized by the Xaverian Theologate, the extracurricular formations are encouraged. In this perspective, from July 1-15, 2019, two Xaverian theology students were given the opportunity to join the Silsilah Dialogue Movement that promotes the Culture of Dialogue and Path to Peace in Mindanao (Philippines) and to the world. This Second Special program on Muslim-Christian Dialogue treated the theme: *Christianity and Islam at the Crossroads*. The aim was to cultivate awareness of what is happening today in Christianity and Islam and how the culture of Dialogue can help to build peace focusing on the Dialogue with Creation.

The formation guides the participants towards the mutual understanding about how the two religions can help each other if the Christians and Muslims enter into a deeper experience of the culture of dialogue. To make this culture of dialogue become a genuine spirituality, it is fundamental for each believer to strengthen first his or her religious identity. Since the doctrinal teachings alone are not enough to promote this spirit of dialogue, we were given two weekends of immersion where Christian participants were sent to live with Muslim families, whereas Muslim participants with Christian families. The experience was meaningful due to the mutual sharing with our foster parents who share their joys, sorrows, their faith commitments, and challenges. The moment of immersion is fundamental to move on with courage and continue living the spirituality of dialogue. For us, it is a reminder that the culture of dialogue does not aim to create a super-religion or a super-culture rather it is an answer to the unity in diversity.

The outcome of the program was a great experience for all 31 participants from the two religions in which 16 were Muslims and 15 Christians. On the side of Christianity there were priests, seminarians, Evangelical, the so-called Born Again, college students and teachers. On the side of Islam, the participants were: ustads, imams, teachers in ma-

drasas, and staffs of different organizations helping for the rehabilitation of the Marawi city after the ISIS siege. The starting of the special course was quite difficult because some of the participants came with prejudices. After the orientation and vision-mission of the Silsilah dialogue Movement, the group was able to overcome all the fears and became friendly. Due to friendship, the first week, we started to share openly our feelings, biases, and were able to listen to the lectures on Christianity, Islam, and dialogue with open minds and hearts. In the second week, the reality of Christianity and Islam at the cross-roads was the main focus. Through the presentations and open forums, we came to a better understanding on how the of secularism and radicalism as alarming challenges for both Christians and Muslims.

Among many significant experiences and sharing, there is one from a Christian and another from a Muslim participant.

A Christian Participant

For the past 15 days of staying here in Harmony Village, together with all my Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters, with all the activities and immersions, all I can say is «wonderfull!». The people in Silsilah, Fr. Sebastiano D'Ambra, the organizers, and staff are wonderful people. They love and care. The silence makes you really feel God's presence and His love for us as His creations. Lastly, during my two immersions, my foster parents are really wonderful people that I rarely meet, that is why I grabbed this opportunity to thank you for making me feel that I am part of your family, for treating me like their child. My 15 days of staying here makes me realize and open my mind that there is still so much work to do, a work to achieve harmony and peace. For almost 10 years, I was confined in the four walls of the seminary, with all the comfort and security offered to me. I have been doing my apostolate heartily and I thought all of that is enough and I did my best. If I did not join this special program, maybe I would still the same, that old person before, «A frog in a well.»

The Silsilah program opened another path for me, a different perspective of looking at things. All of us here gathered together have only one goal and that is to achieve the peace that we longed for—a dream to have a peaceful life, a life where everyone who live together in harmony, solidarity and love. Believe it or not, that is not a dream anymore, because we already experienced that for the past 15 days right here, right now. How does it feel? It feels wonderful.

A Muslim Participant

As-salamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh (May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you). *Maayong* (good) morning. *Silsilah*, it was a strange word for me though I heard it from my co-officemates but I have no idea about their mission and vision. I came here without any expectations. I was just to attend the two-week special program and now, it's done. After the first meeting, I somehow got the gist of this program's mission. From having priests, brothers, ustads, professors and youth classmates. As I look at them every meeting, I realized that I'm very blessed and grateful that I grabbed this rare opportunity when you can express and share your learnings and experiences of your gender, your status, and your belief. We learned a lot from our speakers the way they taught us to practice culture of dialogue as a way of instilling peace.

One of the most memorable moments of this program was the immersion, that is, living in unique families who follow a different faith from us. The warm welcome they gave to us is one of a kind that we will bring when we got here. Their names will be kept in our hearts. Yes, it was a short time but the learnings and experiences that we get here is worth it. I hope the friendship and family that we build will be carried whenever we go. I also invite my co-participants to continue working for peace. We will harvest the fruits of our hard work. Thank you and *wassalam*.

Conclusion

At the end of the program we came up with this statement of commitment which recapitulates our learnings and experiences: rooted in our pearl of giftedness, we people of diverse religions, commit ourselves to be the bridge that links others towards harmony, justice, love, and peace throughout our lifetime. From this commitment, it is clear that the dialogue becomes a culture or a spirituality whenever many people of sincere heart and mind believe in it, live it, and promote it at all levels of the society. Therefore, we do dialogue with no other expectation but love manifested in action, silence, and harmony. Otherwise, the so-called «dialogue» will be a strategy to convince others. In the words of Fr. Sebastiano D' Ambra, the founder of *Silsilah* movement in Zamboanga:

Dialogue without love is nothing. It becomes a strategy and a dangerous way of relating when people do not see each other as having the same dignity. It becomes a new way of controlling and dominating others. The real dialogue motivated by love not only requires pain but also gives joy. Real dialogue can only be sustained by love.¹

1. S. D'Ambra, *Call to a Dream: Sislsilah Dialogue Movement* (Zamboanga: Silsilah Publications, 2008), 10.

What happened in the second special program of *Silsilah: Christianity and Islam at the crossroad* can give hope to both Christians and Muslims that we can live united despite our diversity of beliefs. Our commonalities and differences have to be seen as treasures rather than barriers to build our mutual fraternity².

2. Cassien Nshimirimana and Patrick Fornah Abdul are two Xaverian students of Theology at the Loyola Theological School in Manila (Philippines).

What Is the Dizigui?

UMBERTO BRESCIANI

As the title indicates, the *Dizigui* (弟子規 *Rules for the Disciple*, or *Standards for Students*) is a Confucian book of rules of behavior for a disciple (a young man, a child), instructing him on how to behave toward people and toward his own teacher. It is a very short piece of writing—altogether 1080 Chinese characters—written in poetic lines (360 lines) of three characters each, therefore imitating another celebrated Chinese classic educational primer, the *Sanzijing* (*Three Character Classic*). The lines are enriched by rhymes (every two lines a rhyme), thus making the text quite easy for children to memorize and recite.

Data about the author and the time of writing of the *Dizigui* are rather vague. Everybody agrees that it came into existence during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The most common tradition is that its author was a certain Li Yuxiu (ar. 1647–1729), a scholar who did not succeed in the *jinshi* government examination, and subsequently made a living by teaching and writing educational materials. He wrote the *Dizigui* around the time of the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661–1722), however with the title *Xunmengwen* 訓蒙文, *Elementary Text on Compliance*. Sometime later, toward the end of the eighteenth century, it was published and became a book, after a revision by a scholar named Jia Youren (賈仁 1724–1784), who renamed it *Dizigui*. Another theory supported by some scholars is that the work saw the light only after the Opium War (1840–42), and became widely popular during the last half century of the Qing Empire. In 1893, the scholar Zhou Baozhang 周保璋 in one of his books noted that, after the publication of the *Dizigui*, the *Sanzijing* could be forgotten.

The *Dizigui* was a primer for learning to read and write, and together also learning the basics of human ethical behavior, similar in nature to other primers of the Confucian tradition, the *Sanzijing* (*Three Character Classic*), the *Qianziwen* (*Thousand Character Classic*), or the *Baijiaxing* (*Hundred Family Surnames*). It was compiled on the basis of an essay on children education written by the Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) entitled *Tongmeng xu zhi* 童蒙須知 (*What Small Kids Should Know*), an essay that described how children should learn good behavior in different social contexts: how to dress, to speak, to walk; how to clean their rooms and keep their things in order; and how to learn

to read and write. Zhu Xi's essay was in four sections, closely following a saying from the *Analects* of Confucius:

At home, a young man must respect his parents; abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous. Having done this, if he still has energy to spare, let him study literature.¹

In several places the wording appears to be drawn from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), especially the chapter called *Quli*. A large part of the material comes from the mentioned essay by Zhu Xi.

The *Dizigui* has a very brief general preamble or outline, almost identical in wording to the passage of *Analects* we just mentioned, and then seven chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Filial piety toward parents;

Chapter 2: Respect toward one's elder brothers;

Chapter 3: Be cautious in my daily life;

Chapter 4: Learning to be trustworthy;

Chapter 5: Love all living beings;

Chapter 6: Be close and learn from people of virtue and compassion;

Chapter 7: How to study and learn, to improve one's cultural and spiritual life.

The seven chapters are a development of the content of the short sentences contained in the outline, words coming from Confucius himself. There are listed altogether 113 rules: 24 of them concern filial piety; 13 concern brotherly love/respect; 24 concern caution in one's daily life routine; 15 concern trustworthiness in dealing with people; 21 concern love toward all people; 4 concern staying close to virtuous and benevolent persons; and 12 concern learning.

It is a fact that in the second half of the nineteenth century the *Dizigui* was quite popular in China, even though at the level of the countryside. At the end of the nineteenth century, in numerous areas of China the local government made the *Dizigui* mandatory as a textbook in public and private elementary schools and was widely read. The literati, however, did not appreciate it, considering its style too elementary, its content too low, and its ethical rules too simplistic. According to some scholar, the book had not been written for children, but for illiterate country people. The first places where it was used were temples and tea houses. Anyway, soon later, when the Chinese realized that their country was «The sick man of Asia,» unable to stand up against any foreign power, a wave of an-

1. *Analects*, I, 6, transl. Simon Leys. In the last sentence, although the translator mentions «literature,» the original word (*wen* 文) has a broader meaning, it means any cultural activity.

ti-Confucianism started to spread. They figured that their weakness and backwardness was all the fault of their Confucian cultural tradition. Gradually, everything Confucian was discarded, including the *Dizigui*.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), for all Confucian reading materials the situation became even more serious. Only outside of China there were people still reading and studying Confucian books. In particular, we could mention that in Hong Kong and Taiwan there were several earnest scholars—the so-called New Confucian philosophers—who worked hard at fathoming Confucian doctrines. Around 1990, Taiwanese scholar Wang Caigui (1949–), a disciple of Mou Zongsan (one of the leading New Confucians, 1909–1996), launched a movement in Taiwan for teaching children to memorize the Classics, as it was customary in previous centuries. The movement started from scratch, by organizing voluntary classes outside the school schedule, usually on Saturdays afternoon, when the interested parents would bring their children to a borrowed classroom, and have their children memorize passages from the Classics, while also playing games. Having never been considered a classic in the past, the *Dizigui* originally was not among the materials for memorization; however, soon, under the encouragement of enthusiastic supporters of the movement – Buddhists, Yiguandao, and Tiandijiao religion – the *Dizigui* was included. The activity of *dujing* («Classics memorization») was quite successful in Taiwan and was soon extended also to China, where it became a large movement, enthusiastically embraced by many volunteer teachers and involving tens of millions of children. In China the teaching materials of the movement, which included the *Dizigui*, were also better organized, with the contribution of anthologies, such as that by the scholar Jiang Qing (1953–).

Nowadays, after one century, in contemporary China the booklet known by the name of *Dizigui* is back to topical. We are assisting, after the year 2000, to a «*Dizigui* fever.» According to recent research on the renaissance of popular Confucianism, the revival of the *Dizigui* has been brought about by Master Jingkong, a Buddhist monk.² Born in Lujiang (by then Anhui Province) in 1927, Master Jingkong was exiled to Taiwan in 1949, was ordained a Buddhist master in 1959, and worked hard for decades—he is a talented preacher—to spread a modernized version of Buddhism in Taiwan; then he extended his activities to Chinese communities in foreign countries; finally, in the 1990s he started

2. See the book edited by S. Billioud, *The Varieties of Confucian Experience – Documenting a Grassroots revival of Tradition* (Leyden/Boston: Brill, 2018). In the book, the research about the *Dizigui* is by distinguished sociologist Ji Zhe, who teaches at the Sorbonne in Paris.

to work in China, through preaching and free distribution of books and icons, smartly exploiting the most advanced communication technologies.

Among the materials he promoted, there was the *Dizigui*. He had a theory about it. He was convinced that such a book, even though its content was Confucian, was extremely precious as a concrete form of realization of the highest ideals of Buddhism. Furthermore, he argued that Chinese culture had a unifying thread, which was concentrated in three books, one for each of the three doctrines (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism). In his view, the book representing Confucianism was the *Dizigui*. For him, that little tract was more worthwhile than all the traditional Classics and entire libraries, because it concerned practice in actual daily life. It was even worthier than any Buddhist book, because *Dizigui* dealt with filial piety, and in his thinking, filial piety is the most basic condition to true Buddhist practice. He regarded the rules contained in the *Dizigui* as the fundamental commandments of Buddhism, and deemed that in religion, education is far more important than rituals and prayers.

Numerous other people continued Jingkong's propagandizing efforts, and printed countless copies of the *Dizigui*, distributing them everywhere, the way that has been traditional in China for the *shanshu*. The *shanshu* are those good books, which are handed out free of charge for the edification of people, and whoever prints and gives out such books acquires merit for him/herself. Master Jingkong was a big fan of the *dujing* movement, and he had been instrumental for including the *Dizigui* among the memorization materials for kids.

The spread of the *Dizigui* throughout China gained momentum starting from 2004, when the movement for memorizing the classics started to take firm hold in China, and Master Jingkong's activities also were successful in his native town of Lujiang, Jiangxi, and were imitated in numerous other places. In 2006, a public welfare network was established to the purpose of teaching, promoting, and spreading the *Dizigui*³ and supplying all kinds of teaching materials. In 2008, and again in 2010, a special serial program on CCTV was teaching and explaining the *Dizigui* and reached virtually all corners of the country. By 2009, Xi Jinping, by then the president of the Central Party School, and expected to be China's next president, specifically named the text as recommended reading for party cadres. A professor at the Central Communist Party School, which trains Chinese officials, wrote a book called *Everybody Should Study Dizigui*, and party organizations in far-flung corners of the country have convened study sessions on the text.⁴

3. See the website <www.dizigui.cn>.

4. Rachel Lu, in website «Tea Leaf Nation,» January 7, 2014

Nowadays in China, the *Dizigui* has become a kind of basic universal handbook for correct behavior, not just of children and students, but of every person. It is often quoted in schools, as well as in offices or factories.

It has been used by enterprises for training and selecting employees, by local governments as a text included in «socialist spiritual civilization» propaganda, and massively within the prison system as a tool for correcting criminals' attitudes.⁵

Presently in China, a person is not surprised if, when passing nearby a school, he/she hears a class of pupils recite the *Dizigui*, or even the whole body of students of a school, perhaps thousands of them, chanting aloud together the lines of the *Dizigui* on the school lawn. As a matter of fact, in 2017 China's State Council issued guidelines for the next few years for achievements in traditional culture-related research, education, protection, inheritance, innovation and exchanges. One item of the guidelines indicates that the Qing Dynasty book *Dizigui* (students' rules) should be included in the curriculum of elementary schools.

The Text⁶ – *Dizigui*⁷

Outline

Dizigui, or *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*, is a book that was taught by Chinese saints and sages of the ancient past.⁸ The book first teaches us how to be dutiful to our parents, and how to be respectful and loving to our siblings.⁹ It then teaches us how to be cautious with all people, matters, and objects in our daily lives; how to be a trustworthy person; and to believe in the teachings of the ancient saints and sages. Furthermore, it

5. S. Billioud, *The Varieties of Confucian Experience*, op. cit., 63.

6. Hereby I adopt the fluent English translation kindly made available by the Pure Land Learning College Assn., Inc. (Australia) on their website. It is not stated from which original edition the translation was made. There are extant over a dozen different editions of the *Dizigui* from the nineteenth century, but they show only slight variations of few single characters. Substantially, the content is always the same.

7. In the translation used here, after *Dizigui* there is a subtitle «Guide to a Happy life.» The subtitle is not present in the original text. I suppose it was added by Master Jingkong, to stress how observing the rules below leads one person to live a happy life.

8. The Chinese «saints and sages of the ancient past» include the sage kings of remote antiquity (Yao, Shun, Yu the Great, King Tang, Zhou Gong), as well as Confucius and Mencius.

9. The word «*ti*» used here means fraternal love. In the Confucian tradition, elder brothers are supposed to love and help younger brothers; younger brothers are supposed to love and respect elder brothers. This attitude is supposed to be extended to all people of the same generation, since for Confucius «within the four seas all men are brothers» (*An.*, XII, 5).

teaches us to love all equally, and to be close to and learn from people of virtue and compassion. Only when we have accomplished all the above can we then study further and learn literature and art to improve the quality of our cultural and spiritual lives.

Chapter 1. At Home, Be Dutiful to My Parents¹⁰

When my parents call me, I will answer them right away. When they ask me to do something, I will do it quickly. When my parents instruct me, I will listen respectfully. When my parents reproach me, I will obey and accept their scolding. I will try hard to change and improve myself, to start anew.

In the winter, I will keep my parents warm; in the summer, I will keep my parents cool. I will always greet my parents in the morning to show them that I care. At night, I will always make sure my parents rest well. Before going out, I must tell my parents where I am going, for parents are always concerned about their children. After returning home, I must go and see my parents to let them know I am back, so they do not worry about me. I will maintain a permanent place to stay and lead a routine life. I will persist in whatever I do and will not change my aspirations at will.

A matter might be trivial, but if it is wrong to do it or unfair to another person, I must not do it thinking it will bear little or no consequence. If I do, I am not being a dutiful child because my parents would not want to see me doing things that are irrational or illegal. Even though an object might be small, I will not keep it a secret from my parents. If I do, I will hurt my parents' feelings.¹¹

If whatever pleases my parents is fair and reasonable, I will try my best to attain it for them.¹² If something displeases my parents, if within reason,¹³ I will cautiously keep it away from them. When my body is hurt, my parents will be worried. If my virtues are compromised, my parents will feel ashamed.¹⁴ When I have loving parents, it is not difficult to be dutiful to them. But if I can be dutiful to parents who hate me, only then will I

10. Filial piety has always been the foremost virtue in Chinese traditional ethics. There is the ancient saying, that «among the many (a hundred) good deeds, filial piety is the first (*Baishan xiao wei xian*).

11. Parents will be saddened by the actions of a child who behaves secretly. If s/he behaves in such a way when s/he is still young, then he/she will probably twist the law, obtain bribes, and be a curse to his/her country and his/her people when s/he grows up.

12. On the contrary, if what pleases my parents is illegitimate or unreasonable, I should tactfully dissuade my parents, and tell them the reasons that they should not have it. The lack of this point is one of the most frequent criticisms by present-day Confucian scholars.

13. The correct Confucian tradition is that I should lead my parents to proper views and understanding of things.

14. If a son is sick, his parents will feel worried; if a son behaves badly, his parents will feel ashamed.

meet the standards of the saints and sages for being a dutiful child.¹⁵

When my parents do wrong, I will urge them to change. I will do it with a kind facial expression and a warm gentle voice. If they do not accept my advice, I will wait until they are in a happier mood before I attempt to dissuade them again, followed by crying, if necessary, to make them understand. If they end up whipping me,¹⁶ I will not hold a grudge against them. When my parents are ill, I will taste the medicine first before giving it to them.¹⁷ I will take care of them night and day and stay by their bedside. During the first three years of mourning after my parents have passed away, I will remember them with gratitude and feel sad often for not being able to repay them for their kindness in raising me. During this period, I will arrange my home to reflect my grief and sorrow. I will also avoid festivities and indulgence in food and alcoholic drinks. I will observe proper etiquette¹⁸ in arranging my parents' funerals. I will hold the memorial ceremony and commemorate my parents' anniversaries with utmost sincerity. I will serve my departed parents as if they were still alive.

Chapter 2. Standards for a Younger Brother When Away from Home¹⁹

If I am the older sibling, I will befriend the younger ones. If I am the younger sibling, I will respect and love the older ones. Only when I can maintain harmonious relationships with my siblings am I being dutiful to my parents.²⁰ When I value my familial ties more than property and belongings, no resentment will come between me and my siblings. When I am careful with words and hold back hurtful comments, my feelings of anger naturally die out.

Whether I am drinking, eating, walking, or sitting, I will let the elders go first; the

15. The model for this is the ancient emperor Shun, who originally was a commoner, and was extremely filial, even though his father and his stepbrother treated him badly, even to the point of trying to kill him.

16. In ancient China, when a child did something wrong, the parents were allowed to discipline the child. If a child refused to be disciplined, the parents had the right to ask the authorities to have the child executed.

17. Ancient Chinese took herbal medicines boiled in water. Here the son is required to check the medicine first, before giving it to his parents. He should check whether it is too hot or cold, or too bitter.

18. The details of funeral rites are contained in the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, and updated in later books on ritual, especially in the *Family Rituals of Master Zhu (Zhuzi jiali)* compiled by Zhu Xi.

19. From the context, «away from home» just means «when the elder or younger brother is outside the presence of his parents.» Commentators explain how in ancient China the parents would live in a different room from their children. So, here the first chapter concerns «*rui*,» i.e. entering in the presence of one's parents (here above, it was translated as «at home»). This chapter instead of «*ru*» says «*chu*,» meaning out of the presence of one's parents.

20. Parents are happy when their children get along with each other. This is one way children can show they are dutiful to their parents.

younger ones should follow. When an elder is asking for someone, I will get that person for him right away. If I cannot find that person, I will immediately report back, and put myself at the elder's service instead. When I address an elder, I should not call him by his given name.²¹ This is in accord with ancient Chinese etiquette. In front of an elder, I will never show off. If I meet an elder I know on the street, I will promptly clasp my hands and greet him with a bow. If he does not speak to me, I will step back and respectfully stand aside. Should I be riding a horse and spot an elder I know walking, I will dismount and pay respect to the elder. If I am riding in a carriage,²² I will stop, get out of the carriage, and ask if I can give the elder a ride. If I meet an elder passing by, I will stand aside and wait respectfully. I will not leave until the elder disappears from my sight. When an elder is standing, I will not sit. After an elder sits down, I sit only when I am told to do so. Before an elder, I will speak softly. But if my voice is too low and hard to hear, it is not appropriate. When meeting an elder, I will walk briskly towards him; when leaving, I will not exit in haste. When answering a question, I will look at the person who is asking me the question. I will serve my uncles as if I am serving my parents. I will treat my cousins as if they are my own siblings.

Chapter 3. Be Cautious in My Daily Life

I will get up each morning before my parents; at night, I will go to bed only after my parents have gone to sleep. When I realize that time is passing me by and cannot be turned back, and that I am getting older year by year, I will especially treasure the present moment.²³ When I get up in the morning, I will wash my face and brush my teeth. After using the toilet, I will always wash my hands.

I must wear my hat straight,²⁴ and make sure the hooks of my clothes are tied.²⁵ My socks and shoes should also be worn neatly and correctly. I will always place my hat and

21. In ancient China, a male person had at least two names. The first name was the «given name,» which was given to him by his parents when he was born. A second name was given to him by his friends when he reached the age of 20, at a «Ceremony of the Hat» (or *Capping Ceremony*) given in his honor to announce his coming-of-age. After that only his parents called him by his «given name.» Out of respect, everyone else, including the emperor, could only call him by his second name. The only exception was if he committed a crime. During sentencing, he would be called by his «given name.»

22. In ancient China, most people used horses or carriages as their means of transportation.

23. There is an old Chinese proverb: «A unit of time is as precious as a unit of gold, but you cannot buy back one unit of time with one unit of gold.» It means that time is really very precious, as no amount of money can buy time.

24. In ancient China, when a male wore a hat, it meant he had attained the age of an adult.

25. In ancient China, in place of buttons, people used hooks. When dressed, hooks had to be tied.

clothes away in their proper places. I will not carelessly throw my clothes around, for that will get them dirty. It is more important that my clothes are clean, rather than how extravagant they are. I will wear only what is suitable for my station. At home, I will wear clothes according to my family traditions and customs. When it comes to eating and drinking, I will not pick and choose my food. I will only eat the right amount; I will not over-eat. I am still young, I must not drink alcohol. When I am drunk, my behavior will turn ugly.

I will always walk composed, with light and even steps. I will always stand up straight and tall. My bows will always be deep, with hands held in front and arms rounded. I will always pay my respect with reverence.²⁶ I will not step on doorsteps or stand leaning on one leg. I will not sit with my legs apart or sprawled out. I will not rock the lower part of my body while standing or sitting down.

I will always lift the curtain slowly,²⁷ and quietly. I must leave myself ample space when I turn so I will not bump into a corner. I will hold empty containers carefully as if they were full.²⁸ I will enter empty rooms as if they were occupied.²⁹ I will avoid doing things in a hurry, as doing things in haste will lead to many mistakes. I should not be afraid of difficult tasks, and I will not become careless when a job is too easy. I will keep away from rowdy places. I will not ask about things that are abnormal or unusual.

When I am about to enter a main entrance, I must first ask if someone is inside. Before entering a room, I must first make myself heard, so that those inside know someone is approaching. If someone asks who I am, I must give my name. To answer: «It is me» or: «Me» is not sufficient. Before borrowing things from others, I must ask for permission. If I do not ask, it is stealing. When borrowing things from others, I will return them promptly. Later, if I have an urgent need, I will not have a problem borrowing from them again.

Chapter 4. Be Trustworthy

When I speak, honesty is important. Deceitful words and lies must not be tolerated. Rather than talking too much, it is better to speak less. I will speak only the truth; I will not

26. In ancient China, people paid their respect to others by bowing, holding one hand over the other which is closed, or prostrating themselves on the ground.

27. In ancient China, curtains were made of bamboo strips woven together. They were used to shelter a room from view.

28. Even if a container is empty, out of reverence to things whether living or not, one should treat it with respect and handle it with care.

29. In ancient China, a virtuous man always behaved properly, regardless of whether he was alone or with others.

twist the facts. Cunning words, foul language, and philistine habits must be avoided at all costs.

What I have not seen with my own eyes, I will not readily tell to others. What I do not know for sure, I will not easily pass on to others. If I am asked to do something that is inappropriate or bad, I must not agree to it. If I do, I will be doubly wrong. I must speak clearly and to the point. I must not talk too fast or mumble. Some like to talk about the good points of others, while some like to talk about the faults of others. If it is none of my business, I will not get involved.

When I see others do good deeds, I must think about following their example. Even though my own achievements are still far behind those of others, I am getting closer. When I see others do wrong, I must immediately reflect upon myself. If I have made the same mistake, I will correct it. If not, I will take extra care to not make the same mistake.

When my morals, conduct, knowledge, and skills seem not as good as those of others, I will encourage myself to be better. If the clothes I wear, and the food I eat and drink are not as good as that of others, I should not be concerned.

If criticism makes me angry and compliments make me happy, bad company will come my way and good friends will shy away. If I am uneasy about compliments and appreciative of criticism, then sincere, understanding, and virtuous people will gradually come close to me.

If any mistake I make is inadvertent, it is merely a mistake. If it is done on purpose, however, it is an evil act. If I correct my mistake and do not repeat it, I no longer own the mistake. If I try to cover it up, I will be doubly wrong.

Chapter 5. Love All Equally

Human beings, regardless of nationality, race, or religion—everyone—should be loved equally. We are all sheltered by the same sky and we all live on the same planet Earth.

A person of high ideals and morals is highly respected. What people value is not based on outside appearance. A person's outstanding abilities will naturally endow him with a good reputation. Admiration from others does not come from boasting or praising oneself.

If I am a very capable person, I should use my capabilities for the benefit of others. Other people's competence should never be slandered. I will not flatter the rich, or despise the poor. I will not ignore old friends, only taking delight in new ones. When a person is busy, I will not bother him with matters. When a person's mind is not at ease, I will not

bother him with words.

If a person has a shortcoming, I will not expose it. If a person has a secret, I will not tell others. When people are being praised and approved of, they will be encouraged to try even harder. Spreading rumors about the wrongdoings of others is a wrongdoing in itself. When the harm done has reached the extreme, misfortunes will surely follow. When I encourage another to do good, both of our virtues are built up. If I do not tell another of his faults, we are both wrong.

Whether I take or give, I need to know the difference between the two. It is better to give more and take less. What I ask others to do, I must first ask myself if I would be willing to do. If it is not something I would be willing to do, I will not ask others to do it. I must repay the kindness of others and let go of my resentments. I will spend less time holding grudges and more time paying back the kindness of others.

When I am directing maids and servants, I will act honorably and properly. I will also treat them kindly and generously. If I use my influence to make them submissive, their hearts will not be with me. If I can convince them with sound reasoning, they will have nothing to object to.

Chapter 6. Be Close to and Learn from People of Virtue and Compassion

We are all human, but we are not the same. Most of us are ordinary; only a very few have great virtues and high moral principles. A truly virtuous person is greatly respected by others. He will not be afraid to speak the truth and he will not fawn on others. If I can be close to and learn from people of great virtue and compassion, I will benefit immensely. My virtues will grow daily and my wrongdoings will lessen day by day. If I choose not to be close to and learn from people of great virtue, I will suffer a great loss. People without virtue will get close to me and nothing I attempt will succeed.

Chapter 7. After All the Above Are Accomplished, I Should Study Further and Learn Literature and Art to Improve My Cultural and Spiritual Life

If I do not actively practice what I have learned, but continue to study on the surface, even though my knowledge is increasing, it is only superficial. What kind of person will I be? If I do apply my knowledge diligently, but stop studying, I will only do things based on my own opinion, thinking it is correct. In fact, what I know is not the truth.

There are methods to study correctly. They involve concentration in three areas:

my mind, my eyes, and my mouth. To believe in what I read is equally important. When I begin to read a book, I will not think about another. If I have not completed the book, I will not start another. I will give myself lots of time to study, and I will study hard. If I devote enough time and effort, I will thoroughly understand.³⁰ If I have a question, I will make a note of it. I will ask the person who has the knowledge for the right answer. I will keep my room neat, my walls uncluttered and clean, my desk tidy and my brush and ink stone properly placed.³¹ If my ink block is ground unevenly, it shows I have a poor state of mind. When words are written carelessly, showing no respect, this shows my state of mind has not been well. My books should be classified, placed on the bookshelves, and in their proper places. After I finish reading a book, I will put it back where it belongs. Even if I am in a hurry, I still must neatly roll up and bind the open bamboo scroll I have been reading. All missing or damaged pages ought to be immediately repaired. If it is not a book on the teachings of the saints and sages, it should be discarded and not even looked at. Such books can block my intelligence and wisdom, and will undermine my aspirations and sense of direction. Neither be harsh on myself, nor give up on myself. To be a person of high ideals, moral standards and virtue is something we can all attain in time.



Further Comments and Criticisms

In recent decades, after it became again widely popular, numerous scholars have written essays debating the *Dizigui*. Many people extol its educational value, especially in this world of ours, «when children are listened to, instead of the other way around.»³² Nowadays, according to the research of sociologist Ji Zhe, in the promotion activity of Jingkong and others, the *Dizigui* almost came to be sanctified as a «classic» of the whole «Chinese culture.»³³ It is true that the pamphlet is an austere code of behavior; but numerous Confucian scholars deem it overvalued. They have written to criticize the book and to affirm

30. If I do not understand part of a book I am reading, I should read it again and again, even if for a thousand times. Its meaning will come to me in time.

31. In traditional China, they were writing with a brush and ink. The ink was made at the moment, by grinding an ink stick on the ink stone and adding water.

32. From the introduction to the English translation of the *Dizigui*, website of the Pure Land Learning College Assn., Inc. (Australia).

33. S. Billioud, *The Varieties of Confucian Experience*, op. cit., 62.

that it is not an epitome of Chinese culture; it is just a popular pamphlet containing some traditional Confucian basic rules of behavior and nothing more, suitable only for children or illiterate peasants. Therefore, it is not even on a par with the *Sanzijing*, which is much more ancient (several centuries) and loftier in content. Actually, the *Sanzijing* has more the aura of a Classic. This was the reason why already in the second half of the nineteenth century, many scholars looked down on it and it was never considered a classic.

However, there are Confucian scholars who go further in their criticism. They denounce the *Dizigui*'s content as a betrayal of true Confucian doctrine, and state that it offers a form of «bastardized Confucianism.» Why?

In the twentieth century, many Chinese intellectuals debated and wrote about traditional Confucian ethics, striving to point out its weaknesses and faults. They condemned Confucianism as it was lived out during the last centuries of the imperial age for imposing total subservience to the authority of parents and state and «rendering the people dormant.» After one century of reflection, the New Confucians have made an enormous effort at outlining the original Confucian ethical project, free from any deformation and accretion. Facing the *Dizigui*, they see a Confucianism they dislike, they see a return to the condemned past.

I have examined numerous websites and realized that their criticism is constantly aimed at Chapter One, regarding filial behavior toward parents. They object to the passive attitude of obedience and conformity depicted as standard Confucian behavior. Here are the points, which they find most at odds with the actual teachings of Confucius.

a) Obeying your parents' orders immediately without asking questions («When your parents call you, you should answer without delay. When your parents ask you to do something, you should act immediately as your parents say;»

b) Accepting your parents unconditionally («When your parents instruct you, you must listen to them respectfully. When your parents reprimand you, you must take their rebukes obediently;»

c) Giving ownership of yourself to your parents («A matter might be trivial, but if it is wrong to do it or unfair to another person, I must not do it thinking it will bear little or no consequence. If I do, I am not being a dutiful child...»);

d) Indulging your parents («You should try your best to get fully prepared for what your parents like, and you should carefully get rid of what your parents dislike.») Critics observe: If you do as your parents please, what's the point of giving them the right advice, which Confucius advocated for?

e) Accepting your parents' physical abuse («If our parents do not accept our remon-

strations, remonstrate with them again in a happy way. We may follow up with wailing or sobbing, and we should not feel resentful towards them if we are whipped by them»);

Those who have read actual Confucian classics can immediately spot the distortions in *Dizigui*. Confucius's teachings clearly stated that one should always react rationally and run away from parental abuse.

As for abuse in general, there is the saying of Confucius, that one should «recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness,» (*An. XIV, 34*) i.e., one should let parents know plain and clear that they did wrong.

As for parental abuse, there is a related story in the ancient book *Kongzi jiayu* (*Words from the School of Confucius*), which tells about the disciple Zengzi. One day, while he was working in his vegetable garden, he accidentally cut the root of some melon plants. His father Zeng Xi was so angry that he hit him on the back with a big rod, rendering him unconscious for a while. After Zengzi woke up, he approached his father with no ill feelings, saying, «I offended you, father, and you disciplined me hard. Did you injure yourself?» When he returned to his own room, he took out his lute and sang, so that his father could be assured he was fine. Upon hearing about this, Confucius was furious. He told other disciples, «If Zengzi comes, do not let him in!» Zengzi was puzzled. He sent someone else to ask the Master what he did wrong. The Master said, «Didn't you know that when Shun [ancient sage king] was serving his father, he would always be available when the father needed his help, but he could not be found when his father wanted to kill him? A mild spank is fine for misconduct, but one should run away when facing a big rod. In this way Shun's father could not find a chance to commit the crime of becoming a cruel father and Shun did not become an un-filial son. The way Zengzi served his father today was to wait there for his father to burst his anger, as if he would not run away even when facing death! Had he really died, he would have led his father into a terrible crime. What could be more un-filial than this?»³⁴.

While it goes by itself that teaching blind obedience must be welcome to authorities in China, a word can be said in defense of the *Dizigui*, namely that it is, after all, a list of rules meant for children or illiterate people. Obviously, there is little or no room for explanations, clarifications, and distinctions. Therefore, the blame should be discounted. It is possible to find similar cases in other religions. Take for instance the Catholic catechism in use before the Second Vatican Council. The *Catechism of Saint Pius the Tenth* was actually a summary of Catholic doctrine made by the same Pope (Pius x). He drafted it when

34. Trans. by Ni Peimin, in *Confucius, the Man and the Way of Gongfu* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

he was bishop of Mantua, facing a diocese of poor children coming from illiterate peasant families. He presented the Catholic doctrine by means of a list of extremely simple questions-and-answers. Later he happened to become Pope and the booklet was made the standard of doctrine for the entire Catholic Church for about a century, until by the time of Vatican II everybody was decrying its oversimplified content, and it was discarded.

No matter what, there is no doubt that the spread of the *Dizigui* has accomplished a great deed. One century of historical vicissitudes had almost totally eradicated Confucian values from the minds of the Chinese. Now, it has happened that in the short time of a few years, the *Dizigui*, despite its shortcomings, has been an effective way to restore awareness of Confucian values (filial piety, brotherly respect, trustworthiness, etc.) among the Chinese masses.³⁵

35. Umberto Bresciani received his M. A. and Ph. D. in Chinese Literature from National Taiwan University. He has lived in Taiwan for more than forty years. His main research interest is Chinese philosophical and religious thought and comparative cultural and theological studies. He is the author of *Reinventing Confucianism. The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei 2001, trans. into Italian as *La filosofia cinese nel ventesimo secolo. I nuovi Confuciani* 2009); *Il primo principio della filosofia confuciana* (2014); *Wang Yangming: An Essential Biography* (2016). Most recently, he published *Dizionario di Confucianesimo* (Passerino Editore, 2019).

Cultura
e società



The Secret Language of the Rishi

SERGIO TARGA

Novelle Bengalesi — XI

Il mercante prodigio

Jamini e Kamini

Choto Bhai

ANTONIO GERMANO

The Secret Language of the Rishi

SERGIO TARGA

The Rishi people, also pejoratively known as and called Muchi,¹ are a former untouchable caste of Bengal, nowadays mainly to be found in the South West of Bangladesh. Ranking very low if not lowest in the social and ritual hierarchy of rural Bengal, the Rishi are traditionally linked to leatherwork in all its phases, from skinning, to the treatment of rawhide to the manufacture of shoes and drums. Together with this occupation, Rishi are also customarily associated with bamboo-basket making and music, being the official musicians at religious functions and social gatherings. Yet, even these occupations have done little to enhance their social status, affording them very scant social prestige or import. Indeed, two of the main reasons for the Rishi's liminal status have been their relationship with dead cows and, even more, their socially repulsive habit of eating carrion. On top of that, Rishi are also historically associated with cattle poisoning: it was not only customary for Rishi people to wait for dead cows to become available but they were also actively engaged in assisting their death and thus shorten their wait! As such, the Rishi were likened to a criminal tribe, without, however, being ever so declared.²

As a group, the Rishi never had a place in history and were always given less consideration than other subaltern people: they just simply did not exist on the radar of mainstream society, which considered them less than human and perhaps a bit more than

1. In Hinduism the rishi (ঋষি) are the sages of old, the seers and «composers» of Vedic hymns. Mythical figures of the beginnings, they are endowed with superhuman powers. In the Rishi myths of origin, there is an unmistakable reference to that former higher status and to a subsequent fall because of deception or greed. To call themselves Rishi is to make an etiological statement about a glorious former status as against the present cursed reality of being Muchi. For the Rishi myths of origin, see C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 455–58.

2. In 1871, the then British legislator had enacted for much of North India a piece of very ambiguous and nefarious legislation called The Criminal Tribes Act, subsequently amended several times. According to this Act, a number of castes and tribes (originally 150 in number, but other tribes were added later on) were declared «Born Criminal» and thus subjected to a rigorous and special police regime, which included, among other things, deportation and imprisonment. In 1876, the Act was extended to the Bengal Presidency and by 1911 the whole of the British Raj came under its purview. The act was finally repealed in 1952. The Rishi as a caste were never declared a Criminal Tribe, even though some of its members came under its purview. See S. Targa ed., *Satkhira: The Diaries of the Jesuit Fathers* (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, 2013), 125. Indeed, without being declared a Criminal Tribe, the Rishi were often persecuted and prosecuted under Section 110 («Bad Livelihood») of the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure. *Ibid.*, 14.

animals. Things have changed today. The Rishi are no longer what they used to be. The majority of them have abandoned their traditional trade with cows and hides, yet they continue to suffer from marginality and discrimination. If politically the Rishi of today's Bangladesh are full-blown citizens, with rights and duties on a par with any other citizens of the country, sociologically and psychologically they continue to suffer from powerlessness, insignificance and inferiority complexes.³ They are caught up, as it were, between a promising and fast-moving modernity and a slow moving, burden-loaded tradition. Their identity as a people is what is at stake here. Modern Rishi youngsters experience shame in their people's past history and tradition resolving thus to hide their identity by liquefying themselves into the oblivious and amorphous amalgam that the modern globalized social milieu is. Others, fewer indeed, on the contrary, appealing to a deep-seated strength only the last, the least, the lowest and the lost⁴ can sometime manifest, above and beyond rage and pain, try to find reasons for proudly shouting out their right to exist, without shame or fear, as a dignified *jat*.⁵

Historically, anthropologists and Christian missionaries alike have extended a helping hand by offering, from different perspectives, safety anchors, something to be proud of and to hold on to. It is not that anthropologists and missionaries are better than others; the fact is that, traditionally, they have been the only ones interested in the Rishi and their cause, looking at them, often if not always, with sympathetic eyes. The present article among other things, would like, beyond any academic pretension, to provide Rishi people with more material to reflect upon in their on-going struggle for recognition. I will thus look at a particular aspect of Rishi cultural tradition often surprisingly neglected⁶ by both their otherwise sympathetic patrons, that is, their secret language or *thar bhasha*.⁷ I will

3. It cannot be forgotten that Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, affectionately called Babasaheb by his followers, the main architect behind the Indian Constitution, a Dalit himself (i.e. an untouchable) and a major player in the fight for Dalits rights and dignity, always maintained that «political equality is meaningless without social equality;» see Vasant Moon ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 13 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambekar Foundation, 2014), 1216.

4. This expression belongs to Mahatma Gandhiji who meaningfully described Dalits, by him called Harijan (people of god), as the last, the least, the lowest and the lost.

5. *Jat* is modern Bengali (জাতি) for ethnic group, caste, etc.

6. Cosimo Zene the writer of a copious monograph on the Rishi twice mentions the secret language of the Rishi but dedicates only ten lines to the subject. See C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., 18; 21. Similarly, the Jesuit fathers who happened to work among Rishi people in the first part of the twentieth century, although knowing about the existence of this secret language, mentioned it only once in their diaries, without giving it any importance at all. See S. Targa ed., *Satkhira: The Diaries of the Jesuit Fathers*, op. cit., 110.

7. Significantly, I believe, the word *thar* (ঠার) commonly used by Rishi to refer to their secret language, is Bengali for «code.» Admittedly, however, this word is generally unknown and not even employed. Despite being found in a Bengali dictionary, it is actually of Hindi origin. See A. Datta ed., *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, reprint 2002), entry ঠার, 245.

consider myself satisfied if the argument discussed below would arise their pride.⁸ After a preliminary introduction aiming at clarifying the terms of the question, I will delineate a tentative theoretical linguistic framework capable of highlighting the *thar bhasha* as a major player in the Rishi's cultural milieu. A number of comments centring on the relationship between language and social structure, particularly in Rishi communities who adhere to the Christian faith, will conclude the paper. Lists of *thar* words will complement the paper by giving the reader a flavour of what the Rishi code language is all about.⁹

Language and Its Variations

In a large, complex and extended society the formal, official language cannot but undergo linguistic variations determined by factors such as occupation, class affiliation, recreational interests, geography etc. For instance, jargons are the languages of professional people. We may thus have a jargon of the medical profession and a jargon of builders and so on and so forth. These reflect professional specialization and do not have any secret intent but are often abstruse to those outside the profession simply because they do not know and do not belong to the profession in question. An official language, moreover, when spoken over a vast geographical area, necessarily gives rise to dialectal variations determined by the geography and history of a particular area. Such a language is then called a dialect and is often charged with promoting the identity of local communities. But there is also a language called colloquial or slang¹⁰ which is informal, does not necessarily depend on geography and cuts across both class affiliation and social standing. Lastly, there exists a language called argot (or cant and lingo). «Groups who are oppressed, imprisoned, or isolated from the community at large and those whose activities are under scrutiny by the authorities tend to develop an extensive in-group variety of language known as argot.»¹¹ This argot is «a functionally specialized artificial idiom invented for the purpose of expressing those aspects of behaviour which are deviant and often legally proscribed.»¹² For

8. A certain Oshok Dhali, a Christian of Rishi background from Baradal village in the Satkhira district of Bangladesh, when questioned about their *thar bhasha*, proudly replied: এটা তো আমাদের ইংরেজি, «This is our English!» Father Antonio Germano, personal communication, Khulna, 15 August, 2019.

9. In this paper, I am not going to study *thar*'s morphological, syntactic or phonetic aspects. The interested reader may find that in B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha* (Kolkata: Naba Bharat Publishers, 1371), 38ff.

10. Actually, the difference between colloquial language and slang is in degree. I use Barry J. Blake contention that slang means «very colloquial.» See B. J. Blake, *Secret Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 200.

11. Ibid., 196.

12. R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), 4.

this reason, an argot has the characteristic of being secret or semi-secret. To be clear, since we are going to deal with the secret language of a caste grouping, the Rishi, an argot is not a caste dialect. The latter is defined by dialectical variations brought about this time not by geographical isolation but by social segregation.¹³ In this respect Miller follows Gumperz who, in his by now dated but important paper on social stratification in a north Indian village, concludes: «It is clear that... linguistic differences represent social and not geographical groupings, since members of the same caste living in different sections of the village speak the same dialect.»¹⁴ Indeed a caste dialect lacks three elements proper to an argot, even of a caste argot, as the secret language of the Rishi. It does not have secrecy as an identifying characteristic; it is not artificially construed and, consequently, it is not the conscious product of a caste.¹⁵ While Miller recognizes that «there are sociological factors that are identifiable through speech, including age, birthplace, education level and socioeconomic status, caste is one that is decreasingly found in speech, thus proving that the caste system is becoming less of a socially isolating force in Indian society.»¹⁶ Hopefully, Miller's consideration is true, even though it is not uncommon to hear people, usually of higher standing, ridiculing a friend saying things like «you speak like a Muchi.» This of course refers neither to the Rishi's particular dialect or pronunciation nor, even less, to their argot. The expression simply refers to the uncouth and coarse language the Rishi are traditionally famous for.¹⁷ Be as it may, a decrease in the level of caste isolation would not challenge caste argots because the latter were born not out of isolation but out of social deviance. In other words, an argot depends for its existence on the deviant behaviour it was born to safeguard and conceal. As long as a deviant behaviour, not necessarily a criminal

13. See B. B. Miller «Caste as a Facet of Dialectical Variation in Spoken Telegu» in *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Symposium About Language and Society*, (Austin: Texas Linguistics Forum 54, 15–17 April 2011), 79.

14. J. J. Gumperz, «Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village,» in *American Anthropologist*, 1958, 60:4, 680.

15. Obviously, all languages are artificial in the sense that they are born to satisfy particular social functions. What is stated here is simply that the artificiality of a «normal» language is unconscious while that of an argot is consciously enacted.

16. B. B. Miller, «Caste as a Facet of Dialectical Variation in Spoken Telegu,» op. cit., 80.

17. In this respect, «you speak like a Muchi» can be likened to other expressions like «you walk like a Muchi» or «you dress like a Muchi.» All these expressions are derogative and centred on the marginalized status of the Muchi/Rishi. See also J. J. Gumperz, «Dialect Differences and Social Stratification in a North Indian Village,» op. cit., 676. He says the same things for the Chamars, a North Indian caste with basically the same sort of traditional occupation as the Rishi of Bengal. By the way, the abusive expression চামারের বাচ্চা চামার! «you Chamar son of a Chamar» is used among Rishi themselves, even though they deny their assimilation to the Chamar caste. In this respect, Wise writes: «Rishi and Mochi are synonyms of the same caste, but the members repudiate the name of Chamar. There can be no doubt, however, that they belong to the same race, although long residence in Bengal has altered them in several respects» in J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London: Her Majesty's printer Harrison and Sons, 1883), 367.

behaviour but, also and often, a socially frowned upon behaviour, exists, an argot will continue to be employed.¹⁸ This being the case, it is to be expected that all untouchable castes and marginalized groups of the Indian sub-continent might have developed an argot or secret language the like of the Rishi, since all these castes and groups, despite being functional to mainstream society, are the bearers of socially deviant behaviours. This is so, for instance, for the Paraiyas of South India,¹⁹ the Badi of West Nepal,²⁰ the Cuhra of the Punjab,²¹ the Pandas of Varanasi,²² the Hijras,²³ etc. Significantly, an argot is also defined as «a marker of a social class, typically low social class.»²⁴

Argots as Languages of the Underworld

We have already mentioned that despite the sympathetic approach of both anthropologists and missionaries, the Rishi's secret language has not been properly studied or analysed. Unfortunately, this is true of most of the secret languages of India, despite the fact that administrators, indologists and, indeed, missionaries too had been well aware of their existence. The Linguistic Survey of India, a massive work comprising 20 volumes which took twenty-five years to complete, (from 1903 to 1928), in its very last volume, the one dedicated to Gipsy languages, deals with Indian argots. This collocation is quite telling. Argots when confronted with the «politically and socially correct» attitude of Victorian standards could not but suffer from the prejudice of being the languages of criminal tribes, bad characters, vagrants and anti-social elements in general. What is more, argots were also often considered works of fancy, so that they could not rise to the standards of formal, Aryan languages. Argots were only playthings of criminal and childlike tribes,

18. Indeed, social isolation and deviant behaviour may be related and, to a certain degree, even overlapping, so that to a greater isolation might correspond a greater level of deviancy. Yet, social isolation is not a sufficient element to explain deviant behaviour.

19. Parayar or Paraiyar are a fairly big formerly untouchable caste to be found mainly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The term «pariah» was derived from their caste name. See V. Dileep, «Communication through Secret Language: A Case Study Based on Parayas' Secret Language.» At <<https://pazhayathu.blogspot.com/2011/12/parayas-secret-language-study-by.html>>.

20. The Badi are a caste whose female members traditionally engage in prostitution. See T. Cox, «The Badi: Prostitution as a Social Norm among an Untouchable Caste of West Nepal,» in *Kailash*, 1990, 16/3-4: 165-86.

21. The Cuhra are a caste of scavengers in the Punjab. See G. Bailey, «The Secret Words of the Cuhra,» in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* vol. LXXI, 1902, 1/2: 14-20.

22. The Pandas are a caste of low Brahmins who specialised in cheating pilgrims out of their money in big pilgrimage centres like Varanasi. See R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages*, op. cit., 19-52.

23. Hijras while not a caste are third gender people living in close knitted communities. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 176.

24. B. J. Blake, *Secret Language*, op. cit., 196.

not really deserving the attention of serious researchers.²⁵

Things started to change in the first decades after Indian independence. Bhakti Prasad Mallik (Kolkata 1922–2010) was the first to study in depth the secret languages of West Bengal's underworld. In this he could not but start out from where previous writers had left off. Argots continued to remain the grubby manifestation of the criminal and anti-social worlds, the underworld, yet, in Mallik's understanding, even argots were linked to socio-cultural structures so that «to know the language of the underworld we need to have a clear idea about its inhabitants and their behaviour. Language is the map of a civilisation. The words of a speaker manifest their environment, its psychological formation, and education.»²⁶ Clearly, the relationship between language and socio-cultural structures goes both ways: to understand a language we need to know its environs in the same way as language is itself their map.

Despite a heavily moralistic and paternalistic bias which manifests itself when he terms the language of the underworld as a sort of second class language, the language of obscurity and of un-culture²⁷ or when he clearly states that his endeavour is undertaken in obedience to a sort of missionary zeal,²⁸ betraying thus his Victorian respectable and middle class framework of mind,²⁹ Mallik strongly believes that «language is the best resource we have to know man, and it does not matter if that language is ordinary, mixed up, artificial or of any other form whatsoever.»³⁰

For the sake of precision, it must be said that if Mallik has been an icebreaker in the field of argots in India, David W. Maurer (1906–1981) is the recognised authority in the same field in the USA. To the best of my knowledge, he has been the first linguist to

25. See for instance this quotation: «The argots are chiefly used by criminals and disreputable individuals for the sake of secrecy. Their nature is, however, quite the same as that of the various kinds of play languages which we are accustomed to consider as desultory results of children's fancy.» G. A. Grierson ed., *The Linguistic Survey of India, Gipsy Languages*, vol. 11 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1922), 8.

26. My Translation. অপরাধ-জগতের ভাষা জানতে হলে অপরাধ জগৎ, তার অধিবাসী এবং তাদের আচার ব্যবহার সম্পর্কে স্পষ্ট ধারণা থাকা চাই। ভাষা মানব সভ্যতার মানচিত্র। বক্তার ভাষা তার পরিবেশ, মানসিক গঠন, শিক্ষাদিক্ষা সম্পর্কে অবহিত করে। Bhakti Prasad Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op. cit., 1. See also 16, *passim*. The book should also be available in English, even though I was not able to find a copy. See B. P. Mallik, *Language of the Underworld of West Bengal* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College Research Series no. LXXVII, 1972).

27. অপভাষা, সন্ধা ভাষা and অপসংস্কৃতির ভাষা respectively. See Ibid., 3; 7, *passim*.

28. ভাবলাম, কে এদের জীবন জয়গান শোনাবে? এদের বাঁচাবে কে? «I thought, who is going to make them hear again a song of victory? Who is going to save them?» Ibid., 4.

29. Speaking of the Hijra, the transsexuals etc. of India he says: ওদের বিকৃত ভাবভঙ্গি আচরণ গবেষণার খাতিরেও বেশিক্ষণ লক্ষ করা কঠিন। «Their unnatural postures and behaviour are impossible to bear for long, not even for research purposes!» Ibid., 11.

30. মানুষকে জানতে ভাষা সর্বশ্রেষ্ঠ অবলম্বন। সে ভাষা সাধারণ, মিশ্র অথবা কৃত্রিম যাই হোক তাতে কিছু আসে যায় না। Ibid., 7.

start the systematic study of social languages.³¹ Before Maurer, the study of non-ordinary languages was mainly confined to geographical dialects.

Before Mallik, but in the same line of thought, Maurer believed that «the argots are more than specialized forms of language; they reflect the way of life in each of the numerous criminal cultures and subcultures: they are keys to attitudes, to evaluation of men and society, to modes of thinking, to social organization and to technology.»³² Admittedly, we have come a long way from considering an argot a plaything, the main medium of criminal or deviant subcultures.

Argots as Anti-languages, Expressions of Anti-societies

If both Maurer and Mallik, although with different emphases, postulated a relationship between argot and subculture, it was Lerman who eventually empirically proved the relationship. Accordingly, a subculture is deemed to exist if deviant words (i.e. argot), shared deviant values and deviant behaviour coexist. We may in other words say that, «any subculture is conceived as a combination of language, values and behaviour.»³³ What is more interesting is that it is the argot and its knowledge that shows the degree of participation in a given subculture. This is the same as saying that the greater a person's knowledge of an argot, the greater its socialisation into a criminal subculture. Or again, that the use of argot words manifests «the greatest potential for discerning tendencies towards delinquent specialisation.»³⁴ Furthermore, it appears that there is a relationship between recidivism and greater knowledge of argot.³⁵ Accordingly, a high degree of internalisation of anti-social values that a greater knowledge of argot indicates would be detrimental to future social adjustments.³⁶ To be clear: these studies were born by researching the underworld, so it is obvious that in such a setting delinquency, criminal behaviour etc. are the elements characterising a subculture. However, we should not forget that argots are not deployed only by criminals as such and when talking of the underworld and its subcultures we do not necessarily restrict our discourse to police, prisoners, laws and

31. Perhaps the most important of his books on the subject is its first. See D. W. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940).

32. Quoted in P. Lerman, «Argot, Symbolic Deviance and Subcultural Delinquency,» in *American Sociological Review*, 1967, 32/2: 211.

33. *Ibid.*, 210.

34. *Ibid.*, 216–17

35. See U. Bondeson, «Argot Knowledge as an Indicator of Criminal Socialisation,» in N. Christie ed., *Aspects of Social Control in Welfare States* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1968), 102.

36. *Ibid.*, 104.

correctional facilities. In fact, «by criminal subculture is meant a subculture that has become differentiated from the dominating culture, in so far as some of its beliefs, values and norms are of an antisocial type (criminal or asocial).»³⁷ Understood in this way, also Rishi's secret language finds a place. The cultural substratum the *thar bhasha* of the Rishi implies, certainly reflects a differentiation from dominant, mainstream culture, if not always as a criminal subculture, at least as an alternative and competing one. Bondeson, while speaking of the relationship between argots and subcultures, concludes that the latter are the products of subcultures that shelter «tabooed activities»,³⁸ that is, criminal, non-conformist or asocial kinds of behaviours.

It is important, at this point, to introduce two new concepts, which, in my view, may help a lot to situate and understand argots in general and the Rishi's argot in particular. Halliday has developed the concept of argot as an anti-language, a non-ordinary language that gives expression to what he calls an anti-society. «An anti-society is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction.»³⁹ Significantly, an anti-language and its corresponding anti-society are not kinds of parallel entities; indeed the latter gives rise to the former, even though, Halliday admits, we know very little about the how of this process. However, he does state that an anti-language relates to its anti-society in much the same way as a language relates to its society.⁴⁰ Both anti-language and language are «reality generating systems.»⁴¹ Obviously, the former, that is anti-language, «is the acting out of a distinct social structure... the bearer of an alternative social reality»,⁴² the source of an alternative identity for its members.⁴³ Society and anti-society are related so that the higher the pressure of society the stronger the function of its anti-language in creating a counter-reality. An argot, an anti-language, not only expresses a different subjectivity, from that expressed and maintained by an ordinary language, but it also helps in enforcing it, by giving it empirical reality. In other words, verbal discourse objectifies subjective reality, which, in the case of

37. Ibid., 87. Since this concept appears to be quite important, I here quote another, more neutral definition of subculture. «A subculture can be defined as any cohesive social micro-system that has certain contrasting cultural indices to those of the macro-system that constitutes the dominant culture.» M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance,» in A. Stiebritz & F. Polzenhagen eds., *Contributions to the Study of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 2010, no. 1, 46.

38. Ibid., 77.

39. M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages,» in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 1976, 78/3: 570.

40. Ivi.

41. Ibid., 574.

42. Ibid., 571.

43. Ibid., 573.

an argot, is also alternative and counter to that of ordinary society. In so doing, «conversation» becomes the most important vehicle for the reconstruction and maintenance of social reality.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is always through this conversation that the identities of the «conversants» are refashioned and so restated possibly as counter to that of established, mainstream society. Anti-languages, eventually, not only build counter social realities but provide also social spaces for the deployment of new or anti, individual identities.

The General Characteristics and Features of an Argot/Anti-language

Despite our knowledge of anti-languages being very limited and often confined only to lists of words, it is possible to pinpoint what the general characteristics of an anti-language are. An argot is certainly not anybody's mother tongue. As we wrote already above, an argot is artificial and as such is created to fulfil a purpose, usually a professional and specialized one, often denoted as criminal in the field of these studies, even though deviant would be a more neutral association. An argot does not have a geographical connotation, so it cannot be considered a dialect. It is indeed a non-local, social dialect⁴⁵ which, we know, reflects a social reality. Anti-languages do not have scripts and are always oral, spoken languages only. Not only are they spoken languages, they are also mainly male-spoken languages.⁴⁶ Despite being secret or quasi-secret, an argot does not have a proper specific grammar but follows and employs the grammar of the language of the contemporary and dominant culture.⁴⁷ An «argot is largely a matter of vocabulary.»⁴⁸ To this vocabulary we now turn our attention.

The first notable thing in argots is the tendency to create neologisms. Apparently, this helps «the fostering of group solidarity, mutual recognition, prestige and a sense of exclusiveness.»⁴⁹ It is this same anti-society, which somehow commands the use in ar-

44. Ibid., 574; 576; 579. I purposefully used the word reconstruction (and not construction) because an anti-language is always in structural relationship with a language and hence with a given social reality (already a construction). An argot's task, then, is that of deconstructing it by reconstructing a suitable anti-society, or counter social reality.

45. Mallik speaks of it as of a *gosthi bhasha*, গোস্টি ভাষা. See B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op cit., 6.

46. See Mallik as quoted in ibid., 571. Significantly, Lerman makes the following consideration: «Throughout the literature on delinquency and criminology, there is one fact so demonstrably evident that it is often assumed, rather than made explicit. This fact refers to the greater behavioral deviance of males, in all cultures and during all historical periods investigated.» P. Lerman, «Argot, Symbolic Deviance and Subcultural Delinquency,» op. cit., 215. See also R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages*, op. cit., 39.

47. B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op cit., 41.

48. M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance,» op. cit., 47–8.

49. Maurer quoted in M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance,» op. cit., 48.

gots of many idiomatic expressions which often defy translation. The indeterminacy and obscurity of idioms and neologisms reflect the insecurity of the life of their speakers, in as much as their colourfulness mirrors their often dramatic experiences. Unlike ordinary languages, argots are less stable in the sense that «they are constantly renewing themselves.»⁵⁰ The reason for this constant renewal is not only that words lose their secret quality and thus need replacement.⁵¹ Indeed, there is much more to it than just that: «the speakers of an anti-language are constantly striving to maintain a counter-reality that is under pressure from the established world. This is why the language is constantly renewing itself—to sustain the vitality that it needs if it is to function at all.»⁵²

Halliday, beyond what has already been said above, identifies three main characteristics as the three constant features of all underworld⁵³ languages, the first of which is relexicalisation. By this, he intends the process by means of which ordinary words assume new meaning in argot parlance. This of course does not happen with all words but only with those, which have to do with the tabooed activity of a given criminal or deviant subculture.⁵⁴ But relexicalisation in argots is often overlexicalisation,⁵⁵ and this is the second trait of anti-languages. Overlexicalisation is the tendency in argots to multiply words with the same meaning. Argots have plenty of synonyms. In this respect, for instance, Mallik, in the underworld language of West Bengal, lists at least 23 words for «girl,» 25 for «bomb,» 47 for «police» and 24 for «alcoholic drink.»⁵⁶ The proliferation of synonyms apparently has the «function to emphasise social value.»⁵⁷ The use of one word instead of another in a discursive context has the power to enhance the status of the speaker, to ridicule a victim, and eventually to reinforce the anti-society with its order and hierarchy.

The third and perhaps most important characteristic of argots is their tendency to employ and over employ metaphors. «It is this metaphorical character that defines the anti-language. An anti-language is a metaphor for an everyday language; and this metaphorical quality appears all the way up and down the system.»⁵⁸ We may say that it is metaphors and their variations that which link together the anti-society with its society; a

50. Ibid., 49.

51. Ivi. See also B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op cit., 44.

52. M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages,» op. cit., 582.

53. For the sake of clarity, in this paper I use terms like underworld, criminal subculture and anti-society as synonyms. Similarly, it is with terms like argot and anti-language.

54. See ibid., 571.

55. Ivi.

56. B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op cit., 44–5.

57. M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance,» op. cit., 50.

58. M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages,» op. cit., 578. See also B. P. Mallik, *Language of the Underworld of West Bengal*, op. cit., 119.

deviant subculture with the dominant culture; an anti-language with its language.

Lastly, in the light of what said so far, it remains to be verified if indeed argots are only the professional expression, deviant or criminal, of the underworld. In this sense, what is usually underlined in anti-languages is their secret character: the way to protect and enforce a society's tabooed activity.⁵⁹ Secrecy would thus be the one all-important thing, which actually causes an argot to be devised in the first place. Yet, most argots are spoken only among professionals, people belonging to the same «specialised» group, and never to outsiders unless they are acknowledged and trusted as worthy of belonging to the same group.⁶⁰ Without denying secrecy and its importance, it appears that argots are created not only as tools or as technology of a professional specialization but also as «a badge of identity, a sort of union card,» says Maurer.⁶¹ Secrecy would thus be a feature more than a determinant of underworld argots.⁶²

The Rishi's *Thar bhasha*

We have already noticed above that despite the existence and apparently extensive diffusion of argots among the former, so called, low or untouchable castes of India, the specific study of these languages has remained elusive, to say the least. Mallik who otherwise is considered an icebreaker in the field, did not say anything about the particular anti-languages of the underworld which have caste as their breeding ground. Indeed caste as such is mentioned by him only a couple of times without ever being analysed in depth. I wonder if the addition of caste as a further determinant in the birth of an argot may actually enrich the knowledge of these languages and, consequently, of their speakers.⁶³ Be that as it may, well aware of trading on uncharted ground, I will attempt now a brief description

59. Secrecy is the one character of argots which is most highlighted by generally all authors. It suffices here to quote just one: «Perhaps the most essential quality of an argot in the context of criminal subcultures is its secret nature.» R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages*, op. cit., 5.

60. See M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance,» op. cit., 53. Significantly, Zene writes: «To them, [i.e. the missionaries] the Rishi made the gift of teaching their *Thare* language as a sign of belonging to one and the same community,» C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., 21.

61. Quoted in *ivi*.

62. *Ivi*. See also M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages,» op. cit., 571: «...secrecy is a necessary strategic property of anti-languages, it is unlikely to be the major cause of their existence. Secrecy is a feature of the jargon rather than a determinant of the language.»

63. For instance, what if we were to see the caste construct (as related to the so-called untouchables like the Rishi) as a system of willed underworlds/anti-societies/subcultures hierarchically ordained and connected to a dominant overworld/society/culture? In this sense, would the anti-societies built by and reflected in anti-languages change their alternative, resistant and counter qualities? Would these qualities not be only fabricated, instilled and aroused by an overarching, commandeering overworld/society/culture?

of the *thar bhasha* of the Rishi.

I have been able to find only one scholarly article on the subject, and even this one is rather dated and of a doubtful attribution. Sukumar Sen, the renowned Bengali philologist (1900–1992), wrote it in 1955. The article speaks of a dialect of the Burdwan's Muchi. We actually do not know for sure if these Muchi are the same as our Rishi, even though there is a very good possibility that this be so.⁶⁴ Sen reveals that he came to know, almost by chance, that the Muchi of the South-eastern parts of Burdwan, speak exclusively among themselves a particular language he calls a dialect. He then goes on introducing the Muchi themselves.

The Mucis form the lowliest and most untouchable caste among the Hindus in West Bengal although as ceremonial drummers they have a definite place in all important religious ceremonies and ritualistic festivals. Being a totally excluded caste they could retain or develop a dialect of their own, which did not differ from the local dialect in grammar but mainly in vocabulary. By using their «code» words they could successfully hide or disguise their activities and behaviours which have been almost entirely different from that of the other people of the land. The dialect of the Mucis can very well be compared with the code language (*sandhyā-bhāsā* or *sandhā-vacana*) of the mystic *caryā* songs in Old Bengali.⁶⁵

The description does not add anything to what we already know about the Rishi. Still, a couple of comments are necessary. Sen seems right to relate the code language of the Rishi to the Rishi's complete isolation from the rest of society, being a «totally excluded caste.» Yet the exclusion is not complete. Their «dialect» in fact uses the same grammar of the prevalent language, changing only the vocabulary. This is important: between society at large, which, according to Sen's narrative, has almost nothing in common with them, despite any caste ideological discourse to the contrary, Rishi society, the anti-society of Halliday, must necessarily be related to the dominant society. Significantly, I think, Sen refers to the activities and behaviours of the Rishi neither as criminal nor as deviant, limiting himself to affirming its different quality only. What is more, Sen compares, perhaps inappropriately, the code language of the Rishi with the *caryā* songs of old.⁶⁶ This might well just be an expression of academic sympathy particularly when what follows

64. For the debate about the differences and/or identities between the Rishi, the Muchi and the Chamar in Bengal together with the distinction between different groupings of Muchi in today's Bangladesh, see S. Targa, «Bangladesh,» in T. Tosolini ed., *The Other Within* (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, 2010), 5ff.

65. S. Sen, «The Caste Dialect of the Mucis in South-East Burdwan,» in *Indian Linguistics*, vol. XVI (Madras: Linguistic Society of India, 1955), 16.

66. *Caryā* or *caryapada* are a collection of mystical songs of Bengal's tantric Buddhism (of the *sahajīya* type) written in old Bengali. As a matter of fact, these Pala time compositions (about tenth–eleventh century AD) are the first specimen of Bengali literature. This is why Sen's comparison appears to be a bit preposterous.

in the article is a reference to «the new political and social set up of the country [which] is slowly but surely striking at the exclusion of the Mucis.»⁶⁷ Apart from a seemingly paternalistic attitude, Sen clearly links the «Mucis dialect» to their «different activity» and to the social «exclusion» suffered by them. So much so that the end of their social marginalisation, something promised by the new political and social set up brought about by India's independence, will eventually lead the «Mucis dialect» to a quick extinction.⁶⁸ The foretold disappearance of Rishi's secret code, in fact, reveals the meagre consideration this «dialect» is given, being considered as just a side effect of soon to be discarded social ostracism.

Despite doomsday predictions, however, the Rishi's *thar bhasha* is still alive. This on the one hand could be interpreted as the outcome of Rishis' continuous social exclusion, while on the other it could also be the result of Rishi strenuous attempt to maintain their own separate identity, *vis a vis* main stream society.

The discourse is necessarily complex. Rishi reality is not a homogeneous one so that not all the Rishi belong to the same caste in the same way. Although these distinctions are becoming obsolete by the day it remains that even nowadays the Rishi of one village distinguish themselves from the Rishi of another village. In the past these distinctions were enforced by referring to different caste names, so that there were Rishi *Choto Begi* and Rishi *Boro Begi*. The former were the less sanskritised ones and ranked lower in the social hierarchy, while the latter, more sanskritised, had usually abandoned their traditional leatherwork and taken to agriculture, thus enhancing their ritual status.⁶⁹ Apparently, all knew the *thar bhasha* even though with different accentuations. The sanskritising Boro Begi little by little basically forgot the language because this was necessarily linked to their traditional, and socially frowned upon activity. Furthermore, language, as a builder of social reality and identity, was a very strong cultural determinant; it was practically what enforced and actually constituted their being Rishi and thus that which was scowled upon by society. Sanskritisation eventually meant and means a process by means of which an anti-society like that of the Rishi is little by little disassembled by its own members to disappear and be reborn as society proper. Obviously, for the Boro Begi this implied the discarding of their *thar bhasha*, as a necessary pre-condition to reabsorption into mainstream society.

67. Ibid., 16.

68. Sen writes: «... their dialect, I believe, is advancing on its way to extinction.» Ivi.

69. For a full discussion about Rishi subdivisions and sub-castes see S. Targa, «Bangladesh,» 2010, op. cit., 12ff.

As a matter of fact, most of the Rishi villages to the east of the river Kopotakkho, basically comprising the Rishi of Dumuria (Khulna district), Tala (Satkhira district) and Keshobpur (Jessore district) have practically forgotten their *thar bhasha*. In these villages, only some very old people remember some words in *thar*. Not surprisingly when asked, they laughed and did not usually like to remember their own past, experimenting some sort of shame for something they or their forefathers, had wilfully repudiated.

For the Rishi of the Choto Begi grouping, things turned out to be a bit different. They are geographically concentrated to the west of the Kopotakkho River, to the south of Satkhira,⁷⁰ and they are those who not only use their code language but are also proud of it. The Choto Begi generally live in small villages with no more than 20 families at the most, in areas just outside the «others» quarters, on riversides. These Rishi villages are distanced about ten kilometres from one another, on the edges of large flat and low lying areas (*bill*), usually employed, during the dry season, for cattle grazing. This collocation betrays these Rishis' occupation. They are indeed still engaged in their traditional trade, which is criminal because it involves poisoning cattle or causing their death in some way⁷¹ and deviant because their dealing with hides and their habit of eating carrion are socially reprimanded. In fact, their living in small villages separated in the way described above relates to the need to offset competition in the procurement of dead cattle. Conversely, Boro Begi's settlements are much closer to each other and are constituted by large concentration of families reaching into the hundreds.⁷²

What has been said so far apparently demonstrates that Sen was right in holding that the end of social exclusion, would have brought about the extinction of «Mucis dialect.» Yet a deeper look at reality would show that the Boro Begi did lose their *thar bhasha* but were unable to shake off social exclusion. As a result the Boro Begi traded their outsider status, their anti-society and related social identity, for a low sort of inclusion which constitutes them as another kind of anti-society, more symbiotic than counter to the society they wanted to belong to.

Similarly, but conversely, it may be said of the Choto Begi that by maintaining their traditional occupation, they had to maintain their *thar bhasha* as well and so continue

70. These geographical indications of course are rather approximate. While they depict a general picture, they do not whatsoever exclude the possibility that some Rishi Choto Begi may be found in Boro Begi areas and vice versa. See also C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., 44.

71. I was informed by a friend that killing by poisoning is becoming obsolete. Nowadays, a thin but sufficiently long shoot of bamboo (কাঁড়, *konci*) is forcibly inserted into the cows' vagina. The ensuing internal bleeding leads the cow to a slow death in a few days' time. Personal communication, Jessore, July 2018.

72. This is the case of Khampur village in the Tala upazila, Satkhira district and of Sabdia village in the Keshobpur upazila, Jessore district.

their less than subaltern status of anti-society, this time more counter than symbiotic to dominant society. All things considered, the change in status of the Boro Begi has been more in degree rather than in kind.

Nonetheless, things are always more complex than they first appear to be. Not only has the Kopotakkho River been and, to a certain extent still is, the dividing boundary between Boro and Choto Begi, it has also become the marker of a religious divide as well. In the last century or so, conversions to Christianity have occurred mainly beyond the river, to the west.⁷³ Conversion became a new variable in the struggle for social recognition of the Rishi. For many if not all, Christianity represented a way out from social exclusion, a process of sanskritisation, as it were, which required the dismissal of a so-called Hindu religion⁷⁴ in favour of a new one. This new kind of sanskritisation had, similarly to the old one, its own preconditions among which «purification.» This essentially consisted in «abandoning poisoning cattle, eating carrion and skinning.»⁷⁵ In short, conversion required an occupational change, away from the traditional one. The fact is that, for instance, in Baradal, a major Christian village some 35 kilometres to the south of Satkhira, all the Rishi people from 1937 onwards started moving en mass towards Christianity. Today, despite a fairly big emigration, mainly towards the city of Khulna, the Christian community in Baradal still consists of more than 150 families. They have amended their old ways, but they did not shed their *thar* in the process. And this is true of all the other villages around Baradal which became Christian. Of course, the anomaly, as it were, could be explained away by referring to continuing traditional secret practices in the area. However, up until my presence in the village (beginning of 2014), to the best of my knowledge only two old Christian fellows still worked as professional skinners and I doubt that because of these two persons all 150 families residing in Baradal continued to speak *thar*. My contention is that the persistence of a spoken *thar* in Baradal and surrounding villages has little to do with the Rishi's traditionally proscribed practices and more with their social identity. In this respect, I may also mention that the Baradal Christians are still very much linked to surrounding Hindu Rishi villages, with which they retain also parental relations. Apparently, all this might indicate that the new Christian outfit does

73. I do not have empirical data to sustain this claim. However, I do maintain that the statement is warranted: two of the three parishes with Rishi background (i.e. Baradal and Satkhira) of the Khulna diocese are located in that area.

74. The expression «so-called Hindu religion,» far from disparaging Hinduism refers only to the religion of the Rishi, officially called Hinduism but actually a fusion of different ancient traditions. For a discussion on the subject see S. Targa, «Bangladesh» in T. Tosolini ed., *Death and Those Beyond* (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, 2011), 7ff.

75. C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., 257, passim.

not suffice or fulfil the Rishi's need for social identity. What is more, the continuous use of their *thar* language betrays an unfulfilled need for unity, solidarity and identity together with their requirement for an otherness, irreducible to the self of dominant society, Christian or otherwise.

Significantly, when I asked a friend from Baradal what the meaning of the word *thar* was he bluntly answered: «*bangla*.»⁷⁶ We know already that the word is possibly of Hindi origin. Mallik and others have already noticed the use of foreign words in argots.⁷⁷ Yet this is not the point here. The question is that such an identification of the word *thar* implies a strong statement about Rishis' anti-society as the society whose language is truly Bangla, the Bangla of the Rishi. Indeed, the need for self and community affirmation in Baradal and in its surrounding villages⁷⁸ remains ambiguous and of difficult interpretation. The use of *thar* language and the statement of irreducible otherness that this reveals is accompanied by other complementary attitudes. The Christian people of Baradal are viscerally attached to their village, so much so that it is difficult to have them leave. As the saying goes, it is better to starve in Baradal than to have a full stomach in a different place! It appears as if only in Baradal these people find the fullness of what they are. Even those who are forced to live outside, they see Baradal as a place to go back to, a space where to find a proper place, a lost anti-society, something which gives security, protection and identity.⁷⁹ This risks becoming a morbid disposition and is accompanied by another very common behaviour, not less morbid. The Baradal Christians tend to intermarry, that is to find brides often in the same village or at the most, from villages around, be they Christian or Hindu. Obviously, this is nothing but the continuation of traditional caste endogamy which however when carried out at the level of one and the same village, causes the creation of a very tightly knit network of parental relations.⁸⁰ Besides, the morbid attachment

76. Personal communication, Jessore, 9 August 2019.

77. নানাভাবে বীদেশী শব্দ এসেছে। B. P. Mallik, *Aparadh Jagater Bhasha*, op cit., 58; 63. See also M. Schulte, «The Language of the Underworld and its Sociolinguistic Significance», op. cit., 48.

78. *Thar* language is definitively alive beside Baradal in villages like Jamalnagar, Chachai, Asasuni, Kali-gonj, Paikgacha, Chandkhali, Mosjitkur, Lokkhikola, Goruikhali, Baka, Baulia, Morugacha etc. I happened then to find a place called Botkhana in Jhikorgacha upazila, in the district of Jessore, around 100 kilometres from Baradal, where *thar* was spoken fluently. I had the chance to visit this village on 2 November 2018.

79. Conversely, there are few people originally from Baradal, who have instead cut all the links with Baradal. Like the sanskritised Boro Begi above, these people see returning as a dangerous step back into a quagmire of degradation! While I understand that attitude and acknowledge their choice to shuffle off the Rishi's cultural conundrum, in my view, by doing so they might simply betray the persistence of an unresolved inferiority complex.

80. Traditionally, though, caste endogamy is accompanied by *gotro* exogamy, that is, marriages must be contracted with people outside of one's own male descending line. For the whole question see S. Targa, «Bangladesh», in T. Tosolini ed., *Family Changes* (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, 2015), 13ff.

to the village brings about also, as a side effect, the phenomenon of unmarried girls and women, with all the social problems this creates.⁸¹ As a matter of speculation, I envisage the possibility that the continuation in use of the Rishi *thar* language might be linked also to these two phenomena. Consequently, morbid endogamous practices, the existence of a vast number of unmarried girls of all ages, a marginally persistent skinning activity together with a continuing consumption of both marijuana (*ganja*) and alcoholic drinks⁸² may actually constitute the new set of proscribed, criminal or deviant activities, which apparently are needed for an argot to arise.⁸³ These activities would then be those which convince the Rishi who embraced Christianity of their diversity *vis a vis* mainstream society. This diversity or otherness remains ambiguous, causing inferiority complexes in the people themselves. Thus their anti-society often becomes the refuge for their incapacity to adequate their behaviour to society's standards and requirements. Sometime instead, it turns out to be the proud statement of their perceived and positively embraced difference. Sen had predicted the quick demise of the «Mucis dialect». Nevertheless, after more than 64 years from his prediction the Rishi's *thar bhasha* is still alive. Indeed, the code language, while maintaining all the characteristics of argots highlighted above, has undergone transformations. For instance, while up until 30 years or so ago a dead cow's body floating on a river would be called «*tolpi*,» nowadays the same dead cow's body would instead be called, more colourfully, «*titanic*.» Beyond showing how relexicalisation actually operates, the reference to the famous British transatlantic ship sunk on its maiden voyage is evident but it is also more evident that the reference is to the film, which highly romanticised the whole event. Nevertheless, even these transformations fall within the characteristics of anti-languages, which to enforce a counter sort of reality need continual renewing and refashioning.⁸⁴

In whatever way we are to interpret the survival of Rishis' *thar*, it remains a clear sign of an anti-society, which, despite the new Christian outfit, continues to exist. The Christian Rishi of Baradal and surroundings appear still to be in a fluid situation, caught

81. Inter marriages within the village have created a situation in which everybody is a relative with everybody else. This is often the cause of never ending fights and quarrels going through generations. Strictly related to this is the fact that Baradal's society seems unchanging, unmoving, fixed in time: new blood would certainly move things around. Besides, having a good number of unmarried girls in a village is like having a number of bombs ready to go off anytime, with a manifold increase in the reasons for social conflict!

82. The Rishi are traditionally linked to the consumption of *ganja* and alcohol. «Like the Chamars they are notorious spirit drinkers and Ganjha smokers.» J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, op. cit., 368.

83. This hypothesis should be verified by looking for a specialised vocabulary in the hypothetically and new «proscribed behaviours» of Rishi people in the fields of marriage, sex, girls etc.

84. See M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages», op. cit., 582.

up between the old and the new. They want the new but refuse to let go of the old. Anti-society continues to confront society without resorting to challenge each other in a final battle. I have started thinking that perhaps Christianity had been unable to supply the Rishi with a sufficiency of meaning to nourish their otherness and irreducible self. What if Christianity instead of being introduced as society could have been presented as anti-society, as a subaltern subculture, part of the underworld? To anthropologists and missionaries alike the answer. In the meantime, I content myself with Rishi resilience and anti-society's common sense: «We are like a snake which holds in its mouth a juicy frog, too big to be swallowed, but too good to let go.»⁸⁵

Thar Words

Despite «the rapid turnover of words and modes of expression that is always remarked upon by commentators on underworld language,»⁸⁶ *thar* language has shown a remarkable stability if we consider that some of the words conveyed by Sen are still understood by today's speakers. Furthermore, an even higher number of words are indeed recognized but given a totally different meaning from that given by Sen.⁸⁷ Besides, it is also somewhat noteworthy that a good number of the words reported by Mallik about the language of the criminal underworld of Calcutta are likewise recognized and understood. The continuity of use in *thar* language, the Bangla of the Rishi, might be explained by a high degree of social exclusion suffered by these people and hence the consequent lesser necessity to change or coin new words to replace old ones, which have lost their secret connotation. It is more difficult instead to provide an explanation for the communality of words between different subcultures. A plausible explanation might refer to a certain overlapping of cultural backgrounds encountered in jails and police stations, places where the most diverse

85. C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., xv. These words were the answer given by a Rishi person to Zene who had asked him what Christianity (the frog) meant to the Rishi (the snake). A friend, quite perceptively, pointed out to me that the metaphor could also be read differently, particularly in the light of what is said above. What if we were then to consider the Rishi the frog and the missionaries the snake? Would this play out differently in the context of the Rishi struggle for recognition and identity? Would a theology of anti-society (for instance a serious Dalit Theology) somehow offset the snake-like quality of a Christianity that has inevitably assumed the forms of a dominant society? Fascinating questions that would require another paper to answer.

86. M. A. K. Halliday, «Anti-Languages», op. cit., 582.

87. The phenomenon is of difficult interpretation. Mehrotra noted a similar situation among the Pandas of Varanasi who apparently borrow some words from the language of nineteenth century Thugs operating between Patna and Allahabad, but change their meanings «to suit their profession.» See R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages*, op. cit., 36–7. Is it possible to think of a process of relexicalisation of *thar* words themselves? See also footnote to Table 3 below.

people meet and interact. On the other hand Mehrotra puts forward the hypothesis that «although most argot usages die a natural death with the passage of time, yet many survive, sometime in disguise, in the speeches of other criminal groups if the group which fathered them is no longer in existence... It is amazing how these argot usages get transferred from one generation to another and also from one criminal subculture to another to ensure their survival for centuries without written record to their credit.»⁸⁸ Whatever the explanation, it will be of note below that according to expectation,⁸⁹ *thar* vocabulary is richer when covering areas of Rishi interest, that is, the areas of deviant behaviour, that is, skinning, eating, smoking.

The tables below list a number of *thar* words as used in today's Baradal (Table 1) together with other secret words reported by both Sen and Mallik and still recognized by the same speakers (Table 2 and 4 respectively). Furthermore, a list of words, originally listed by Sen, is then offered in Table 3. These words are indeed recognised by today's speakers of *thar* yet they are given a different meaning. I regret that I could not introduce the reader with more terms from the living *thar* of the Rishi. It is to be taken into consideration that Sen's list is given in English transliteration. This of course added to the difficulty of pronunciation and hence of word recognition of a language, which as we well know, is only spoken. The lists will be provided in both Bengali script and in English transliteration.⁹⁰

88. Ibid., 13. Mehrotra's consideration is definitely interesting even though I would like to know how all this becomes possible in practice.

89. Ibid., 571. Relexicalisation and overlexicalisation involve particularly those areas typically «central to the activities of the subculture... that set it off most sharply from the established society.»

90. This work could not possibly have been completed but for the close cooperation of a Christian family from Baradal, well acquainted with *thar* language. For reasons of privacy, I am not at liberty to disclose their names. To them, however, goes my unbounded gratitude.

TABLE 1

BARADAL'S THAR	STANDARD BANGLA	TRANSLATION
দেআ (dea)	আকাশ	Sky
গুডুম ডাকছে (gudum dakche)	বিদ্যুৎ চমকাচ্ছে	Lightning
হালতে (halte)	ডাল	Branch
খেটন খিটা (kheton khita)	খাওয়া দাওয়া করা	To eat
ভুগা (bhuga)	মরা	To die, death
ভুগোই দেওয়া (bhugoi deoa)	খুন করা	To kill
ঠিঙ্গানো or ঠিঙ্গান দেওয়া (thingano or thingan deoa)	মারা বা পিটানো	To kill or to beat
ঝ্যাম করা (jhem kora)	ডাকাতি বা চুরি করা	To rob, to loot
জুনুক করা (junuk kora)	দেখা	To see, watch, look
ঘেড়োনে (gherone)	পায়খানা করা	To defecate
চিনানো (cinano)	প্রস্রাব	To urinate
ছোল পাড়া (chol para)	কথা বলা	To talk
ফোস দেওয়া (phosh deoa)	কামড় দেওয়া	To bite
ফোস (phosh)	কামড়	Bite, snake
ভোষ (bhosh)	স্ত্রী লিঙ্গ	Vagina
ভুদা (bhuda)	স্ত্রী লিঙ্গ	Vagina
মেই (mei)	মহিলার স্তন	Women's nipple
থই (thoi)	মহিলার স্তন	Women's nipple
থোলকে (tholke)	মহিলার স্তন	Women's nipple
ধুর (dhur)	পুরুষ লিঙ্গ	Penis
বাড়া (bara)	পুরুষ লিঙ্গ	Penis
ওলন (olon)	পুরুষ লিঙ্গ	Penis
ফিঙ্গেল (phingel)	বিড়ি বা সিকারেট	Cigarette
গামাল (gamal)	গ্রাম	Village
গাতাড় (gatar)	গ্রাম	Village
ঠুকানে (thukane)	ম্যাচ	Matches
গুটকেল (gutkel)	নারকের	Coconut
থপথপি (thopthopi)	মিষ্টি কুমড়া	Sweet Pumpkin
চুদুম (cudum)	ঢোল	Drum
চুদুম দার (cudumdar)	যে ঢোল বাজায়	Drummer
চুদুম বাড়ুনে (cudum barune)	ঢোল বাজান	To play the drum
ধুন (dhun)	গাঁজা	Marijuana
সবজি (shobji)	গাঁজা	Marijuana

শুকনো (sukno)	গাঁজা	Marijuana
ডাল (dal)	ফেনসিডিল	Phensedyl (drug)
হোন্ধল (hondhol)	গাঁজা খাওয়ার বাশি বা কোলকে	Tool to smoke marijuana
খানকা (khanka)	যেখানে সবাই মিলে এক সাথে বসে গাঁজা খায়	Place where marijuana is smoked
ঘিনায় (ghinae)	মদ	Alcohol
পেড়কো (perko)	জল	Water
ঠিকুনে (thikune)	চুরি	Knife
ভিগনে (bhigne)	খারাপ	Bad, poor, Muchi
শায়কা (saeka)	ভালো	Good, rich, well-to-do, outsider
খল (khol)	ঘর	House
গুনা (guna)	জুতা	Shoes
চসমা (coshma)	জুতা	Shoes
ভুগা গানতা (bhuga ganta)	মরা মাংশ	Dead meat
গলসা (golsha)	মরা মাংশ	Dead meat
তাগান (tagan)	মরা মাংশ	Dead meat
ভুন্তে (bhunte)	মরা মাংশ	Dead meat
কটমাছ (kotmach)	শুকনা মাংশ	Dry meat
চিক (cik)	চর্বি	Fat
চিকের (ciker)	মুচি	Muchi
গন্ধ রাজ রুশ (gondhoraj rus)	মুচি	Muchi
ঠার (thar)	বাংলা	Secret language
ফ্যাস ফ্যাস (phesh phesh)	হাঁস	Duck
আড়াই প্যচ (aria pec)	সাপ	Snake
ভূত (bhuut)	মহিষ	Buffalo
খাবলি (khabli)	কুকুর	Dog
ঘেউ ঘেউ (gheu gheu)	কুকুর	Dog
তলপি (tolpi)	গরু	Cow
টাইটানিক (taitanik)	মৃত গরু	Dead cow
নিমারকে (nimarke)	ছাগল	Goat
ভেড়ী (bherii)	ভেড়া	Sheep
কালো খাসি (kalo khashi)	শুকোর	Pig
ঘতঘুতে (ghotghute)	শুকোর	Pig
দাঁতনে (dantne)	শুকোর	Pig
ঠক ঠকে (thok thoke)	মোরগ	Cock

বয়কা (boeka)	পুলিশ	Police
মাছরাঙা (machranga)	পুলিশ	Police
টেক্কা (tekka)	পুলিশ	Police
ধারকো (dharko)	ছুরি	Skinning knife
কোন্দার (kondar)	রাত	Night
পড়কা (porka)	কাপড়	Clothes, dress
ভালুক (bhaluk)	জ্বর	Fever
উড়ো কাজরা (uro kajra)	লবণ	Salt
কুড়োন (kuron)	ভাত	Cooked rice
দাতি (dati)	চাউল	Husked rice
ভূষকে (bhuushke)	ধান	Paddy
খচখুচে (khockhuce)	চিনি	Sugar
পোদ or মালায়োন (pod or malayon)	হিন্দু	Hindu person
ঝাল (jhal)	মুসলিম	Muslim person
ঘাকসি (ghakshi)	চুল	Hair
জানকে (janke)	পা	Foot
হাঁরকো (hanrko)	দাঁত	Tooth
কানসা (kansha)	কান	Ear
সিতাল (sital)	কপাল	Front
খুমড়ি (khumri)	মুখ	Mouth
ডুঙ্গা (dunga)	পাছা	Bottom
জুনুক (junuk)	চোখ	Eye
ডেমি (demi)	মাথা	Head
খুতে (khute)	ব্যাগ	Bag
ঝুলা (jhula)	ব্যাগ	Bag
হাম্পা (hampa)	খারাপ	Bad
ছাদে মাল নেই (chade mal nei)	মাথায় চুল নেই	Hairless head
চিকুনে (cikune)	চুরি করা	To steal
ফড়কা (phorka)	বিনামূল্যে, এমনি	Free, at no cost
চৌড় (cour)	গরুর রান	Cow's foot
কুলি	গরুর বুক	Cow's belly
করকানা	গরুর কোমর	Cow's waist
হাচড় পাচড় (hacor pacor)	চুলকানি	Itching
জেরু (jeru)	ইট	Brick
রুশ (rus)	পুরুষ	Man
মানদি (mandi)	মহিলা	Woman

চেচি (ceci)	মেয়ে	Girl
চাড়ি (cari)	মেয়ে	Girl
চিচা (cica)	ছেলে	Boy
পঠকা (pothka)	অস্ত্র	Weapon, bomb
কাটকো (katko)	নৌকা	Boat
সানকে (shanke)	টাকা	Money
পাতি (pati)	টাকা	Money
খিনে (khine)	টাকা	Money
দয়েলা (doela)	টাকা	Money
ফুটি (phuti)	টাকা	Money
পাতিয়ালা (Patiala)	টাকাওয়ালা	A rich person
সানকেয়ালা (shankeala)	টাকাওয়ালা	A rich person
কাজলা (kajla)	কিস্তি	Instalment
টিপনে (tipne)	বিষ	Poison
ভেল (bhel)	বিষ	Poison
চেরো (cero)	চলাচল	Moving
ফোট (phot)	চলাচল	Moving
চারুয় পড়া (carue pora)	চলাচল	To move, go, come
মাটকেল (matkel)	মাটি	Soil

TABLE 2

Thar words from «Burdwan 1955» and still recognized today

BURDWAN'S THAR (SUKUMAR SEN)	STANDARD BANGLA	TRANSLATION
খাড়ো (kharao, 17)	দাঁড়াও	Stand up
পাতারি (patari, 17)	পান	Betel leaf
ভালুক (bhaluk, 18)	জ্বর	Fever
ভালুক (bhaluk, 18)	কুকুর	Dog
চেছকা or (চিচা) (cechka, 18)	ছেলে	Boy
ছানরুই (chanrui, 18)	মাছ	Fish
গম্বুজ (gombuj, 18)	মাথা	Head
মেমারু or নিমারকে (memaru, 18)	ছাগল	Goat
ফোপাসু (ফোস) (phopasu, 18)	সাপ	Snake

থুরু (thuru, 18)	বুড়ো	Old
থুরুভদো (থুড়ি) (thurubhodo, 18)	বুড়ি মহিলা	Old woman
ছোল (chol, 19)	কথা বলা	To talk
ঘেড় (gher, 19)	পায়খানা	Excrement
কান্সি (kanssi, 20)	বৌ, মেয়ে	Wife, girl
খিনে (khine, 20)	নোট, টাকা	Banknotes, money

TABLE 3

Thar words from «Burdwan 1955» and still recognized today but with a different meaning⁹¹

BURDWAN'S THAR (SUKUMAR SEN)	BURDWAN'S MEANING	JAMALNAGAR'S MEANING
চন্না (conna, 17)	Foot	গালাগালি – Bad words
চারা (cara, 17)	To do	বিষ দেওয়া – To poison
ছেই (chei, 17)	To cut off	কুকুর – Dog
চুমিড় (cumri, 17)	Chin, beard	বাঁশের ডালা/ঝুড়ি – Bamboo-basket
দেশাও (deshao, 17)	To give	পাচার করা – To smuggle
এদেরা (edera, 17)	Night	পাতকুয়া – Water well
গেজাও (gejao, 17)	Beat (the drum), play on	বার বার কথা বলা – To speak time and again
হোলচুরছা (holcurcha, 17)	To talk, speak	ছাগল-গরু খাসী করা – To castrate bulls or billygoats
কোর (kor, 17)	Hand	গর্ত – Hole
কেড়াই (kerai, 17)	To roll one's eyes	এগিয়ে যাওয়া – To go ahead
খিটছে (khitchi, 17)	Is eating, is biting	দৌড় মারা – To escape, flee

91. For the compilation of this table, a friend from the village of Jamalnagar, a place some six kilometres away from Baradal, helped me. While I sincerely thank him, I also wish to point out that the friends in Baradal did not recognise these words. This could mean two things. Either the person from Jamalnagar is more knowledgeable in *thar* than the people of Baradal, or he actually did not know the words but attempted to understand them by unconsciously reversing the «rules,» as it were, that accompany the birth of an argot from the language of a dominant society in the first place (for instance: transposition of syllables, insertions of syllables, backward words, musical value and rhythm of words, etc; see R. R. Mehrotra, *Sociology of Secret Languages*, op. cit., 60ff). This second possibility would further widen the field of sociolinguistics. However, when I questioned the friend from Jamalnagar over the phone on this topic, he answered that most of the words and their meanings he had given me were discovered by showing the words to other Rishi people of the deep South with whom he is in contact. He is in fact a professional musician and goes around all the villages of the area playing at religious ceremonies, Hindu and Christian alike.

খোপ (khop, 17)	Home, house	দুঃখ – Suffering
নোব্রু (nobru, 17)	Cow	ভদ্র – Polite
নেপ্টাই (neptai, 17)	Bed	কাজটা জড়িয়ে ফেলা – To get the job done
পরক (porok, 17)	Cloth	পরীক্ষা করা – To examine
শিব্লি (shibli, 17)	Water	গাছী – Pruner
টেরাই (terai, 17)	Eye	এড়িয়ে যাওয়া – To avoid
ঠেকা (theka, 18)	To give	কষ্ট – Hardship
টুপো (tupo, 18)	Alcohol	পালাই – Escape
বাটপা (batpa, 19)	Hand	ধুনফুন – To tune in
বাওয়া (baoa, 19)	Tobacco	কাজে এগিয়ে যাওয়া – To advance in a job
চাদু (cadu, 19)	Man carrying a drum on his back	আদর করা – To fondle
চুয়াড়কে (cuarke, 19)	Pubic hair	তাড়াতাড়ি হাটা – To walk quickly
ধিমি (dhimi, 19)	Muchi	কাজের গতি ধীর – Slow moving job
ডলা (dola, 19)	To speak	মানুষের শরীর ম্যাসেজ করা – To massage
ডুমো (dumo, 19)	Musical instrument (any)	নারকেল or গোলফল – Coconut or any round fruit
হেকছে (hekche, 19)	Sexual intercourse	নাক পরিষ্কার করা – To clean the nose
গুটকে (gutke, 19)	Women's Breasts	3/4জন মিলে ভাল or ক্ষতি পরামর্শ করা – 3 or 4 people coming to- gether for the good or evil
চাপর (capor, 20)	Ten	চড়ম – Ultimate, intense
আদ চাপর (ad capor, 20)	Five	অর্ধেক চড় মারা – To bit with half a slap
মাক্ড়া (makra, 20)	Men	কাঁকড়া – Crabs
ঝাগ্লি (jhagli, 20)	Hindu	পাগল – Crazy
ঝাপ্তি (jhapti, 20)	Muslim	চুল কাটে যারা/নাপিত – Hairdresser
তব্লুই (tobloi, 20)	Belly, stomach	টাকার তহবিল – Fund in money
সিক্তে (sikte, 20)	One	গাঁজা – Cannabis
জড়ুটা (jorta, 20)	Two	জটিল – Difficult

নেও (neo, 20)	Three	কিছু দেওয়া – To give something
গোণ্ডা (gonda, 20)	Four	বোবা – Dumb

TABLE 4*Thar words from «Mallik 1371» and still recognized today*

CALCUTTA'S THAR (BHAkti P. MALLIK)	STANDARD BANGLA	TRANSLATION
গুল (gul, 46)	ধাঙ্গা	Cheating
গিনাই (ginai, 46)	মদ	Alcohol
আনতাবরি (antabori, 46)	এলোমেলো	Confusion, upside down
মদনা (modna, 46)	বোকা	Stupid
ঠোলা (thola, 56)	পুলিশ	Police
ভিম (bhim, 59)	ভীষন	Terrible, magnificent
কললা (kolola, 60)	গলা	Throat
খালাস (khalash, 64)	খুন	To kill
খোমা (khoma, 72)	মুখ	Mouth
থুড়ি (thuri, 82)	বৃদ্ধ মহিলা	Old woman
ছাম (cham, 86)	মাছ	Fish
ঝাড়ি (jhari, 97)	চোখের ইশারা	To signal with eyes
গনজাম (gonjam, 98)	গোলমাল	Noise, confusion, disturbance
ফুট (phut, 111)	পালানো	To flee, escape
সবজি (shobji, 104)	গাঁজা	Marijuana
চ্যাঙড়া (cengra, 117)	চালাক	Sly
চ্যাঙড়ামো (cengramo, 108)	মজা	Good, tasty, likeable
বাতেলা (batela, 108)	ধাঙ্গা	Cheating
চিছা (cicha, 107)	মেয়ে	Girl
বিলা আওয়াজ (bila aoaj, 112)	মিথ্যা কথা	Lie
বিলা মাল (bila mal, 113)	ভেজাল বা খারাপ	Bad, artificial, not pure
ঝাটাকাটি (jhatakati, 120)	লম্বা বা রোগা মেয়ে	High or sick girl
মামার বাড়ি (mamar bari, 69)	থানা	Police station
ধুর (dhur, 71)	কোন ব্যক্তি	Someone
সাইনবোর্ডালা (sainbordola, 124)	বিবাহিত মহিলা	Married woman

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Novelle bengalesi — XI

A CURA DI ANTONIO GERMANO

Il mercante prodigio

Siamo nel meraviglioso mondo delle fiabe, che ci portano questa volta niente di meno che a Baghdad, un tempo crocevia dei popoli e, nella nostra storia contemporanea, venuta tristemente alla ribalta per una guerra inventata dagli occidentali, le cui conseguenze sono ancora visibili ogni giorno nelle sequenze di violenza e di odio, che sembrano non aver termine. Sede del califfato, Baghdad, nell'Alto Medioevo, ebbe un periodo di splendore nel campo dell'arte, della cultura e del commercio. Sembra che, all'epoca, superando il milione di abitanti, fosse la metropoli più grande del mondo. Nella fiaba entra in gioco un fakir (fachiro), che diventa il tramite per la conclusione felice di un amore che sembrava impossibile. Fakir è il nome di un asceta-mistico nel sub continente indiano. La parola è di origine araba e significa «povero». Il personaggio appartiene sia al mondo islamico sia al mondo indù ed è al centro di un'ampia letteratura.



Nell'immensa città di nome Baghdad viveva un califfo. Nurzahan era la sua unica figlia. Era di rara bellezza e intelligenza. Sapeva leggere e scrivere, conosceva tutti generi di lavoro a mano e sapeva anche dipingere brillantemente. Un giorno si avventurò a passeggiare da sola fuori dalla reggia, ma, giunta in un luogo solitario, cadde nelle mani dei banditi. Caricata sul cammello essi si avviarono verso Damasco. Sulla stessa strada stava arrivando il figlio di un ricco mercante. Si chiamava Selim. Egli era carico di un'abbondante mercanzia e si recava a venderla. Selim, avendo notato le lacrime sugli occhi della ragazza, si fermò. I banditi dissero:

«La ragazza è figlia del califfo di Baghdad, il suo valore è di 70 lac¹».

Selim rivolto alla ragazza disse:

«Vuoi venire con me?».

La ragazza rispose:

«Sì, voglio venire con te!».

1. Circa settantamila euro.

Selim consegnò tutta la mercanzia nelle mani dei banditi e tornò a casa insieme alla ragazza. Il padre sorpreso disse:

«Come è possibile! Nel giro di due giorni sei già tornato indietro? E quella ragazza chi è?». «È la principessa della città di Baghdad. I banditi l'avevano rapita e la stavano portando via. Per riscattarla ho dovuto consegnare tutta la mercanzia».

Il padre infuriato gli disse:

«Esci fuori di qui e non metter più piede in casa mia!».

Selim uscì di casa. Con la principessa si recò sulla riva del fiume e si sedette. I suoi occhi erano colmi di pianto. Improvvisamente la principessa disse:

«Selim, tanti principi si erano presentati per sposarmi, ma nessuno mai, per avermi, ha dilapidato tutto quello che possedeva. Vuoi tu sposarmi?».

«Sì, lo voglio! E tu, Nurzahan, vuoi diventare mia sposa?».

«Sì, lo voglio! D'ora in poi, nella buona e nella cattiva sorte, divideremo gioia e dolori. Adesso ascolta: io so dipingere quadri; se tu riesci a venderli al bazar, troveremo il modo per campare».

Essi presero in affitto una piccola casa e cominciarono l'una a dipingere quadri e l'altro a venderli. Da parte sua il califfo aveva mandato un gruppo di soldati in cerca di Nurzahan.

Un giorno al comandante in capo capitò di vedere i quadri e, messosi alla ricerca della casa di Selim, la trovò. «Salve, principessa! Sono spiacente di essere arrivato in ritardo».

«Comandante, è venuta lei in persona! Bene, andiamo! Andiamo tutti insieme».

«L'ordine del califfo è che non posso portare nessun altro all'infuori della principessa».

I soldati, legato Selim con funi, ritornarono in patria con Nurzahan.

Selim rimase da solo. Quando poté sciogliersi dai legacci e uscì di casa, un vecchio *fakir* gli chiese l'elemosina. Poi, venuto a conoscenza dei fatti, gli disse:

«Su, coraggio! Andiamo a Baghdad, io conosco la strada. Durante il viaggio chiederemo l'elemosina e camperemo».

Selim rispose:

«Sì, andiamo, tu sarai mio amico per l'eternità!».

Nel giro di alcuni giorni essi giunsero alla casa regale. Selim cominciò a lavorare con i giardinieri. Un giorno essi gli chiesero di portare un vaso di fiori nella stanza della principessa. Vedendolo, la ragazza trasalì di gioia. Si stavano preparando per fuggire, quando sopraggiunse il *fakir*, il quale disse:

«Io sono il primo ministro del regno, e non è necessario che tu scappi con la principessa. Domani ci sarà la cerimonia delle nozze».

Jamini e Kamini

Una fiaba con finale boccaccesco, ma che racchiude un gran messaggio. Mi ricorda il messaggio paolino della seconda lettera ai Corinzi, che amo citare in latino: «Hilarem enim datorem diligit Deus» e cioè: «Dio ama chi dona con gioia» (2Cor 9,7). Il titolo bengalese della favola è un po' diverso: «L'avara Kamini». Io ho preferito mettere come titolo i nomi delle due vedove protagoniste: Jamini (pron.: Giamini) e Kamini. Tutti e due questi nomi nella lingua bengalese racchiudono un significato. Jamini è un termine giudiziario e significa «cauzione». È il prezzo di riscatto per chi è finito in prigione prima di essere giudicato. È capitato anche a me, nella mia lunga storia missionaria, di dover pagare il jamini per alcuni cristiani che erano finiti in carcere senza colpa. Kamini invece significa «cespuglio in fiore» e la persona, che in questo caso lo porta come nome, sembra esserne la contraddizione. Ricorrono poi termini già apparsi in altre favole, come khalamma, che è la zia materna per i musulmani; bubu, termine affettuoso rivolto alla sorella maggiore; ma («mamma»), titolo affettuoso con cui ci si rivolge alla sorella minore. Compare per la prima volta Bhogoban, che è il nome di Dio per gli indù, ma anche per i cristiani.

La favola si svolge in ambiente tipicamente bengalese e fa riferimento a usi e costumi, soprattutto per quel che riguarda il cibo. Si parla, per esempio, dell'ilish mach, che è il pesce nazionale del Bangladesh, molto gustoso e perciò anche molto costoso. Si fa accenno al pan (in inglese: betel leaf), che è una foglia arrotolata, dentro cui ci sono pezzetti di areca nut (una specie di noce moscata), calce, qualche volta tabacco o sostanze stupefacenti. In Bangladesh, soprattutto a livello di villaggio, tutti masticano il pan. Dicono sia digestivo. Molti però lo fanno per ingannare l'appetito



Sulla luna viveva una fata. Aveva pochi anni e non era ancora entrata nella piena maturità della sapienza e della conoscenza. Si chiedeva come mai *Bhogoban* premia gli uomini e dona loro la pace solo dopo la morte. Secondo lei, premiandoli vita natural durante, essi sarebbero diventati più buoni. Ma... chi sono poi gli uomini buoni? La fatina non sapeva darsi una risposta. Tra le fate ce n'era una che aveva 200 anni. Si rivolse a lei e le chiese:

«*Bubu*, chi sono gli uomini buoni?».

Ella rispose:

«Perché? Coloro sulla cui bocca c'è il sorriso essi sono buoni e diffondono gioia intorno a sé».

La fatina, assunte le sembianze di una vecchia gibbosa, appoggiandosi ad un bastone, cominciò a girare di villaggio in villaggio. Giunta ad un villaggio, notò le capanne di due vedove: Jamini e Kamini. Esse sbarcavano il lunario tessendo stoffa. Sul volto di Jamini c'era il sorriso. Di tanto in tanto le vicine di casa venivano e se la raccontavano, masticando il *pan*, dicendosi storielle, scherzando e ridendo allegramente. Dall'altra parte della

strada c'era Kamini, che, udendo tutto quel frastuono, si arrabbiava e diceva fra sé e sé:

«Le vicine di casa, che non lavorano, mi daranno forse da mangiare?».

Non dava retta a nessuno. Al momento del pranzo, con la mano destra si portava il riso alla bocca e con la sinistra mandava avanti il telaio.

Quel giorno, verso sera, vedendo la vecchia venire verso il cortile di casa sua, avviò ancora più velocemente il telaio e disse:

«Non qui, vecchia, io sto lavorando. Se vuoi sentire raccontare storie, vai nella casa di fronte».

Così la vecchia si recò nella casa di Jamini. Le disse:

«Ma, sono molto stanca; posso sedermi un po'?».

«Siedi, *khalamma*, vado a prenderti il *pan*... Ecco, prendi! *Khalamma*, si è fatta notte, stai qui e domani andrai via. Stanotte mangerai quello che ho».

La vecchia disse:

«Bene, allora fammi cucinare al posto tuo».

Le due, dopo aver cenato, se la raccontarono e alla fine si addormentarono. Al mattino, sul punto di partire, la vecchia disse:

«Per favore, *ma*, il lavoro che comincerai questa mattina, fa' in modo che vada avanti velocemente durante tutta la giornata».

Jamini quel giorno si era seduta per preparare un tessuto bello e delicato. In poco più di cinque minuti era finito, ma continuavano a venir fuori i pezzi: due, tre, quattro, dieci... ventuno, ventidue, ventitré! Allora chiamò:

«Kamini *bubu*, vieni a veder il miracolo della vecchia!».

Kamini disse:

«Se la vecchia torna, dille di venire da me».

Il giorno dopo venne da lei. Kamini le disse:

«Venga, *khalamma*, ho cucinato l'*ilish mach*, faccia sosta da me e poi riparta».

Kamini sorrise ma il suo sorriso era forzato. In che modo si sorrideva, lo aveva dimenticato. Diede da mangiare alla vecchia e la fece coricare su un morbido letto.

Al mattino la vecchia le disse:

«Per favore, *ma*, fa' in modo che il lavoro con cui inizi la giornata, vada avanti senza interruzione durante tutto il giorno».

Kamini, però, prima di mettersi al lavoro, si recò al gabinetto. Così, secondo quello che aveva detto la vecchia, non smise di andare e venire dal bagno ininterrottamente!

Choto Bhai

Ho preferito dare questo titolo alla favola invece dell'originale: «Chi è il furbo e chi è il fesso?», proprio per dare risalto al portatore di valori, che è il choto (cioto) bhai (fratello minore), protagonista del racconto. Il boro bhai (fratello maggiore) è il furbo; con termine moderno lo chiamerei indifferente, a cui le disgrazie del prossimo non interessano minimamente. Leggendo e traducendo questa favola, mi venivano in mente figure bibliche parallele ed in particolare la parabola del buon samaritano. Mi vengono in mente anche le parole di mio padre, il quale assai spesso diceva (in dialetto naturalmente): «Fa' il bene e scordati; fa' il male e pensaci!». In altre parole: donati e dimenticati. L'asino, che nel racconto appare miracoloso, non è un animale che appartiene a questo ambiente e a questa cultura: finora io non ne ho visto neppure uno. Però anche qui ad un ragazzo, che non riesce a scuola, si dà dell'asino (gadha). Si parla anche del goru gari, che è il carro, trainato dai buoi. Quarant'anni fa, quando arrivai in Bangladesh, due erano i principali mezzi di trasporto: la nouka (la barca) per i fiumi; re delle strade era invece il goru gari. Al sud mezzo rapido di trasporto era il cosiddetto elicottero, che era in realtà una bicicletta con il sedile posteriore per il passeggero, che correva lungo l'argine dei fiumi, oggi sempre più interrati. Nel racconto ricorre il termine chacha (ciacia), che è lo zio per i musulmani. Il birani è un gustoso piatto di riso a base di carne di mucca sulla mensa dei musulmani.



C'erano due fratelli. Il fratello maggiore era molto scaltro, il minore invece era molto semplice. All'alba essi andavano a lavorare. Tornando nel pomeriggio, consegnavano i soldi alla mamma. Il fratello maggiore portava sempre più soldi e perciò prendeva in giro il *choto bhai*. Un giorno i due, mentre andavano a lavorare, videro un vecchio contadino, che con l'aratro sulle spalle si recava sui campi. Il boro bhai andò avanti imperturbato, il *choto bhai*, invece, si fermò e disse:

«Lasci che porti io l'aratro, *chacha*; a me non crea nessun fastidio».

Arrivati sui campi, il contadino disse:

«Puoi portare l'aratro anche al ritorno?».

Il ragazzo rispose:

«Certo che posso!».

Nel pomeriggio il ragazzo trasportò l'aratro fino alla casa del contadino, il quale disse: «Quest'asinello a me non serve per nessun lavoro; prendilo e portatelo a casa. Al mattino stai attento a quando scarica la cacca; ogni giorno potrai avere tre monete d'oro».

Il ragazzo, montato sull'asino, si diresse verso casa; strada facendo, si fermò a mangiare in un piccolo ristorante e si mise a raccontare i prodigi del suo asino. Il padrone, ammiccando al servo, fece sostituire l'asino con un altro asino. Arrivato a casa, il ragazzo raccontò

la sua avventura. Il *boro bhai* scoppiò a ridere ed anche la mamma sorrise. Al mattino egli vide che l'asino aveva fatto la cacca, ma delle monete nessuna traccia.

Quel giorno i due fratelli, mentre si recavano al lavoro, videro che un carro trainato dai buoi era andato a finire in un fosso. Il *boro bhai*, facendo finta di non averlo visto, passò oltre. Il *choto bhai* si fermò e aiutò il padrone a tirar fuori il carro. Quell'uomo disse:

«*Bhai*, mi sei stato proprio di grande aiuto, prendi questo tovagliolo. Quando lo stendi, puoi mangiare tutto quello di cui hai voglia».

Nel pomeriggio, sulla strada del ritorno, si fermò di nuovo allo stesso ristorante. Il padrone si affrettò a portargli da mangiare; ma il ragazzo disse:

«Non c'è bisogno; vedi!».

Dopo aver steso il tovagliolo, disse:

«Voglio il *birani*».

Immediatamente un piatto di *birani* comparve sul tovagliolo. Dopo che ebbe finito di mangiare, il padrone lo invitò a sedersi al suo fianco; gli chiese di riferirgli la storia del tovagliolo e fece contemporaneamente cenno all'inserviente, il quale sostituì il tovagliolo con un altro. Tornato a casa, il ragazzo raccontò la sua storia. Steso il tovagliolo, disse:

«Voglio mangiare il *birani*!».

Ma non accadde nulla. Il *boro bhai* scoppiò a ridere e così anche la madre. Il *choto bhai* per il dolore e la vergogna non mangiò nulla. Stette lì a pensare e alla fine capì chi gli aveva arrecato danno.

Il giorno dopo, recandosi al lavoro, fece sosta nella casa del vecchio contadino, al quale raccontò tutta la storia. Il contadino disse:

«È tutta colpa mia! Mi ero dimenticato di darti questa scatola. Qui dentro c'è la frusta per l'asino. Tutti possono aprirla, ma, per chiuderla, all'infuori di te, essa non ascolterà la voce di nessun altro. Il ragazzo, giunto al ristorante, disse al padrone:

«Conserva questa scatola, ma che nessuno la apra!».

Ciò detto, andò a dormire. La notte poté sentire le grida del padrone e del servo. La frusta si abbatteva sui loro corpi; essi correvano da una stanza all'altra, si nascondevano sotto il letto, ma, inesorabilmente, la frusta li perseguiva. Essi continuavano a dire:

«*Bhai*, ti sconsigliamo, ferma la frusta! Noi ti restituiamo ogni cosa!».

Il ragazzo adagio adagio scese e fermò la frusta. Poi con la scatola ed il tovagliolo, montato sull'asino, tornò a casa. Il *boro bhai* capì finalmente che aiutando il prossimo non ci si perde mai.²

2. Traduzione dal bengalese del missionario Saveriano p. Antonio Germano Das.

In
margine



Una persona alla ricerca di Dio

CHERRY

Una persona alla ricerca di Dio

CHERRY

*«All'inizio non volevo tornare a disturbarti,
ma non ho resistito al desiderio di condividere con te la mia ultima esperienza,
anche perché essa conferma proprio le tue parole».*

Con la nonna di Yao Yao¹ ci siamo accordati per portare la bambina dal medico il martedì mattina. Siccome era la prima volta che la accompagnavo, in cuor mio ero preoccupata perché non sapevo come prepararmi a questo evento. Per fortuna, la nonna aveva già preparato tutto il necessario.

Siamo riuscite a salire sull'autobus senza problemi, ma tutto quello che è successo dopo, è stato qualcosa di inaspettato e di indimenticabile.

Poiché il passeggino di Yao Yao aveva bisogno di un certo spazio, è stato difficile trovargli un posto adatto; alla fine abbiamo dovuto posizionarlo vicino alla porta di uscita dell'autobus.

La gente non aveva prestato troppa attenzione a questa bambina coricata nel passeggino. All'improvviso però, ha avuto una delle sue crisi epilettiche e la nonna si è avvicinata per calmarla. Dal canto mio, aiutavo Yao Yao a raddrizzare il corpo che durante la crisi si era disunito.

È in questo frangente che tutti han cominciato a prestare attenzione e han capito che quella che avevano davanti era una bambina disabile. Han cominciato a parlare fra di loro, a chiedere questo, a chiedere quello. La nonna con calma ha cominciato a raccontare la vita di Yao Yao dalla sua nascita, da quando lei era sopravvissuta ed era stata abbandonata dai genitori, e di come lei — la nonna — abbia deciso di dedicarsi interamente alla bambina.

Nel mezzo del racconto, gli occhi di tutti erano fissi su Yao Yao. In quell'istante, nella mia mente è emersa come una percezione: non mi trovavo più davanti a Yao Yao, quello disteso in silenzio sul passeggino era Gesù. In quel momento è scoccata in me come una

1. Yao Yao è una bambina di 10 anni cerebrolesa grave, accudita dalla nonna. La mamma l'ha abbandonata in ospedale dopo che per 40 minuti in assenza di respirazione, non c'era più speranza di riportarla in vita. In realtà, la bambina si è risvegliata e ha ripreso a respirare anche senza l'ausilio dei macchinari. La mancanza di ossigenazione del cervello per un tempo così prolungato ha causato una tetraplegia grave accompagnata da gravi crisi epilettiche.

scintilla: «Gesù sta provando la nostra umanità, per vedere come ciascuno di noi lo tratta e reagisce di fronte a questa sua presenza nascosta».

La prima volta che ero andata a casa di Yao Yao ed avevo ascoltato il racconto della nonna riguardo a tutto quello che la bambina aveva passato, non avevo pianto. Tuttavia, questa volta, ascoltando il racconto che lei faceva ai curiosi attorno a noi, i miei occhi erano pieni di lacrime. (Per fortuna in quel momento stavo portando gli occhiali da sole e nessuno ha potuto notare la mia emozione). Ho pianto in silenzio, senza dire niente.

Non so quale tipo di sentimenti abbia suscitato nel mio cuore l'ascolto di quella storia. Perché stavo piangendo? Poi ho pensato che forse sono una persona che si commuove facilmente.

Gli altri passeggeri dell'autobus dopo aver ascoltato, ognuno ha avuto una reazione differente, ma io sono stato l'unica a reagire in questo modo. Qualcuno è rimasto scioccato dal fatto che questa piccola vita, dopo che il cuore si è fermato per 40 minuti, come per miracolo ha avuto la forza e la tenacia di continuare a vivere. Altri esprimevano la loro compassione alla nonna che aveva deciso di dedicare la sua vita nell'accompagnare la nipote disabile. Altri dicevano che per tutto quello che la nonna aveva fatto, avrebbe sicuramente ottenuto una buona ricompensa (visione buddhista). Per altri ancora, il fatto che questa piccola vita avesse tenuto duro, significava che lei e la famiglia erano state predestinate a vivere insieme in un rapporto colmo di sfide.

Quando la maggior parte delle persone sull'autobus ebbe terminato di esprimere la sua compassione per la bambina e le parole di conforto per la nonna, la giovane guardia addetta alla sicurezza sull'autobus si è rivolta verso la nonna con cattiveria, chiedendo di fare spazio perché la gente potesse passare. Con gli occhi ignorava l'esistenza di questa bambina, e dava l'impressione di essere solo intento a svolgere il suo compito.

Quanto osservato mi ha portato subito alla mente quello che la nonna aveva condiviso con me circa un'esperienza particolare. Quando Yao Yao era più piccola, la sua mamma assieme a Tian Tian (l'altra figlia) e la nonna, l'avevano portata a fare una crociera in Corea e in Giappone. Quella è stata l'unica vacanza che avevano fatto insieme.

Sulla nave, tutti avevano trattato Yao Yao molto amichevolmente e ogni volta che vedevano la nonna spingere il seggiolino della bambina, tutti si prestavano attivamente ad offrire il loro aiuto. La nonna in quell'occasione aveva sentito l'affetto e l'attenzione di tutti. Specialmente dal giorno in cui la nave aveva attraccato alle coste del Giappone, c'era sempre stato qualche giapponese che si era prestato ad aiutare la nonna a sospingere il passeggino di Yao Yao. Le continue attenzioni della gente verso la bambina, hanno lasciato nella nonna una profonda impressione. Questo atteggiamento esprimeva un senso di

rispetto e al tempo stesso un senso di cura e di attenzione verso i deboli. A quell'epoca, ascoltando il racconto di questa esperienza, mi era venuta in mente una frase che avevo avuto modo di ascoltare diversi anni fa: «Se vuoi vedere il livello di civiltà di una nazione, devi osservare in che modo essa tratta i più deboli».

Ecco perché, quando l'addetto al servizio di sicurezza ebbe finito di rimproverare la nonna e le persone sull'autobus si erano schierate subito dalla parte della nonna, rimproverando tutte insieme il giovane agente, in quella reazione avevo potuto scorgere la presenza di una certa coscienza sociale.

Sull'autobus, seduta dietro a me, c'era una giovane donna che portava la mascherina sulla bocca. Alle volte alzavo i miei occhi per osservarla e mi accorgevo che lei guardava fisso Yao Yao e ascoltava tutto in silenzio. Arrivati alla stazione, abbiamo lasciato che tutti quelli che dovevano scendere, scendessero prima di noi. Mi stavo preparando a prendere in mano il passeggino per scendere, quando mi sono accorta che questa stessa signora stava aspettando fuori dall'autobus per aiutarmi ad alzare e far scendere il passeggino e la bambina.

Dopo aver messo a posto Yao Yao in luogo sicuro, questa giovane signora si era fermata con la nonna per scambiare con lei il numero di telefono ed esprimere la sua disponibilità ad aiutarla qual'ora ne avesse avuto bisogno: era molto disposta a prendersi cura di Yao Yao. La nonna da un lato le dettava il suo numero di telefono, dall'altra diceva che la bambina le aveva portato veramente fortuna, perché le aveva fatto conoscere tanti amici, tante persone che si erano rese disponibili ad aiutarla a prendersi cura della bambina.

Osservavo con i miei occhi ma con il mio cuore percepivo sentimenti particolari: provavo ammirazione per questa giovane signora, ammirazione per il suo coraggio, ma ancor di più per questo suo amore concreto: voleva attivamente aiutare la nonna.

Continuando il nostro tragitto, ci siamo imbattuti nella necessità di salire su un cavalcavia, e qui, di nuovo in un'altra persona che ha voluto darci una mano: un soldato si è offerto per aiutarci ad attraversare il ponte. Alla fine siamo arrivati a destinazione senza difficoltà, e anche il dottore ha visitato la bambina gratuitamente.

Dopo essere ritornata a casa, spesso mi sono ritrovata a ripensare a questa scena e all'atteggiamento di ciascuno verso la bambina.

Yao Yao era sdraiata in silenzio sul passeggino, e probabilmente non era del tutto cosciente dell'esistenza delle persone che aveva tutt'intorno. Ma lei era in realtà come uno specchio che rifletteva la parte più vera di ciascuno di noi.

Ripensando a quanto era successo, mi chiedevo perché nell'ascoltare la nonna avevo provato quel sentimento incontrollabile che ha riempito i miei occhi di lacrime? Che tipo

di affetto porto per Yao Yao?

Tu mi hai dato la risposta quando mi hai detto: «Io penso che tu ami Yao Yao perché vedi in lei la presenza di Cristo — qualunque cosa tu fai al più piccolo, la fai a me —. Così, penso che tu abbia scoperto dove Egli è, o chi Egli è: Egli è negli ultimi».

Come ti ho detto, quando stavo davanti a Yao Yao, mi sembrava quasi di non vedere lei ma Gesù.

Durante tutto il tragitto non ho espresso nessuna parola di consolazione, ho solo pianto in silenzio. Questo mi ha fatto ricordare quelle altre tue parole: «Maria, la madre di Gesù, sotto la croce, guardava soffrendo. Ella non aveva espresso parole di consolazione. Il vangelo ci dice solo che era stata ai piedi della croce. Ci sono momenti di dolore nei quali noi possiamo solo essere lì, senza poter offrire nient'altro che la nostra presenza».

Sento che io in quel momento ero proprio in questo tipo di situazione, senza parole. Tu hai condiviso con me i tuoi sentimenti, ma in realtà hai descritto bene la mia esperienza.

Anche se sono ormai trascorsi tre giorni da quando queste cose sono successe, tuttavia nella mia mente spesso riemerge il quadro di quanto accaduto: a chi sto davanti, in realtà? A Yao Yao oppure a Gesù?

Perché osservando Yao Yao mi viene da pensare a Lui?

Perché sebbene sappia che Yao Yao non può parlare, tuttavia mi sembra di aver chiaro quello che lei vuole dirmi o quello che lei pensa? Non so se tu mi puoi capire. Questo sentimento è scolpito nel mio cuore in maniera indimenticabile, e perciò lo condivido con te.

Beijing, June 22, 2018²

2. Data l'ostilità religiosa tutt'ora presente in Cina, non possiamo rivelare né l'autrice del testo, né il suo traduttore.

