

Threshold Religion

ed. by Tiziano Tosolini



Asian Study Centre

Xaverian Missionaries – Japan

THRESHOLD RELIGION

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Introduction

S. TARGA, F. TOSOLINI

Continuing the series of phenomenological presentations of cultural aspects of the Asian cultures in which we live, this 2012 issue of the *Asian Study Centre* tackles the ubiquitous and evasive topic of forms of religiosity which are not easily classified under the umbrellas of established religious systems and practices. As the title *Threshold Religion* suggests, these forms are already part of the house, while they are not yet its interior. Nobody lives on a threshold, although a threshold must be crossed if one wants to enter a house.

The paper on Bangladesh focuses on the historical and political factors that have determined the modern religious configuration of the country. Pre-Hindu and, obviously, pre-Muslim religious traditions are highlighted as the cultural cradle where both Hinduism and Islam have nested. Born in pre-state societies, these ancient religious practices have survived despite the advance of those larger religious traditions, albeit marginalised and confined to the private domain. However, if on the one hand they have been pushed back to the threshold, on the other hand

they still maintain great importance, even politically, as markers of a deeper identity which cannot be controlled or manipulated by established orthodoxies.

Conversely, the tradition of the Mentawai Islands, in Indonesia, has not been historically affected by encounters with Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. In this context, threshold does not point to marginalisation, religious or otherwise. Rather, it identifies the whole religious experience of an Aboriginal community as a very immediate perception of the closeness of the invisible world. Religious practices aim here at fostering harmony within oneself, among individuals, clans, society and the cosmos.

In Japan, yet a different meaning of the idea of threshold religion comes to the fore: in order to attract people, a religion needs miracles. Such is the case of the advance of Buddhism in the sixth century AD. Even after the prohibitions from the Meiji era to the end of the Second World War, threshold religious practices such as divination, fortune telling, magic and the like, have surfaced again and again. They have not only found their place in the established religious systems, but have also taken on the forms of new religions, all of them trying to secure their niche in the market of the sacred.

The Philippines on their part show the chameleonic dimension of threshold religious practice. In spite of more than four hundred years of Catholic evangelisation, some basic traditional religious beliefs and rituals are still in place. They have been blended with Christian doctrinal principles, curiously reminding us of the crowds' reactions to Jesus' thaumaturgic activity. It is undeniable that, regardless of many shortcomings, some aspects of folk religion have brought the Christian faith closer to the soul of the Filipino people.

Finally, Han Chinese folk religious practices reveal yet another way in which threshold religiosity has been able to market itself as a neutral, immanent doctrine of harmony, without obliterating its beliefs in gods, ghosts and spirits. In Chinese tradition, divination practices, besides being omnipresent and multiform, have also been raised to the level of a combinatory science. Under this form, they are able to interpenetrate all the aspects of life and even other religions.

These five papers are not exhaustive of the multifaceted reality they try to classify: some aspects presented in one paper could also be part of some of the others; what is lacking in one essay is present in another and becomes a suggestion for further research. Nevertheless, the mere juxtaposition of the five contributions with their different, yet complementary, approaches, offers an overview of the topic under study.

We wish to thank the Xaverian Missionaries for their support, those who helped us in the research, among them Siprianus Sokkot Ogo Sagoroujou and those who helped us to revise the English texts: Fr. Steve McKend sx, Fr. Michele Davitti sx, Shukuru B. Valentin sx, Fr. John Fagan sx, Brian Reynolds, Sr. Nancy Murphy RSCJ and Alberto Bertozzi.

A special word of thanks goes to the Xaverian community of the CSAM in Brescia for hosting our yearly meeting in July 2012.

Threshold Religion

BANGLADESH

SERGIO TARGA

Apparently, to speak of threshold or border religion might imply the definition of religion as a clear cut space where rituals and beliefs constitute its ideological borders. What trespasses such borders becomes other, different and alien. Yet threshold religion does imply also a space which at the same time is “within” and “without” those same borders as against, perhaps, established orthodoxy but nevertheless experienced by people as meaningful. As a matter of fact “threshold religion” turns out to be a historical and political construction as much as the religion or religions¹ against which it is considered “threshold.” Threshold religion thus cannot but be analysed or understood without reference to its specular and hegemonic other. In this respect religion as ideology plays a significant role in as much as it becomes the distinctive marker of national identity.

1. See T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins 1993), 27–54.

This is certainly the case of Bangladesh, a country which after more than forty years of independence still struggles between a Muslim religious identity as against a cultural and linguistic Bengali one.

In Bangladesh threshold religion and established Islam reflect the ambiguous and dichotomous construction of a would-be monolithic Islamic national identity, which apparently marginalises other, different, religio-cultural experiences. However, if religion is indeed the result of historical and political processes, without belittling its socio-economic matrix, it is conceivable that both threshold religion and its specular counterparts may have played different and even opposed roles in history. What today is threshold religion might have occupied hegemonic places in different polities of the past. Identities in fact are historically shifting and dynamic in nature. They certainly are not built once and for all.

Threshold religion may then be equated with the “little tradition” of anthropological and ethnographic parlance as against the “great tradition” of established religions. In this respect, despite the attempt to purify Bengali Islam from its historical accretions often identified by the ultraorthodox as Hindu in origin, Bengali Islam still remains a very fluid reality, far from a monolithic identity, multi-vocal in nature and expressing layers of identities. Regrettably, this threshold, popular or folk religion (in Bengali *loukik Islam*), usually considered a debased version of a more institutional, orthodox and elitist Islam, could have become the basis of a national identity which might have kept together both the Islamic ethos and its Bengali cultural dress. In a country of 150 million where ethnic Bengalis constitute the 98% of its total population of which nearly 90% are Muslims, around 10% are Hindus and a marginal number are Buddhists and Christians, this could have put the foundation for a pluralist and tolerant society.² After all Bangladesh is home to the second largest ethnic (i.e. Bengali) Muslim population of the world and despite the continuously dwindling numbers of its Hindu population, Bangladesh remains the third largest Hindu country after India and Nepal.

Threshold religion can not only be illumined by its political and historical underpinnings but it can also be interpreted using opposite, anti-political categories. While the borderline metaphor mentioned above is more apt to express the ideological emphasis underlining religious experience, its instrumental uses in identity building, the centre-periphery metaphor may be more useful to explain the positioning of threshold religion as against the socially productive dimensions in polity building of established religions. In this respect, threshold religion might impinge on the realm of *adharma*, the exoteric, the magic, the sacred experienced as an uncontrollable force, something terrible and dreadful, to keep under control, something to acknowledge but to keep marginalised

2. All the statistics presented here have been worked out from “Religion in Bangladesh” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Bangladesh>. Data from the 2011 Census is being elaborated; see “2011 Population & Housing Census: Preliminary Results.” The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics at <[http://www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/BBS/PHC2011Preliminary Result.pdf](http://www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/BBS/PHC2011Preliminary%20Result.pdf)>.

because politically unproductive. In this sense, threshold religion might oppose the individual to society: what society and the religious establishment cannot acknowledge because of ideological and political constraints, the individual can.

This paper is divided in three sections. The first will question Bengal's early medieval past in search for the cultural streams which have shaped modern Bengal. In particular, starting with the Pala period, Buddhist and Hindu ideologies with their Tantric underpinnings will be identified as the welcoming environment to Islamic inroads from the beginning of the thirteenth century AD. The second section will attempt the ideological reconstruction at work in shaping modern Bangladesh, the conflicting identities and the positioning and repositioning of Islam as the principal marker of national identity. The metaphor of borders will here be put to use. The third and last section, more phenomenological in outlook, will synthetically describe threshold religious practices in modern Bangladesh. The centre-periphery metaphor will here be employed as an explicative device.

SHAPING MODERN BANGLADESH:

THE IDEOLOGICAL CONFIGURATION OF THE PALA EMPIRE FROM 750 TO 1162 AD AND THE ISLAMIC IRRUPTION FROM THE XIII CENTURY

The choice of studying Pala North India in search of the cultural roots of modern Bangladesh, despite a degree of arbitrariness, is justified by the fact that it is during the Pala period that Bengal emerges as a relatively well-defined geo-political and cultural unit.

As a matter of fact, the *Charyapada*, the oldest known poetic compositions written in pre-modern Bengali are dated to this period; in fact it is from the tenth century that the Bengali language starts its historical journey as the vernacular of North-Eastern India. But more importantly, this period is particularly relevant because the imperial formation the Pala kings created was the end result of a specific ideological configuration in which religion occupied the centre stage, something which might come in handy to understand modern dynamics as well. From the Maurya dynasty (321–185 BC) onwards, Buddhism had become the religion of the empire. Displacing Vedism as the religion of pastoralists, with its accent on violence and sacrifices, Buddhism successfully established itself in urban centres as the religion of elites and mercantile classes. Substituting the *mahayajna* (i.e. the great sacrifice) of Vedic tradition, the *mahadana* (i.e. the great gift) of the Buddhists came to be the central ritual activity of Buddhist imperial states.

In fact, the *asvamedha* or horse sacrifice, politically speaking the most important among the Vedic great sacrifices, “could do no more than evoke the very world of dispersed power and agonistic rivalries it was meant to overcome.”³ In this sense Vedism,

3. R. Inden, “The Ceremony of the Great Gift (Mahadana): Structure and Historical Context in Indian Ritual and Society,” in M. Gaborieau and A. Thorner, ed. *Asie Du Sud. Traditions et Changement* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique Paris, 1979), 135.

as the religion of warring petty principalities, the religion of the regional level, could not become the cosmopolitan ideology needed by empires. Indeed “Buddhism provided Indic empires with a paradigm for the ‘horizontal’ integration of ethnically diverse military and mercantile ‘elites’ organised around strategic centers and along trade routes.”⁴

Yet, from the fall of the Gupta dynasty (c. 467 AD), Buddhism starts its declining curve. In the same way in which Buddhism had displaced Vedism from the political centre of empires it was now the reformed Vedic religion to dislodge Buddhism itself. From the beginning of the Christian era, on the ashes of Vedism and in structural and oppositional relation to the dominant religion of Buddhism, Hinduism was born as the theistic religion of Vishnu and Shiva.⁵ This new theistic afflatus allowed for the conception of a vertical power structure which saw in the earthly king the parallel and analogical image of the godhead, be it Vishnu or Shiva, the cosmic overlords. In a way, the relationship between Buddhism and Vedism was being once again rehearsed here this time between Hinduism and Buddhism,⁶ that is, Hinduism was now replacing Buddhism as the new cosmopolitan religion of the regional states, this time organised more on a vertical plain.

This transformation which started from after the fall of the imperial Guptas and certainly accelerated after the experience of Harshavardhana (606–647 AD), the last Buddhist emperor of North India, was brought about by intervening changes in the economic fabric of early medieval North-Eastern India.⁷ As already said above, Buddhist empires relied on a horizontal interconnection of regional states. Basically those empires were established on an unstable equilibrium: the Buddhist centre kept a strategic distance from the ethnic and regional states of the periphery in which the new Hindu religion was holding pride of place. Hierarchical encompassment and strategic avoidances were the devices used by the imperial court to maintain that unstable political balance, *via-à-vis* the regional Hindu courts.

However, when for several different reasons, among which the military incursions of the Huns from Central Asia and the rise of the new Islamic empire, the Indic political formations found themselves cut off from Western and Central Asian trade routes, what used to be the agrarian periphery of the then polities started to gain political importance. Eventually, the fall in international trade, the consequent decadence of urban centres

4. Ivi.

5. Indeed the use of the term Hinduism is here anachronistic. Thapar writes: “The wider application of the term ‘Hindu’ originated with the Arabs after the eighth century AD, when it referred to all those who lived beyond the Indus.” R. Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003), 275. In this paper the use of the terms Hindu or Hinduism will exclusively refer to the Saiva or Vaisnava religious schools or orders.

6. Significantly, the emergence of Hinduism as the new political ideology of early medieval Indian states did not mean the resurgence of the old Vedic ritual paraphernalia. Hinduism too could not but discharge a religion which no longer suited the new situation.

7. See R. Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India*, op. cit., 290–302. This reference describes a number of socio-economic changes which intervened after the imperial Guptas. While the changes are real, I do not share the explanations and interpretations offered by Thapar.

and the debasement of coinage, in short, drastic changes accrued in the socio-economic fabric of imperial formations required new ideological and political adjustments and new political centres. The ensuing re-centring of political institutions on their new regional agrarian hubs caused the displacement of the old Buddhist urban establishments. The end result was that, what used to be the geographical, cultural, economic and political periphery of the Gupta Empire, i.e. the countryside, had now become the geographical, cultural, economic and political centre of the Pala social formation and of other contemporary ones; as a matter of course, the shrinking of trading activities could not but have forced the then rulers to look at their agrarian hinterland as to the powerhouse of the new polities being built.

The above sketchy depiction of the ideological environment of early medieval North India serves the purpose of contextualising the particular experience of the Palas of Bengal. This dynasty is especially important because it clearly embodies what I have been saying above. What is more, despite being the last major Buddhist dynasty of continental India, its *modus operandi* reflected Hindu ideology.

An in-depth analysis of Pala inscriptional evidence reveals that their political project was very vertical and consisted in reinforcing their political hold on land already under cultivation. It does not appear that the Palas favoured the extension of cultivation in hitherto fallow or jungle lands. The strengthening of their hold on the land was then implemented by religious agents. In fact Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples extended Pala authority on their kingdom and worked as intermediary between the central Pala court and the peasantry. These religious institutions were patronised with gifts of lands, donations which thus became very much functional to a very vertical project of political domination. Obviously, the latter was aimed at maximising the process of agricultural surplus extraction in the guise of revenue. But how this extraction was actually carried out is the question we have to answer.

The Palas were Buddhists and their hinterland was basically Hindu. This means that they had somehow to come to terms with the question of legitimation. If we then consider that the Palas reigned for more than four hundred years, it is unreasonable to think that such a remarkable stability was brought about by the continuous threat and use of violence. It was religion which provided the framework for economic relations of production and justified the court demands for revenue. However, despite the kings being Buddhists, it was Hindu ideology which understandably was deployed as the legitimising tool. In particular the concept of *dharma*, the cosmo-moral order, was deployed to justify agrarian relations and the differential *adhikaras* or entitlements they embodied.

Varnasramadharma divided human society in four estates each of which was loaded with particular ontological endowments.⁸ The point is that it was the *varna* template

8. *Varnasramadharma*, that is, the duties (*dharma*) as determined by one's social class (*varna*) and stage of life (*asrama*) is the principle of social organisation and is the foundation of the four castes: *brahman*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya* and *sudra*.

which articulated lordship in early medieval India and thus provided the ideological framework of agrarian relations. Significantly, it was unimportant for the kings to be Buddhist or otherwise; they were building a polity whose framework could not but be the *varna* system. No surprise then that Dharmapala (770–810 AD) in the Munghir copper-plate of his son Devapala (810–849 AD) is said to have made “the castes conform to their proper tenets,”⁹ and Vigrahapala III (1042–1068 AD) in his Amgachhi copper-plate is said to be “a supporter of the four castes.”¹⁰

The chain of lordships the *varna* template articulated, was *ipso facto* also a chain of beings which had at the top the Godhead, Vishnu or Shiva and at the bottom the *chandals* or untouchables. The king was analogous to Vishnu or Shiva and replicated in his domain the same chain of lordships and beings. The difference between these parallel chains of lordships was only in degree and not in kind: the extension of the Godhead’s kingdom was just bigger than that of its earthly replica.

The adoption of Hindu categories by Buddhist kings cannot and must not be interpreted as a sort of instrumentalisation of the religious by the political, rather it was the result of a complex dialectic process between different agents (royal court, religious institutions, peasantry etc.) each one of which articulated different hierarchical codes to make sense of the same social reality.

These codes were incongruent with one another, so that the absolute claim to superiority of each was substantiated through the appropriation and subordination of elements of the other’s hierarchical code. But incorporation and subordination did not exhaust the complex relationships among the various agents: mutual recognition of the other’s relative superiority, accompanied by strategic avoidance and respect, made up a system which was flexible and open to continuous adjustment.¹¹

Some examples as applied to the Palas may further elucidate the point being made here. A clear instance of inclusion ordered to subordination can be found in the central temple of the Paharpur *mahavihara* of the time of Dharmapala. Avalokitesvara seems to have been central to the Buddhist discourse of the period. In the form of Padmapani, he is given pride of place in the outer basement image sculptures of that temple.¹²

Notably, this centrality is all the more striking because all the other sculptures of the same basement represent instead scenes from the Khrishna and Radha-Khrishna sagas. In the Ramacaritam too Avalokitesvara this time in the form of Lokesa appears as “borne

9. F. Kielhorn, “The Munghir Copper-plate Grant of Devapaladeva,” in *The Indian Antiquary* 1892, XXI, 257, line 8.

10. R. D. Banerji, “The Amgachhi Grant of Vighraha-Pala III: the 12th Year,” in *Epigraphia Indica* 1919–20, xv, 300, verse 13. For the whole point see S. Targa, *The Pala Kingdom: Rethinking Lordship in Early Medieval North Eastern India* (Unpublished MPhil Dissertation, London SOAS, 1999), ch. 3.

11. For the whole argument see R. Burghart, “Hierarchical Models of the Hindu Social System,” in *Man* 1979, 13/4: 519–36.

12. See D. K. Narayan, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*, MASI, no. 55 (Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government Printing Office, 1938), 49.

in the heart of Varendri,”¹³ the fatherland of the Palas in North Bengal. Here the parallel between the Pala kings and the bodhisattva Lokesa, both housed in Varendri, may exemplify the appropriation of a meaningful Hindu ideological device just to recast it this time in a Buddhist guise.

Another clear example of hegemonic appropriation and consequent cultural subordination may be discovered in the findings of both Paharpur and Nalanda’s archaeological excavations. In these two archaeological sites a good number of Vaisnava and Saiva images have been found.¹⁴ The puzzling thing is that both Nalanda and Paharpur are known as great centres of Buddhist learning and studies. Far from expressing a kind of anachronistic tolerance and catholicity, these discoveries just point to the complex hegemonic discourse the Palas were building by including yet hierarchizing gods of different religious orders.

That a strict link between imperial authority and Buddhist monasteries developed can be inferred from seals found in the archaeological sites of Nalanda and Paharpur. The seals belonged to Dharmasena and Simhasena who may have been officers of the Palas commissioned to supervise the monasteries.¹⁵ More clearly, the link between monasteries and central royal authority may perhaps be better inferred from the Gosrawan Stone Inscription in which Viradeva is said to have enjoyed Devapala’s patronage; Devapala eventually will give him a post of responsibility at the Nalanda *vihara*.¹⁶

As already mentioned above, the Pala imperial formation relied solidly on religious institutions to strengthen its hold on agricultural land. That Buddhist monasteries occupied an important place in the hegemonic discourse being built at court does not surprise at all. From epigraphic material it is clear that the Pala kings patronised both Buddhism and Hinduism. From their official charters however, it emerges that Smarta brahmanas¹⁷ were more favoured than Vaisnava or Saiva ones. And this too can be explained by the fact that Smarta brahmanas were more neutral in terms of their incorporation in the Pala political project than, say, their theistic counterparts.

Obviously, the construction of a hegemonic cultural system, the result of a continuous bargaining between agents and their hierarchical claims, was certainly open to conflict and contrasts. In this respect competition between different religious elites at the Pala court may be surmised from a stray reference in Taranatha’s account. This refers to a con-

13. *Ramacaritam of Sandhyakaranandin*, H. P. Sastri ed., R. G. Basak trans. (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society 1969), canto III, 7B, 62.

14. See K. N. Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*, op. cit., 44; *passim*; H. Sastri, *Nalanda and Its Epigraphical Material*, MASI no. 66 (Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government Printing Office, 1942), 114.

15. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

16. F. Kielhorn, “A Buddhist Stone Inscription from Ghosrawa,” in *The Indian Antiquary* 1888, xvii, 307ff.

17. Smarta comes from *smṛiti*, i.e. *dharmashastra*, a class of literature under the general name of “tradition.” This literature can be considered the first brahmanical reaction to the Buddhist political inroad. As compared to Vedism, *smṛiti* literature represents a real revolution in perspectives. In a meaningful way, *smṛitis* are the basis of later theistic Hinduism.

flict between “insiders” (the Buddhists?) and “outsiders” as to what gods should have been installed in a temple being constructed.¹⁸ In short, the end result was a complex narrative, at the same time political, religious and economic, the creation of a hegemonic cultural discourse where the central Buddhist establishment of the Palas had the upper hand.

Yet the emergence of Vaisnavism and Saivism as the new hegemonic political discourses¹⁹ in the hitherto peripheral regions of empires was concomitant with the emergence and development of Tantrism, in its various forms and schools. The hypothesis here is that Tantra was one of the developments out of Vedism once the latter was dislodged from the political centre by the Buddhist critique of the Vedic sacrifice. Tantra, in a way, recovered the total system, which we may conventionally and usefully call cosmic, of a world experienced in the double valence of life and death, generation and destruction, right and left.

Tantra with its accents on seemingly antisocial practices and rituals²⁰ has often been seen and still is by many authors as a non-Vedic and non-brahmanical product, either the result of foreign import²¹ or the heritage of non-Aryan, tribal populations being incorporated into the brahmanical fold.²² Tantra in this sense would be the result of tribal acculturation, the price brahmanical ideology had to pay to incorporate hitherto non-sanskritised populations.

Tantra eventually would boil down to being a popular and superstitious religion to be contrasted with the scriptural orthodoxy of brahmanical Hinduism. Obviously the popular and the elitist are here differentiated on the basis of a gnoseological and scientific sophistication, or on their ethical and philosophical content. But these categories are already the product of cultural determinations, that is, they are already the result of a hierarchical articulation of a hegemonic ideology.²³ Tantra for many modern interpreters turns out to be only a “threshold religion,” but is it?

Apparently Tantrism was no popular accretion but was indeed the result of Vedic elitist interplay with a Vedic populace at the time when Vedism, being displaced from

18. D. Chattopadhyaya, ed. *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*. Trans. C. A. Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, reprint 1990), 261.

19. Among the many authorities which can be quoted here the words of Hiuen Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim who visited Bengal in about 637 AD will suffice. He says that in Pundravardhana (i.e. North Bengal) “there were twenty Buddhist monasteries... and one hundred Deva temples.” Quoted in R. C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co., 1971), 521.

20. The elements of tantric rituality often impinged on the negative realm of social meanings. The most common of these elements were the cemetery, the corpse, the eating of human flesh, the cremation ground, the menstrual blood, the female sexual organ, the coitus, all sorts of impurities etc.

21. See R. Thapar, “Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?” in R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (London: Sangam Books, 1996), 68.

22. See N. N. Bhattacharyya, *History of Sakta Religion* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1974), 61.

23. Basically what distinguishes between popular and elitist is a differential access to power. For the problem of conceptualising the notion of popular culture vis-à-vis elitist culture see C. Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), xi–xix; *passim*.

the public domain by the irruption of Buddhism, established itself in the periphery of empires, in the private and domestic domains, the only places in which it was allowed to prosper. In this sense Tantra is thus not the creation of a new religion but an extension of Vaisnavism and Saivism,²⁴ a religious development intimately bound up with the formation of these two religious orders. The fact is that to be a tantrika one had first to be a Vaisnava or a Saiva adept. Initiation was necessary to go through the steps of a spiritual ladder leading towards the experience of non-duality (i.e. liberation). Tantrism in this sense was (and is) also a sort of technology, an extraordinary means to achieve the same spiritual results.

The problem was that Tantra posited the union of life and death, generation and destruction, male and female reconstituting a cosmic unity which while beneficial to the individual was not so for the polity in which “ordinary” Vaisnavism, in particular, was being singled out as beneficent, generative and auspicious both at court and temple. But Tantra was not only an extension of the two Hindu orders, it represented also their very conscious inversion. The tantric Pancatattva or Panca-makaras afford us a clear insight to what this inversion meant.²⁵ Eventually we may characterise the relationship between Hinduism and Tantra as one of oppositional complementarity. Secrecy was the device through which Tantra was both acknowledged and marginalised or subordinated at the same time.

A big question remains. If Tantra is a development of the two Hindu orders, how is the huge efflorescence of Buddhist Tantra in Pala India to be seen? The question is that while in the rest of India by the seventh century AD Buddhism is displaced as the imperial ideology and replaced by Vaisnava or Saiva polities, Buddhism continued as the imperial and courtly ideology of the Palas down to the first half of the twelfth century. That meant that in the Pala domains, Vaisnavism and Saivism with their respective Tantric technologies went on occupying the periphery of the state. My contention is that Vajrayana and its offshoots were the response of the Buddhist establishment to the new cultural, religious, economic and political situation: the way in which the dominant Buddhist ideology controlled religious and political dissent. The huge number of tantric treatises which proliferated in North-Eastern India from the seventh century onwards bridged the gap, as it were, between the political centre and the political periphery of Pala society, another example of cultural incorporation ordained to hegemonic submission.²⁶

24. Obviously, Vaisnavism and Saivism are not the same thing, so it is to be expected that the tantric content, as it were, of these two orders may be different. If we then consider that Saivism has a much longer tradition of asceticism and renunciation, I would accept Mayer's contention that singles it out as the originator of the Tantric template. See R. Mayer, “The Origin of the Esoteric Vajrayana,” in *The Buddhist Forum* (Series of Seminars; SOAS 17 October 1990, Unpublished Paper), 38–51.

25. *Pancatattva* ordained the use of *madya* (alcohol), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (magical diagrams) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse).

26. For the whole question of Tantra in Pala India see S. Targa, *Esoteric Practices and Society in Pala India* (Unpublished Paper: SOAS 1998).

How the Pala dynasty ended its historical journey is unknown to us. However, its legacy still lingers on. Be that as it may, after less than fifty years from the last known Pala emperor, Madanapaladeva, new events came to reshape the horizon of North-Eastern India. In 1204, Muhammad Bakhtiyar and his detachment of 200 Turkish cavalymen, the head of a 10,000 strong horse-mounted army, swept through Nudya the capital of king Lakshmana Sena and formally inaugurated five hundred years of Muslim political domination in Bengal.

In this context we are not interested in the political vicissitudes of Muslim political domination in North Eastern India; indeed what is relevant for our discourse is that the Muslim inroad into Bengal just added another layer to the already multi-layered religio-cultural identity of North Eastern India. Apparently, Muslim political penetration was slow in Bengal, but their religio-cultural penetration was even slower. In fact it is only from the late sixteenth century, in Mughal times, that we have information about the existence of large Muslim peasant communities in Bengal.²⁷ Not only this, it also clearly appears that the Islamisation of Bengal was very successful in its Eastern most portions. Eventually when in 1872 reliable census data becomes available it is shown that “Muslims predominated in Bengal’s Eastern districts in proportions ranging from 60 to 90 per cent, in contrast to Western districts, where they shaded off from less than 40 per cent of the total to virtually zero along the delta’s Western edge.”²⁸

Apparently Islam from the very beginning but particularly from the Mughals onwards was being introduced as a “civilisation-building ideology associated with settling and populating the land and constructing a transcendent reality consonant with that process.”²⁹ This responded to the centralising and expanding needs of the central Mughal court. Eastern India needed to be integrated with the geography, economics and politics of North India after it had been disjoined from it for centuries. Expanding the agrarian base of the empire was the aim of the Mughals and this was reflected in the content of their policies in Eastern India. It is in the process of realisation of these socio-economic imperial dynamics that mass conversion to Islam seemingly took place. Interestingly, as long as Islam remained encapsulated in the old lands of the Palas in North and West Bengal, it constituted only the organising principle of a new hegemonic discourse in which old Hindu and Buddhist elements were incorporated and hierarchized.

Apparently in the period preceding the Mughal’s incorporation of Bengal into their vast pan-Indian empire, Muslim society was pre-eminently urban, concentrated in the traditional capital and provincial cities mainly situated in West Bengal. The Muslim elite was made up of traders, soldiers, Sufi preachers, government officers, etc. all known as *ashraf* Muslims, that is, Muslims whose point of honour was their foreign descent, their

27. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 192.

28. Ivi.

29. Ibid., 226.

not being local Bengalis. The only non-*ashraf* Muslims were groups of artisan castes who had converted and provided their services within towns and cities in much the same way as their Hindu counterparts had done till then. The countryside was basically left untouched.

Things changed drastically with the Mughal emperors. “The conquest was accompanied by fundamental changes in the region’s economic structure, its socio political system, and its cultural complexion, both at court and in the countryside.”³⁰ The cultural change occurred at court, first, because particularly Akbar (1556–1605) was promoting a policy of cultural integration among all the many regions comprising his sprawling empire.³¹ The active reclamation of land that the Mughal administration sought for required then a new relationship with the countryside and its inhabitants. This was provided by Sufis or Muslim holy men who, as true pioneers, accompanied, organised and instructed a non-Muslim peasantry in the difficult work of clearing jungle lands. A hitherto marginal population was thus reworked by the energy and freshness of Sufis into a valuable work force which eventually brought much of East Bengal under wet rice cultivation. This socio-economic change brought about the cultural transformation of that same peasantry who by now started to assimilate itself to a distinct Muslim identity. It was socio-economic transformations on the ground which brought about a new religious identity.

On a more specific religious level, the Islamisation of Bengal had as a consequence the “Bengalisation” of Islam. Writes Eaton: “Since Sufis were especially concerned with apprehending transcendent reality unmediated by priests or other worldly institutions, it is not surprising that they, among Muslims, were most attracted to the yogi traditions of Kamrup.”³² The *Amritakunda*, a manual of tantric yoga in Sanskrit, from the very beginning of the Turkish occupation of Bengal in the thirteenth century started being translated in both Persian and Arabic and circulated throughout the delta for the next five hundred years, such was the fascination of Sufis with the esoteric practises of Bengal.³³ But the Bengalisation of Islam, as it were, was brought about in particular by the *bhakti* or devotional movement and the consequent revitalisation of the Vaisnava order. Here we have to mention the extraordinary experience of a Bengali saint, Chaitanya (1486–1533), who renewed Vaisnavism by centring his devotional and emotional cult on Krishna and his divine lover, Radha. How much devotional Islam became indebted to this *bhakti* movement is anybody’s guess.³⁴

30. *Ibid.*, 158.

31. For a synthetic view of Akbar’s integrative policies see J. F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 34ff. See also I. A. Khan, “Akbar’s Personality Traits and World Outlook: A Critical Reappraisal,” in M. Bhargava ed., *Exploring Medieval India: Sixteen to Eighteen Centuries* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 353–69.

32. R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 78.

33. *Ibid.*, 78; *passim*.

34. For the relationship between Chaitanya’s *bhakti* and Muslim devotion see A. Sharif, “Chaitanya Moto-bad o Islam,” in R. Rain ed., *Banglar Dhormo o Dorshon* (Dhaka: Sangbed Prokasona, 2009), 263–81.

The end result of this reciprocal influence between Islam and pre-existing Bengali religio-cultural strands is what many may like to call *loukik* Islam, or folk Islam. “The form of this *loukik* Islam of Bengal is absolutely fantastic and amusing. In it Hindu religion and Buddhist religion, Aryan, non-Aryan and Vaisnava faiths have found a place.”³⁵ I am not sure that today’s Bengali Muslims would be happy with such a statement. However, Akbar, the great emperor of the Mughal dynasty, might have been.

FROM BRITISH INDIA TO PAKISTAN AND TO BANGLADESH:
BETWEEN CORE AND THRESHOLD RELIGION, THE POLITICAL MARKER OF
NATIONAL IDENTITY

If we accept that religion is not a set of static elements but “something which is always deeply intertwined with historical and political processes”³⁶ it may become clearer why what was supposedly good for Akbar was and is no longer so for Bangladeshi modernity. Apparently, what I have called above the Bengalisation of Islam clearly responded to the Mughal’s project of political and cultural integration of a vast empire housing in itself great cultural, ethnic and religious differences. But with the end of British rule in 1947 and the birth of two national states, Pakistan and India, the borders of religions had to accommodate themselves so as to coincide with the physical territorial boundaries of the two new polities. More so in our case where at least Pakistan was born out of an ideology which posited religions, Islam and Hinduism, as the markers of two conflicting political identities, Pakistani and Indian respectively.

Obviously, things being so, all that could mean border or threshold religion, often identified as Hindu in origin, was a threat to the political existence of the polity. Orthodoxy was becoming the buzzword of the day, and, so called, little or folk tradition of Islam was being marginalised as a heterodox, unproductive superstition. Things seemed to change when in 1971 Bangladesh was born out of the ashes of East Pakistan. After a bloody war of nine months, Bangladesh was established as an independent nation on the basis of a Bengali cultural and linguistic nationalism. Reversing the religious genealogy of Pakistan, Bangladesh seemed to be *en route* to be a secular, socialist People’s Republic. Unfortunately, the 1975 political coup, and the successive rule of military dictators up until 1991, reversed the political trend and plunged Bangladesh within a still unresolved problem of national identity. Borrowing the words of a concerned Bangladeshi, this identity impasse can be expressed thus: “Are we Bengalis first, and Muslims second? Or are we Muslims first, and Bengalis second?”³⁷

35. M. E. Haque, “Bonge ‘loukik Islam:’ er Udbhob,” in R. Rain ed., *Banglar Dhormo o Dorshon* (Dhaka: Sangbed Prokasona, 2009), 159. My translation.

36. G. K. Brown, S. Deneulin and J. Devine, “Contesting the Boundaries of Religion in Social Mobilisation,” in *Papers in International Development*, 2009/4: 3.

37. L. Karim, “In Search of an Identity: The Rise of Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism,” 2. South Asia Citizens Web. Available at A-Z Index of documents on Communalism <www.sacw.net>.

It is a fact that from after independence from the British in 1947, the then East Pakistan and today's Bangladesh has been relentlessly undergoing religious purification, as it were.³⁸ And this is the direct outcome of the political creation of a nation-state. The establishment of territorial borders required the clearing up of religious boundaries, as we have already been reminded. In this sense "the border metaphor is a manifestation of the discourse of nation-states and is, therefore, a powerful 'constitutor' of modern experience for anyone who is touched by the politics of the nation-state."³⁹

Again and again religious experience is fashioned and refashioned to suit always new political projects. The most important event, in this Islamic regeneration was the arrival in the 60s of the Deobandi missionaries from Uttar Pradesh, the bearers of a reformed Islam centred on the Quran and the Sunnah. The Tablighi Jamaat, a missionary organisation, is considered their most significant offshoot. It was apparently created to offset Hindu renewal movements which were considered dangerous to gullible Muslim peasants. Taking up residence in Kakrail (Dhaka) in mid 60s, this Tablighi Jamaat started to organise weeks of *tafsir*, or exegesis. These gatherings were so successful that soon their venue had to be shifted outside Dhaka to a place called Tongi. Now these annual gatherings, called *Bishwa Ijtema*, collect millions of people at a time.

Military dictators further deepened the process of Islamisation of the country⁴⁰ by patronising the Quomi Madrasas, Islamic schools which draw inspiration from the Deobandi type of Islamic education. In practice these madrasas teach only the Quran, the Hadith, the Sunnah and a very orthodox interpretation of the Sharia. It is calculated that there are at least 6,500 of these Islamic schools in the country.⁴¹

Together with this macro changes, small and perhaps imperceptible ones have been taking place giving the measure of the cultural transformation at work.⁴² Bengali lan-

38. Indeed the so called purification of Islam from its folkloric accretions had started much earlier with different renewal movements. See for instance among others, the Faraizi movement of mid-nineteenth century in the Faridpur area: I. Iqbal, "Between Puritan Islamic and Syncretistic Muslim Traditions in Bengal: An Ecological Perspective on the Faraizi Movement," in *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 2011, 8/1: 64–71. For a general perspective on reformation movements see R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims: 1871–1906* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988). However, this does not contradict the strong link between nation-state and clear religious borders being argued here.

39. K. P. Ewing, "Crossing Borders and Transgressing Boundaries: Metaphors for Negotiating Multiple Identities," in *Ethos*, 1998, 26/2: 266.

40. The constitutional changes that these dictators introduced are not listed here even though important. See for instance general Zia's declaration of Islam as state religion in 1988. See L. Karim, "In Search of an Identity: The Rise of Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism," op. cit., *passim*.

41. See A. M. Choudhury, "Islamic Education Heritage," in *The Daily Star* (Dhaka: 25–2–2010). Retrieved at <<http://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/2010/02/ds19/segment3/heritage.html>>. A critical view of the Quomi system of education can be found in A. Mannan and F. Mannan, "Quomi Madrasa: Time to Remove the Stigma," in *The Daily Star* (Dhaka: 26–3–2010). Retrieved at <<http://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/2010/03/26thmarch/page11.htm>>.

42. "Today every state function is preceded by recitations from the Quran. Bangladesh television broadcasts Azan regularly and other Islamic rituals are also performed by government ministers and functionaries as public duties. Women announcers and newsreaders are made to cover their heads during the month of

guage, always considered un-Islamic, is often de-sanskritised and more and more people introduce Arabic words in their parlance.⁴³ The Persian tradition of saluting people when departing with “Khoda hafez” has now become “Allah hafez.” And so on and so forth for many other trifles like the *hijab* for women, the round skull cup for men something which in the 50s barely existed.⁴⁴ Often the justification for such changes or for the demand of changes in religious practice and belief is referred by the Ulema or Muslim elite to the unresolved dialectic in Islamic practice and doctrine between local/particular and universal/general.

To my view, however, it is difficult to believe that such statements are not put to the service of arbitrary construction of imagined communities *vis-à-vis* the threatening other, which in Bangladesh is unmistakably Hinduism. Eventually, “putatively universal claims are made and taken up in specific cultural and physical terrains,”⁴⁵ which become the matrix of further and meaningful religious experiences.

In a way the question of local and universal in Islam is parallel to the question of little (i.e. *loukik*, folk, popular) and great traditions. As I had already occasion to remark above, the distinction between these two articulations of the same religion is not in their differential sophistication of their content, philosophical, theological or otherwise, but on the differential access to power they embody and symbolise. It is not the case that the proponents of a classical, orthodox and pristine Islam, identified tout court with the great tradition of Islam are the religious, political and economic elites of the country. But what if for a twist of luck today’s peasants could become tomorrow’s elite? What would happen to their *loukik* Islam? Indeed in such an eventuality their *loukik* Islam would become just Islam, at the only condition of being able to imagine a different community, that is, a different identity, that is, different borders.

As a working hypothesis, I would like to apply to Islam what Morinis said of Hinduism: “The simplifying dichotomies [i.e. little *versus* great religious traditions] have obscured the fact that different aspects of Hinduism tend to be present in every instance of popular practice, explicitly or implicitly, coexisting without conflict by being located at different level of cultural abstraction.”⁴⁶ The question remains of how cultural abstractions are determined and indeed whether, at times, they may be conflicting with each other.

The attempts at cleaning up folk Islam particularly of its Sufi overgrowth have had mixed results. In fact to force on a population a national identity on the rigid borders of a

Ramadan while performing. The President himself performs Haj every year using public funds as part of his state duties.” S. Kamal, “Move Towards State Sponsored Islamisation in Bangladesh,” WLUML Dossier 5–6 December 1988/May 1989, 1. Retrieved at <<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/rtf/dossiers/dossier5-6/d5-6-06-bang-islam.rtf>>.

43. L. Karim, “In Search of an Identity: The Rise of Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism,” *op. cit.*, 2.

44. See J. Ullah, “Folk Islam is Alive and Well in Bangladesh Judging by Politicians’ Pre-Election Activities,” retrieved at <<http://mukto-mona.com/wordpress/?p=59>>.

45. J. R. Bowen, “What is ‘Universal’ and ‘Local’ in Islam?” in *Ethos*, 1998, 26/2: 261.

46. E. A. Morinis, “Levels of Culture in Hinduism: A Case Study of Dream Incubation at a Bengali Pilgrimage Centre,” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology (ns)*, 1982, 16/2: 255.

monolithic Islam led that same population to find different and diverse strategies to cope with their religio-cultural experience. The first of these strategies is the displacement of parts of religious experiences from the domain of the public to that of the private, in other words, to shift from the space of religion to that of threshold religion.

While religious expressions informed by music or dance or any other Islamicly ambiguous manifestation could be the cause for suspicion or social boycott, people resort to the private domain. In a way the socio-political level linked to the public comes to be associated with orthodoxy while at the same time it is dissociated from the private which instead is left to the individual and to his/her meanings. The phenomenon can be looked at from its opposite perspective also: while officially Islamic orthodoxy is enforced and safeguarded, in practice it is paid lip service only. Blanchet writes: "the end result is a new veneer of Islamic orthodoxy that comes to cover the beliefs and practices of a nominally Muslim peasantry."⁴⁷

Blanchet discovers this strategy particularly in women and their "religious" practices. Perhaps because of the fact that women are less socialised in Islamic values and their practices are mainly private ones, they are perceived as less threatening to the wider *somaj* or society. This appears to be more evident in two events: marriages and births. During these events Muslim women are free to relate to spirits and ghosts, offsetting their nefarious influences while at the same time enlisting their protection and support. "In Bangladesh, expressions of 'Bengali' culture, judged un-Islamic, have become increasingly confined, private. To some, it is non-culture, or 'just women's beliefs,' tolerated with muted consent."⁴⁸ And this muted consent speaks volumes on the continuously surfacing multi-layered identity of Bangladeshi Muslims. In a way, it reminds me of secrecy as the device used to both include and marginalise esoteric experiences of early medieval tantric gurus.

The metaphor of borders pointing to important identity markers cannot but be linked also to the other metaphor relating to cross-border experiences. In an ancient land like Bengal where centuries of variegated interaction between a hostile nature and its successive religio-cultural domestications, a political imposition from above of a monolithic religious identity cannot do away with a plurality of voices which might have been construed as beyond the border but which nevertheless remain anchored to meaningful personal experiences. To exemplify what is being discussed here, let us turn to the case of Shefali, a Muslim possession medium studied by James M. Wilce Jr. back in 1991.⁴⁹ Shefali was said to be possessed by a spirit, a *pari* (i.e. a female spirit in Arabic) every Thursday night, and, while in trance, she was able to offer cures for diseases. This medium experi-

47. T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1984), 9. While I like this writer's insights, I disagree with her when she defines the Islam of peasants as only "nominal." The dichotomy between little and great traditions surfaces again!

48. *Ibid.*, 17.

49. The following story and comments are taken from James M. Wilce Jr., "The Kalimah in the Kaleidophone: Ranges of Multivocality in Bangladeshi Muslim's Discourses," in *Ethos*, 1998, 26/2: 230–56.

ence, un-Islamic in form and content for most Muslim believers, managed to put up a play of identities by simply manipulating pronouns.

According to Wilce, it was difficult to establish when Shefali was talking as Shefali or when she was talking as the *pari*, even while recounting her experiences outside of actual possession, during normal consciousness. In effect, Shefali, by leaving always ambiguous who was talking to whom, played openly a blameless hide and seek game. The author would even have expected some form of awareness, on behalf of Shefali, on the non-orthodoxy of what was happening to her each Thursday night. Instead either Shefali or the *pari* itself or both did not show the slightest awareness of that whatsoever. On the contrary, the experience turned out to be more than acceptable. Wilce recounts for instance when the *pari* related to having pushed over Shefali's husband in the field. When questioned about her behaviour, the *pari* replied that that day Shefali's husband had forgotten to say one of the five prayers prescribed. Not only was Shefali unaware of her heterodoxy, but interpreted herself as enforcer of Islamic doctrine.

What is more, Wilce reports that during his many visits to Shefali sometimes she even denied that she had spirit possession experiences. The author then came to know that since the beginning of her trance possessions, Shefali's husband had attempted to stop her because apparently the *pari* prompted her into unacceptable behaviour. Shefali's denial was just part of that kind of secrecy and privacy put in place to protect herself and her threshold religious experiences.

"What shall we call Shefali? Is she a cryptofundamentalist or cryptofeminist? A modern Bangladeshi whose identity is increasingly caught up with Middle Eastern Islamist reform, or a Bengali woman engaged in a form of spirit-mediumship that predates not only the advent of Islam in Bengal but also that of Hinduism and Buddhism?"⁵⁰ Likely enough Shefali, was being a bit of all this and was giving "voices" to a sort of "transcommunal ethnic culture."⁵¹ This transcommunal ethnic culture is called also by the same Wilce, the "multiple laminated identities of Bangladeshi Muslims," not the result of spurious Hindu accretions but something which has been laid down by those same people who first brought Islam to the country. In between the two nationalisms of secularists and Islamists in Bangladesh, a middle way may thus give voice to those "nationalists who advocate a national identity, which is rooted in the indigenous folk culture of Bangladesh, one that rejects the ultra-nationalism of both the Islamic and cultural nationalists and attempts to revive the folk Islam of the peasants in Bengal to the national level."⁵²

But the multivocality of Bangladeshi Islam shows up clearly not only in the strategic manipulation of language and practices in private or domesticated public domains. "The dominant trope of Islamic unity notwithstanding, one hears a diversity of voices in Mus-

50. J. M. Wilce Jr., "The Kalimah in the Kaleidophone: Ranges of Multivocality in Bangladeshi Muslim's Discourses," op. cit., 236.

51. Ibid., 239.

52. L. Karim, "In Search of an Identity: The Rise of Political Islam and Bangladeshi Nationalism," op. cit., 3.

lim societies like Bangladesh, for instance, in the dozens of its *tariqah*,⁵³ the schools of the different paths of Sufis' spiritual elevation. These *tariqahs* situate themselves on an ambiguous ground, a liminal one perhaps, in the sense that they inhabit a border area caught up in between core and threshold religious experiences. Their liminality is indeed more political than otherwise, since they occupy a public domain albeit an encapsulated one.

In the past *mazars*⁵⁴ of Sufis have been targeted by Islamic extremists. On January 17, 2003 a bomb caused the death of seven people at Faila Peer Mazar in Tangail. On January 12, 2004 another bomb went off at Hazrat Shah Jalal Mazar in Sylhet leaving five people dead. Still another bomb went off at the same shrine four months later, on May 21, 2004 causing other three people to die. Significantly, the latter event had targeted the Bangladeshi born British High Commissioner of the time, Anwar Choudhury, who was slightly injured along with 70 other people.⁵⁵

Indeed the same reasons which probably prompted Islamists to attack mazars are the same reasons behind the frequent visits of politicians to these places. Suffice it to mention that both Sheikh Hasina, present Prime Minister of Bangladesh and leader of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia, former Prime Minister and leader of the opposition party, the BNP, in December 2008 visited one after the other the mazar of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet to inaugurate their electoral campaigns.⁵⁶ Obviously, both the bombings and the politicians' visits point to the fact that despite strenuous efforts at building a monolithic Islamic identity for Bangladesh, the fact remains that Bangladeshi Muslims' multiple laminated identities still maintain a strong hold on Muslim masses, so much so that this is perceived as a threat by Islamists and a resource to be tapped by would-be office bearers of the state.

A cursory analysis of one of these *tariqahs*, the Maijbhandari, might farther elucidate the argument. While acknowledging the recent spate of events pointing at a reassertion even in Bangladesh of a political and literalist kind of Islam, many may agree that in Bangladesh other religious manifestations are more pervasive and ubiquitous, the veneration of Muslim holy men (or *pirs*) being one of these.

Indeed it was the ubiquity of such a phenomenon which had required the attention, as it were, of both terrorists and politicians, as shown above. Even though both religious and secular Bangladeshi elites may consider such a Bangladeshi religious attitude as a sort of "embarrassing anachronism...", a large majority, of Bangladeshi Muslims from across the entire urban-rural and socioeconomic spectrum accept the legitimacy of some holy men, if not as workers of miracles and purveyors of magical cures, then at least as

53. J. M. Wilce Jr., "The Kalimah in the Kaleidophone: Ranges of Multivocality in Bangladeshi Muslim's Discourses," op. cit., 233.

54. *Mazar* is an Arabic word whose meaning is "mausoleum."

55. See I. I. Choudhury, "The Rise of Extremists in Bangladesh," in *The Daily Star*, 15-9-2004.

56. See J. Ullah, "Folk Islam is Alive and Well in Bangladesh Judging by Politicians' Pre-Election Activities," op. cit., 1.

sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance.”⁵⁷ Noticeably, it is the support of a mass of people which determines the place of Sufism in Bangladesh. What could have just been a private, low profile and reserved threshold religious experience is instead conflictually vying with a monolithic interpretation of Islam imposed from above. In a way, the ongoing cultural (but also socio-economic and political) conflict reflects a hegemony without dominance.⁵⁸

Thus the Maijbhandari *tariqah* takes its name from the village twelve kilometres North of Chittagong in which it all started more than a century ago. Followers consider Gausulazam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah (1826–1906) the founder of the Maijbhandari *tariqah*. Without repeating the whole story, Sufi Ahmad Ullah is considered as descending from followers of the line of holy men going back to Sufi Abdul Qader Jilani (1077–1127). After attaining higher education in Calcutta, Ahmad Ullah obtained the Qadiriya spiritual mantle from a North Indian Sufi. This of course was in addition to the association with the order he had already acquired by birth. Going back to his native village of Maijbhandar he started preaching and performing miracles. From then on other three Sufis “adorned” the *tariqah* with their spiritual endeavours.

In Maijbhandar the *darbar sharif* or saintly court’s central structures are the four mausoleums of the four recognised *pirs*: these mausoleums constitute “the material objects that extend their physical presence and provide the solid matter for the construction of their sanctity.”⁵⁹ At present the leadership of the *tariqah* is disputed. There are in fact two Maijbhandari lines of succession: the Ahmadiya, directly ascending from Ahmad Ullah, and the Rahmaniya, descended from Golamur Rahman, the nephew of Ahmad Ullah and the second *pir* of the Maijbhandari *tariqah*. It is difficult to say how many Bangladeshis follow one or the other of the two lines of Maijbhandari *pirs*, but the numbers must be huge as must be the financial resources involved.

The Maijbhandari path involves seven steps of spiritual elevation. The first stage involves self-discipline in order to heighten awareness. From here, the second step consists of release from ordinary activities and this leads the devotee to the third step which involves his gradual surrender to Allah. These first three degrees of spiritual elevation are preparatory to the following four. At the fourth stage one seeks the so called “white death,” that is, the death of appetites, through fasting and moderation in general. In the

57. P. J. Bertocci, “A Sufi Movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari Tariqa and Its Followers,” in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 2006, 40/1: 2. I am indebted to this paper of Bertocci for the information on the Maijbhandari *tariqah* below.

58. The discourse must be necessarily nuanced. First, the cultural hegemony of Sufism intersects spaces which are embedded in orthodox Islam, thus creating an ambiguous terrain where threshold and core religions overlap. Secondly, the cultural hegemony of Sufism is fragmented into different levels of belonging and membership. Thirdly, the political dominance of monolithic Islam also and particularly at an international level, produces imagined and ideal Muslim communities which while constituting themselves as counter-hegemonic models, debase the self-appreciation of one’s real community, its practices and ideas.

59. Mills quoted in P. J. Bertocci, “A Sufi Movement in Bangladesh: The Maijbhandari Tariqa and Its Followers,” op. cit., 8–9.

fifth step the devotee seeks the “black death,” that is, the death to his own self through accepting criticism and engaging in dialogue. The sixth step or “red death,” requires the devotee’s death to lust and greed. Mastering these series of deaths the devotee is prepared for the seventh and last one, the “green death,” the readiness to receive and contemplate the presence and love of Allah. As beautiful and attractive as this method of spiritual elevation may be, Bertocci relates that he met none among the Maijbhandari enthusiasts who had actually undergone the spiritual process.⁶⁰ Indeed the attractiveness of the Maijbhandaris lies not in its theosophy but in its ritual eclecticism.

The Maijbhandaris acknowledge musical performances as a mode of worship. Their musical tradition is well known all over Bangladesh and together with characteristic Maijbhandari songs local, traditional Bengali instruments such as the *ektara*, *dotara* and the *dhol* are normally played.⁶¹ These performances may be quite infectious and produce in their listeners mild states of heightened awareness. Interestingly the songs evoke a universalist spirit, beyond religious distinctions often mildly critical of conventional religious practice. In this sense the Maijbhandari songs belong fully to the Bengali tradition of religious poetry and song.

Other standard ritual performances include the *milad mahphil* and the *dhikr*. This latter ritual expression is most crucial and refers to the rhythmic chanting of the name of Allah until it produces forms of ecstasy. *Dhikr* or *jikir* in Bengali if properly performed may lead to *fana* or the mystic union with Allah. *Dhikr* is usually prepared by a *milad mahphil* in which names of particular saints and the *kalimah* or profession of faith are repeated time and again.

Gifts to the reigning *pirs* are another characteristic not only of the Maijbhandari School but of all cases of *pir* veneration in Bangladesh. Usually, the bigger and the costlier the gift the bigger the blessing expected in return. This blessing is somehow believed to cause the devotee to share in the power of the *pir*. What instead is really peculiar to the Maijbhandari *tariqah* is the ritual sacrifice of water buffaloes. Back in 1999 Bertocci was witness to the ritual slaughter of 50 healthy water buffaloes which provided food and *tabarruk* (blessing transmitted through something) to the thousands of people who had gathered in Maijbhandar on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Sufi Syed Golamur Rahman (1865–1937).

The sacrifice of the buffaloes is possibly the central ritual practice of the Maijbhandari and as such is loaded with plenty of meanings, all exercising great appeal to the Bengali masses, Muslim and not. First, the buffalo sacrifice calls to mind the older Hindu tradition which sees the goddess (Durga *debi*) slaughtering the buffalo-demon (*mahishasura*). The myth refers to the victory of good over evil. On a different level, the buffalo sacrifice symbolises the taming of wilderness, the rural roots of an agrarian society in which the

60. Ibid., op. cit., 14.

61. The *ektara* and *dotara* are string instruments with one and two cords respectively. The *dhol* is a particular ceremonial drum.

buffalo is still an important draught animal. Behind this rituality then there may be the cathartic recollection of a medieval past in which marginal agrarian populations, neither Hindu nor Muslim if not just nominally, cleared the jungle pushed, helped and directed by the *pir-mazar* ideological complex.⁶² Finally, the buffalo sometimes is also celebrated as symbol of the modern Bangladeshi nation. In this respect the famous painting by Zai-nul Abedin of the buffalo and his driver joined in superhuman endeavour, best illustrates the idea.

Whatever the ideas behind the buffalo sacrifice, it certainly has great appeal among the people. It is difficult not to see that this appeal is grounded in the multi-layered stratification of Bangladeshi multiple identities. In today's Bangladesh it is this wealth of voices which is at risk of being silenced and reduced to a monotone of practices and ideas. Yet it is of institutions like the Majibbandari to oppose the militant thrust of Islamists, and continue to reside in the political limbo of threshold religions. Unfortunately there are signs which do not bode well for the future. Majibbandari present leadership is endeavouring to show itself as a *sharia* abiding movement. And if works speak louder than words, the new construction resembling the pages of the Quran⁶³ which has replaced the old elaborate shrine of Ahmad Ullah is possibly a sign of an increasing homologation on a stricter, globally enforced version of Islam.

THRESHOLD RELIGION: PRACTICES FROM A LOST WORLD

The multivocality or "transcommunal ethnic culture" we have been referring mainly to Bangladeshi Muslims above, can and must be referred to Bangladeshi people as such, be they Muslim or otherwise. Blanchet while researching on the meanings of pollution among Muslim women highlights three levels of religio-cultural stratification: a primitive level, a Hindu level and a Muslim level.⁶⁴ This conceptualisation however may be generalised to apply not only to the meanings of pollution but also and particularly to the systems of meanings that Bangladeshi culture is. It is the articulation of these three levels of meaning which allows us to speak of Bangladeshi multivocality or multi-layered identity. Eaton, attempting to articulate the three historical layers, speaks of a triadic and dialectic movement corresponding to inclusion, identification and displacement.⁶⁵ This model was elaborated by him to understand how a vast mass of Bengali peasants happened to become Muslim. But the model can be paradigmatic for the cultural process in general.

Through inclusion, local primitive traditions came to be paralleled by new meanings brought in by the great religious systems of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. This parallelism allows the great religions to be acknowledged and accepted in the local context

62. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 280–81.

63. P. J. Bertocci, "ASufi Movement in Bangladesh: The Majibbandari Tariqa and Its followers," op. cit., 25.

64. See T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, op. cit., 61–2.

65. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 270–90.

and particularly in the local cosmology. The second stage takes place when the new supernatural beings which paralleled the local territorial ones are identified with them. For instance, *bhut* and *petni* of Bengali tradition (male and female ghosts respectively) become *jin* and *pari* of the Muslim tradition.

Eventually the new cosmology and its supernatural beings—third stage—displace the old, territorial and traditional ones. The process might be seen as one in which from a situation of centrality the local, primitive cosmology and its supernatural beings are progressively displaced to leave space to those of the great religious traditions. The complication in this conceptualisation resides in the fact that the process is not accomplished once and for all.

The displacement operated by the great religious traditions first leaves behind religious accretions, as it were, and second and more importantly, the displacement is from the public to the private, from the socio-political domain to the individual one. This means that in particular situations displaced elements belonging to marginalised cosmologies surface and impose themselves, that is, become more meaningful to individual experience despite and above group identity.

Illnesses and calamities, for instance, are the situations in which these ancient beliefs and practices are more likely to be deployed. If this dialectic movement is not necessarily a temporal one, that is, it did not happen once and for all in the past, it is however true that in today's Bangladesh marginal religious practices relatable to old displaced cosmologies although present and alive, are progressively losing their meaning at least in the consciousness of the people. It is thus foreseeable that also because of an enforced strict religious orthodoxy, practices already displaced from the public domain, might in a near future be displaced also from the private one.

Before entering a more phenomenological description of what these practices consist of in modern Bangladesh, I would like to briefly point out the basic ideas on which Bengali transcommunal ethnic cultural construction relies upon,⁶⁶ being aware that beliefs, practices etc. are always the projection or production of a particular society. The society we are dealing with here is an agrarian and pre-agrarian one.

Territoriality appears to be important. Trees, rivers, forests and paddy fields are populated by local kinds of supernatural powers, spirits, ghosts and gods each of which must be propitiated in the attempt to offset their negative influences. Fertility is the governing principle of life and soon enough it comes to be associated with land and women. The latter because of their close relationship with life are construed in analogy with the land. Auspiciousness, purity and their opposites come to be associated with the female principle, its physical constitution and its functions. "Every woman interacts with the granary, the cow, the paddy field, the river."⁶⁷ And it is evident that it is on these domains that the economic welfare of agrarian societies depends.

66. The discourse is necessarily tentative. Anthropologists might here come to the help of historians.

67. T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, op. cit., 41.

The granary is associated with auspiciousness, wellbeing and prosperity. The kind of prosperity a woman brings to her husband in marriage. The wife is called *ghorer Lakshmi*, the Lakshmi of the house, in parallel and analogy with goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and wealth. A menstruating woman cannot go into or near the granary, or the field or any other productive domains because her pollution would cause Lakshmi to leave and *alakshmi* (i.e. poverty, misfortune) would set in. In this respect Lakshmi comes to be the ideal of any Bengali woman, a concentration of womanly virtues.

As with the granary, a woman is associated with the cow as well. In a state of pollution she should not enter the cow shed lest the cow gets sick and dies. The cow is not considered sacred by Muslims, yet the cow is recognised as something very pure, very much related to the wellbeing of a household. Similarly, the river is very sensitive to the touch of women. Again, during menstruation a woman should not bathe in a river, or go on a boat trip. Kwaz, the *pir* of the river,⁶⁸ may be offended by such behaviour and cause the woman to drown or the boat to capsize. But Kwaz is also associated with fertility in that he is a manifestation of human sexuality. In a way Kwaz is both repulsed and attracted by women and their secretions.

There is a double kind of explanation as to why Kwaz would take down a menstruating woman. The first, domesticated interpretation is that menstrual blood would enrage him, pollute him causing thus the death of the woman by drowning. A second more likely interpretation is that Kwaz is indeed attracted by menstrual blood, life matter, which arouses his sexual passion and causes him to enjoy the woman in the depths of his waters. It will have been noticed that these associations do not seem to be properly Islamic or Hindu in character. Indeed they may date to a hoary past before the great religious traditions entered the country.

Indeed it appears also that such beliefs constituted the backbone of what in early medieval North-Eastern India was known as Tantra. Even a cursory look at basic tantric beliefs would hopefully bear this out. The starting point in Tantra is the opposition and complementarity between the male and female principles. Not only this, between the two principles the tantric adepts underlined the role of the latter one, the female principle being associated with fertility and thus with the land as well. In a way Tantra had associated human reproduction with the productive power of land, and, more importantly, with the generation of the cosmos as well.

In Tantra the human body and not philosophy is the main vehicle for spiritual achievement. In this respect another fundamental norm in Tantra is that the human body is a microcosm of the universe: *ja ache dehobhande, tai ache brohmande*.⁶⁹ Tantric *sadhona*

68. It has to be understood that while these beliefs appear to be quite widespread all over Bangladesh they present also regional differences. What I have here called Kwaz, the Guardian of the Waters, in Faridpur is known as Jalkauri or Jaldano. See W. Ahmed, "Folklore," in S. Islam ed., *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series* (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), vol. 7: 305.

69. N. Bhattacharjya, "Sakto Dhormo o Tontro," in R. Rain ed., *Banglar Dhormo o Dorshon* (Dhaka: Sangbed Prokasona, 2009), 43. The elements of tantric practice as listed above are basically taken from this article. For

(i.e. practice) consisted in manipulating the body in order to achieve visible results in the social and cosmic worlds. Magic in the forms of *mantra*, *mudra* and *mandala*⁷⁰ came to be a very important element of tantric practices.

But more than magic, which was basically the then technology of the sacred, Tantra and the transcommunal ethnic cultural practices I have so briefly described above reflected a very unitary conception of the universe. The natural, the social and the cosmic levels were only parallel and analogic domains experienced as one thing in the theory and practice of the human body conceived as microcosm. For our discourse, the sacred in its double significance of a sacred related to life and of a sacred related to death⁷¹ was then experienced as one and the same thing, as the two sides of the same coin. From the establishment of Buddhist polities onwards, the official *weltanschauung* changes. The sacred related to death is no longer seen as conducive to the prosperity of the new polities and thus marginalised to the periphery, geographical but also religious and political, of the same. From there it survived to the present day occupying the private domain, the space in which the new political economy of the state has confined it.

It is this same unitary experience of the world in all of its dimensions that may explain both tantric and modern threshold religious practices having to do with the use of liminal elements and substances. I have already mentioned above for instance the *pancatattva* theory of tantric *sadhona* in which a very conscious inversion of established religious and social norms is actuated. Similarly, we have seen in the assimilation of women to fertility, the nearly cultural obsession with women's menstruation. In the same way, we have noted Kwaz, the guardian of waters, himself, in his ambiguous role of being both turned away and attracted at the same time by that sexual blood.

Transcommunal ethnic culture, in which I would situate also Tantra as one of its historical templates, comes out of an inclusive vision in which positive and negative, male and female, purity and pollution, and any other sort of opposites in general are seen as parts of the same cosmological project. The human body becomes the receptacle of such cosmological unity, something which, despite the intervened polarisation of the cosmos, is maintained also in Hindu conceptualisation where "the body in its constrained state stands as a metaphor for the social system representing the containment of categories. Play on hair, nails, and extremities, enables one to use body symbolism to express both the normal containment of categories and a state of liminality."⁷²

Apparently it is on a world of liminality that threshold religious practices impinge. This world is first and foremost populated by ghosts, spirits and supernatural entities

the body as microcosm see also P. Das, *Sahajiya Cult of Bengal and Pancha Sakha Cult of Orissa* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1988), 112; *passim*.

70. *Mantras* are magic charms or spells proper; *mudras* are mystic signs and postures and *mandalas* are magic circles of divinities. See *Ibid.*, 27.

71. For this quite important distinction see V. Das, "The Uses of Liminality: Society and Cosmos in Hinduism," in *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, 1976, 10/2: 248.

72. *Ibid.*, 258.

in general. The latter are normally associated with evil and endowed with a mischievous nature, to say the least. Shonkheni, and Hostini,⁷³ are two spirits, often considered female,⁷⁴ which are intent in disrupting the life of humans. They are the cause of quarrels, fights and of disharmony in general. They may also cause illnesses to members of a family, particularly of children. These spirits are thought of as sitting on trees, with legs spread, hair unrestrained while eating lice. Their urine is said to stink and so do their bodies. When women cook, they put their feet into the cooking fire and sing. A particular power connected with these spirits is that they may assume any sort of form. In so doing they can marry and thus cause havoc to the life of an unaware human partner.

The world of Bengalis is also populated by myriads of anonymous ghosts called *bhut* and *petni* (i.e. male and female ghosts, respectively). They are generally considered evil spirits bent on harming humans, which they do by possessing them and causing them suffering of various kinds. As a result of *bhut* possession, children stop eating, getting thinner and thinner; adults may go crazy in particular times and situations; a husband or a wife may refuse conjugality, and so on and so forth. They are said to be fond of blood which they drink whenever they find it.

In this respect, Blanchet observes: “The menstruating girl should spend more of her time ‘inside.’ She is especially vulnerable to *bhut*, those spirits who attack brides as well as women who have just given birth. *Bhut* are very fond of fresh, bloody life matter.”⁷⁵ Unlike the two spirits seen above who like to eat stolen, uncooked fish, *bhut* but particularly *petni* like to eat fried food, especially fish. *Petni* again are depicted similarly to the Shonkheni class of spirits, as inhabiting trees with the very bad habit of urinating on people underneath. Needless to say, those who happened to undergo such an experience certainly got sick, with death as a possible outcome. *Petni* are also singled out because they cry emitting a nasal sound.

Rakkhushi is the name of another ghost inhabiting the land. My informer refers to it as to the *onnotomo* (i.e. most special) ghost. Like the other ghosts it is very fond of blood. Rakkhushi is active particularly at midday, when it can attack people and kill them by

73. In literature, Shonkheni and Hostini (*Sankhini* and *Hastini* in Sanskrit) are usually mentioned together with Poddhini and Citrini (*Padmini* and *Citrini*). They come from *kamasastra* tradition where they indicate four kinds of women and their characters. Thus *Sankhini* indicates a wild, disorderly and unrefined woman. *Hastini*, from elephant, indicates a fat, clumsy and vulgar woman. *Citrini* points instead to a woman who gives joy, light hearted and refined. *Padmini* similarly represents a beautiful, feminine and auspicious woman. How it happened that these four female paradigms came to be “spirits” is difficult to understand. However, as a matter of speculation, we may point to a link with the Buddhist Tantra in which the four characters are equated to goddesses, as paradigms of female energies. See A. Wayman, “Female Energy and Symbolism in the Buddhist Tantras,” in *History of Religions*, 1962, 2/1: 73–111.

74. The description from now on relies on what people, old ones usually, have relayed to me. As it may become clear below it is often difficult to make full sense of their narration even because the information given is fragmented and somehow enveloped in a kind of embarrassment. All the people I talked to were quick to say that these things no longer exist or people do not believe in them anymore. Bacchu Tarofdar helped me quite a lot in collecting this kind of information.

75. T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, op. cit., 39.

sucking their blood from behind their neck. It is usually depicted as living in two kinds of palm trees, the date palm and the “tal” palm.

Ele or Aleya are another class of ghosts. Apparently they originate from the death of small children. They usually live on marshy land and are quite active at night. They are deceitful and their speciality, as it were, consists of causing people to go round and round instead of going straight to their destination. From a distance they look like a big sphere of light.

Pecho-Paci seems to be another kind of well-known ghost. They attack small children and possess them with the clear intention of killing them. When a child cries continuously he or she is said to be possessed by Pecho-Paci. Kalobhut (black ghost) is said to be active during the celebration of *del puja* (i.e. Shiva’s celebration). To offset its destructive and disruptive power it must be fed with rice and fish. My informant refers to a lot of other ghosts, among which Shakchunni. He then adds that basically they all behave in the same way. They are particularly active at dawn, midday and evening and their targets are women and girls in particular. Pregnant women are to be especially aware of the menace of *bhut* and avoid as far as possible all those places believed to be infested by them. These may be certain trees, or places, crossroads, isolated corners of a house etc.

Often *bhut* are distinguishable because their feet are backwards. Shakchunni, however, appears to be a very well-known ghost. It apparently refers to the ghost of a married woman. “Shankchunni usually captures the wives of rich men so that they can lead a life of a married woman and can enjoy everything that a married woman usually does.”⁷⁶ They are said to live in mango trees.

Another quite ferocious and malicious *bhut* is Nishi. A female spirit, Nishi works at dead of night, as her name implies. She calls out the names of her victims using voices familiar to them. If one, listening to this voice goes out, he/she is killed. As it is said that Nishi can call only twice, one should reply to a call only when he/she hears it thrice.⁷⁷

Interestingly though somehow mysteriously, a person I have questioned relayed to me that in each man there are five ghosts: Shonkheni, Hostini, Citrini, Poddhini and Doitto (i.e. giant, demon). Indeed such an elaboration betrays a recent conceptualisation on the line of the *panchabhuta* of both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.⁷⁸ Yet, this elaboration may also betray its popular roots and thus envisage the kind of analogy we already noticed above between the human body as the microcosm of the universe.

The *bhut* and *petni* of the land have also been identified with the *jin* and *pari* (i.e. male and female ghosts respectively) of Muslim tradition. Interestingly, my informant referred to them as if they were just kinds of ghosts among the many in existence. No reference

76. “Ghosts in Bengali Culture,” in *Wikipedia* at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghosts_in_Bengali_culture>.

77. See W. Ahmed, “Folklore,” op. cit., 305.

78. The *panchabhuta* are the five gross elements of which the universe and man in it are made. These are: earth, water, fire, air and ether. Even here there might be some sort of overlapping with Buddhist tantric tradition. See footnote 73 above.

to their belonging to Muslim cosmology was inferred. Be that as it may, *pari* are said to be very beautiful and attracted by handsome boys whom they try to possess. They reside on branches of trees, are mischievous but less than the local variety. They harm if they are disturbed, otherwise they are often seen as neutral. Indeed, it appears that all these supernatural powers, *bhut*, *petni*, *jin* etc., are seen as neutral in the sense that they do not answer to any ethical principle. Accordingly, it might be tentatively said that they are amoral, their behaviour being just primordial and dictated by their inner instincts, passions and unrestrained nature.

Kabiraj is the traditional Bengali healer who can deal with *bhut* and spirits in general. He is knowledgeable in traditional herbal medicine and knows the relevant charms and paraphernalia necessary to cast out demons, spirits or ghosts. A Kabiraj performs *jharphuk*, which means to cast out a spirit or to cure an illness caused by a spirit.

Illnesses are often seen as the result of evil influences and thus can be cured only through *jharphuk*. In this way a Kabiraj is also an exorcist. The tools of his or her trade are the *mantras* or magic spells usually taken from religious sources, both Hindu and Muslim. Then again resins, fire, old worn out brooms, leather shoes, dry chilli, herbs, roots and particularly branches or leaves of the *nim gach*, the Margosa tree, are employed to perform an exorcism. *Tabij* or *maduli*, small cylindrical containers filled with herbs and/or with *gunomantra*, spells of one single word or sound, are then prepared by a Kabiraj to cure or protect a person from evil influences. These must be worn somewhere on the body by the interested person.

As it was said for spirits and ghosts in general, even the Kabiraj somehow partake of the same amoral nature of the entities they have to deal with by profession, a profession which is set in motion when one discovers in himself the existence of particular abilities or powers. A Kabiraj in fact can be employed to free a person or to enslave him or her. He/she can do it on payment of money or just make this happen because of the liminal nature Kabiraj share with supernatural entities.⁷⁹ *Ban mara* is what people fear most. This is a kind of sortilege thrown on somebody to cause them harm or even death.

To protect people from this sort of black magic Kabiraj prepare particular potions called *topla* or *potla*. These are a mixture of different ingredients among which the most common are pieces of leaf or branch from the *nimukho* tree (a plant without roots), some dry hair,⁸⁰ some goat dung, a three cornered piece of broken earthenware,⁸¹ the fruit of the fig tree all bonded together with a piece of plastic to form a sort of small ball worn somewhere on the body by means of a thread.

79. A person, known to carry out this kind of evil magic, when asked about the why of this activity of his, replied that he did not know but that on particular occasions he felt an irresistible impulse towards it. He then related that on seeing a bleeding wound *tar mukh chul khae*, i.e. his mouth feels ticklish, meaning that he must cast a sortilege!

80. In Bengali it is called *kharu chul*, i.e. the hair women find in the comb after having used it. It is usually dry and unoiled.

81. In Bengali it is called *tekona khola*.

In such a world populated by liminal creatures ready to cause havoc to humans, fear is nearly personified as another ghost. The Kabiraj is thus often called for to *jharphuk* or exorcize fear in people. The evil eye, or *kunajar* in Bengali, is what mothers try to protect their small children from. To accomplish this, they draw a black spot on the forehead of their children. This spot is supposed to distract the evil eye of people, which is nothing but envy and jealousy. Even this evil eye is somehow personified as fear is, and to be removed, it requires the services of an expert Kabiraj.

What in fact is surprising in all these practices is the actual absence of any positive participation of either victim or victimiser or healer in the processes in which each of the agents carries out a particular role. The whole scene unfolds as if in a mechanistic way. Magic is the real power at work here and that does not require the active participation or transformation of the players involved. Once again such religious practices are freed from any ethical weight. They are indeed just a kind of technology for the achievement of particular aims, usually good health in whatever way it is intended.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted the description of what threshold religion is by situating it in a wider historical context. Starting from the principle according to which religion is the product of history and politics, the paper has tried to contextualise the notion of threshold itself as politically and historically constructed, hinting at the fact that in the past what today is considered threshold might have occupied centre stage. The two metaphors of border-lines and centre-periphery have been utilised to make sense of the data in our hands. While the former metaphor has been seen as more useful to describe modern and contemporary situations, the latter has been perceived as fitting best the depiction of pre nation-state polities.

Right from its inception, the paper has posited the strict link between religion and polity, and religion and identity. The first section has thus enquired into the formative time of Bengal as we know it today. Vedism, Buddhism, Hinduism, their respective tantric technologies and Sufi Islam have been identified as the early medieval ground of a very complex religio-cultural conundrum in which centre and religious periphery are variously articulated according to socio-economic and political determinants.

The second section has attempted a reading of Bengal's modernity as increasingly dogged by religion seen as a marker of political identity. Islam in particular has been singled out as the productive paradigm for this identity from Akbar onwards, even though the transcommunal ethnic culture of Bengal as acknowledged by him has slowly but steadily been undergoing erosion in favour of a reformed Islamic orthodox identity, freed from any folkloristic accretion or Hindu elements. The modern attempt to build a monolithic Islam has then been contrasted with the multivocality of Bangladeshi Muslims and their Sufi tradition, the latter being another ambiguous experience of threshold religion.

The last section has finally attempted a phenomenological description of religious practices embedded in what we have called the transcommunal ethnic culture of Bangladesh. Displaced from the realm of the auspicious and the productive, ancient religious practices, responding to the situation of pre-state society, have been confined to the realm of the private, outside and beyond any political significance. Reflecting a unitary vision of the cosmos as amoral and mechanistic, such practices rely largely on magic as their religious technology proper.

Indeed, the paper has touched upon a number of important questions without exhausting their horizons. Yet it has also shown how so called threshold religious practices are deeply embedded in Bangladeshi consciousness, particularly of women: it is they who have to deal “with the spirits that have survived outside the threshold of Islam, outside the bound of ‘civilisation.’”⁸² And it is they who must come to terms with those same spirits. National politics and religious identity eventually boil down to nothing.

“When someone is ill, there is no difference between Muslim and Hindus. We only want to get well,”⁸³ said one Muslim woman. Apparently, this points to a very practical religiosity, devoid of doctrines but replete with magical practices, as long as they work. A question may arise. This pre-modern attitude might have spilled over into the great religious traditions in today’s Bangladesh where

the ethical question, which remains one of the most controversial themes in actual practice of religion, can be seen as being more and more divorced from rites and rituals. While ethics has become more social, it is increasingly becoming a social virtue rather than an individual virtue. In Bangladesh more and more the doctrinal and ritualistic aspects of religion tend to tone down the significance of individual virtuousness.⁸⁴

Perhaps this is the revenge of threshold religious practices against dominant great religious traditions. But this is a matter for further research.

82. T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*, op. cit., 31.

83. Ibid., 49.

84. K. A. M. Saaduddin, “Sociological Approach to Research on Religion: Bangladesh Perspectives,” in *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 2011, 8/1: 23.

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INDONESIA

MATTEO REBECCHI

The Mentawai Islands represent one of the best vantage-points from which to inquire about the Indonesian cultures, their inhabitants being one of the oldest and least contaminated ethnicities in the entire Archipelago. Most probably the Mentawaian is one of the first populations which, it is reckoned, settled in Indonesia in 3,000 BCE. Further migrations, which gave birth to the variety of ethnicities occupying the Archipelago at present, did not affect the Mentawai, which remained almost uncontaminated for thousands of years. Even in modern times these Islands remained unknown to traders and explorers, so that the first regular commercial contacts with Sumatra, and also the presence of the first Christian missionaries, started at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As in many other cultures in Asia and Indonesia, the traditional religion in Mentawai has much to do with the spirit world. Spirits are ubiquitous and affect virtually every aspect of human life. Everybody is familiar with spirits and souls. For example,

once a missionary, while teaching children at an elementary school in Mentawai, asked them where the angels were. Everybody answered as expected: “In heaven!” Then he continued: “And where are the devils?” All the children became excited and, pointing at some trees in the nearby woods, answered: “The devils are there, beyond that tree!” Thus, people not only believe in their existence, without a shadow of a doubt, but they are even familiar with them in everyday life. Sometimes one can even guess that people are talking about ghosts which they believe have appeared somewhere or about some strange phenomena, just by observing the excitement expressed in their way of speaking.

Given that the influence of the spirit world is so ubiquitous, many phenomena, activities and beliefs are about a realm which is close to religion, although to a certain extent, remains at its threshold because it does not directly involve the relationship with God. In this paper I will try to describe some aspects of the Mentawaian way of living which belong to this realm between the invisible and the visible worlds. After a description of the Mentawain spiritual world in general, I will specifically speak about Shamanism, healing rituals, black magic, divination, and I will give an example of celebration inside a clan.

Although the Mentawaian culture has attracted the attention of anthropologists and explorers in the past, nevertheless, literature on Mentawaian culture is somewhat lacking, especially with regard to recent studies. Therefore, this paper relies on research done by missionaries who have worked in the area and some other research carried out by professional anthropologists.

Finally, I would like to thank Siprianus Sokkot Ogo Sagoroujou for his help in discussing some topics related to this paper and for giving some additional information based on his personal experience as a Mentawaian, and also on the interviews he conducted in the village of Madobak in 2011.

ARAT SABULUNGAN

The traditional religion of the Mentawaians is called *arat sabulungan*. The word “*arat*” is commonly translated by the term “religion,” but in fact its meaning goes far beyond it. *Arat* means also customs, traditions, behavioural rules, and, of course, all that may concern spiritual and supernatural matters, namely the realm of spirits, ancestors and God.

This wide concept of “religion” depicts the spiritual attitude of the Mentawaians, for whom it is almost impossible to clearly separate spiritual beliefs from daily life and activities. The worlds of the “visible” and the “invisible” are interconnected and influence one another in a sort of fragile cosmic equilibrium which has to be safeguarded at any cost. Therefore it is not easy to distinguish what in Mentawai is confined to the realm of religion and what is not.

Arat sabulungan has also often been mistakenly translated as “religion of the leaves.” In fact, leaves are universally utilized in the rites and celebrations as ornaments, medicines, fetishes and as ritual tools. Nevertheless, the term *sabulungan* derives from the word *bulu*

(and not *buluk*, which means “leaf”), that is translated by the word “offering” and so the correct translation of *arat sabulunang* should be the “religion of the offerings.”¹

The presence of the spirits in Mentawai seems to be ubiquitous: they are in the skies, in rivers, in the trees, in the sea, but also in houses, in natural phenomena (a rainbow or a blue sky) and even inside common tools.² They inhabit any place and their influence is felt always, anytime, in daily life. Virtually everything has a soul or a spirit which affects human life for good or bad, so that the main concern of any Mentawaian is to get help from good spirits and to avoid negative influences from the evil ones. Therefore, the ideal situation which the Mentawaians long for is the preservation of harmony with the surrounding world in which everything has a soul, so as to obtain happiness, health and a long life.

Among the countless myths of Mentawaian traditions, there is not one about the creation of the world.³ The world (limited to Mentawai and Sumatra, since there is not a clear idea about what may exist beyond such boundaries) has always existed, thus the idea of creation *ex nihilo* does not concern the Mentawaians. For this reason, we cannot exactly identify the Creator Spirit within the Mentawaian *pantheon*.

Nevertheless, they acknowledge the existence of the highest Spirit, who may possibly be the creator of the universe—even if not openly professed—called *Ulaumanua*, which means “beyond the skies.” Actually, we can’t get much information about *Ulaumanua* for two reasons: first, he is too far away and does not really care about or ordinarily have relations with human beings; second, people do not easily talk about *Ulaumanua* since they fear him. For this reason the figure of *Ulaumanua* has been hidden for a long time and no trace of him is reported by the anthropologists who did their research in the area. Only during recent decades, the missionaries living in the Archipelago noticed that the Mentawaians are accustomed to call on or refer to *Ulaumanua* in particular circumstances.⁴

His influence is particularly related to life, since *Ulaumanua* defines the right time for death: when a person dies, people commonly say that he or she passed away that very day because “*Ulaumanua* wanted it.” He also punishes those who violate particular taboos. Likewise, according to Caissutti, *Ulaumanua* is called as witness during the ritual pledge of *tippu sasa*. During this rite, the one who swears cuts a piece of rattan, accepting the risk of dying, like the cut rattan, if he speaks falsely. Needless to say, those who swear untruthfully, inescapably die after a time.

At any rate, besides this scarce information, we must admit that we know very little about *Ulaumanua*. He is the highest Spirit, he is one, he dwells in a high place, beyond

1. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani* (Sikabalan: *Pro Manuscripto*), 13–4.

2. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore. La cultura delle isole Mentawai nell'impatto col mondo moderno* (Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 1980), 70; R. Shefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh: Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1991), 125.

3. R. Shefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh*, op. cit., 1–5.

4. So far only Tonino Caissutti, a Xaverian Missionary who spent many years in Siberut, has done research and reported on *Ulaumanua*. See T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 14, 18–9, 84.

the skies, and he is without a body. But he also rarely has interactions with humans: for instance he is never called on during the major celebrations, whilst other spirits are commonly invited to attend.⁵

He is prayed to sometimes before hunting so that he can provide good game. Unusual and unexpected fortunate events, such as the exceptionally easy capture of a deer, are also perceived as rare acts of benevolence of the Highest Spirit. He does not directly punish a person who has violated a particular taboo, but he entrusts evil spirits (often the spirits of the waters, the *Taikabagatkoat* or *Kameinan*, with the task of carrying out the sanction. Strictly speaking, as we have seen above, we cannot even affirm with certitude that he is the creator of the universe, since the Mentawaians do not speculate on the matter of creation.

In summary, we can say that although we know little about him, he is believed to be the highest Spirit in the Mentawaian spiritual world, and so the spiritual entity closest to the concept of God. *Ulaumanua* seems to be very close to the Cosmic and Celestial God as it is worshipped in many traditional cultures in Asia. If this is true, the understanding of *Ulaumanua* may reveal that Mentawaian beliefs cannot be merely defined as animistic or polytheistic, but as virtually monotheistic instead. On the other hand, as it can be seen in other traditions in Asia, the Cosmic God seems to be a *deus otiosus*,⁶ not caring about human beings and worldly matters. Other spirits have closer interactions with humans. *Ulaumanua* mostly intervenes when some major infringements have occurred. Needless to say, he is far from being conceived of as saviour, father or love.

OTHER SPIRITS

Besides *Ulaumanua*, many other spiritual entities populate the Mentawaian *pantheon*. The inhabitants of the sky are the so called *Taikamanua*, where *Tai* means “many,” and *manua* means “sky”. These spirits can appear to men in the shape of beautiful bodies. They are many and live together in villages located in the skies. According to the Mentawaian myths the *Taikamanua* can come to the world in the shape of human bodies and, at the same time, the humans too can climb up to them. They are male and female, and can even get married to humans, as is shown in the legend of *Simage-mage* and some other myths.⁷ It is the *Taikamanua* that, according to the story of *Sitakigagailau*, gave the powers and a beautiful body to the first shaman after he climbed up to the skies.⁸

5. For example, during the important ceremony of initiation of boys and girls (*eneget*), *Ulaumanua* is never invoked, prayed to or praised. F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell'ambito dell'iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*. Tesi di Licenza in Liturgia (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Liturgico, 1978).

6. M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 9.

7. B. Spina, *Mitos dan Legenda Suku Mentawai* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1981), 68-71; 344-46; 63-5; 340-41.

8. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 89-94; B. Spina, *Mitos dan Legenda Suku Mentawai*, op. cit., 72-80; 347-52.

The fact that for many years *Ulaumanua* had been unknown to missionaries and anthropologists misled translators when they tried to translate the word “God.” The first protestant missionaries, possibly pushed by the need to translate the prayer “Our Father,” found in *Taikamanua* the closest spiritual entity to the Christian God, (“Our Father Who art in heaven”).

Being unaware of the existence of *Ulaumanua* as the highest Spirit, who is one and ruler of human life, dwelling not in the skies, but even beyond them, they mistakenly picked up the word *Taikamanua* and made of it the “official” name of God. Ever since it is *Taikamanua* and not *Ulamuanua* that is the name given to God both in Catholic and Protestant churches and some attempts to correct the mistake and to persuade people to use the right name of God have been so far rather unsuccessful.⁹

The spirits living on the ground are called *Taikapolak*, whilst those underground are the *Taikabaga*. According to some Mentawaiian myths, one of the *Taikabaga* was a powerful *kerei* (shaman) whose brothers attempted to kill him by burying him under the main pillar of a house under construction. Ever since, his spirit takes revenge on them by shaking the ground and producing earthquakes.¹⁰

The spirits of the sea are called *Taikabagatkoat*, whilst the spirit dwelling in the river is the *Kameinan*. The Mentawaians are really afraid of them because they are considered to be evil spirits. It is believed that the punishments inflicted by *Ulaumanua* are entrusted to and carried out by them.¹¹

The *Taikaleleu* are the spirits that inhabit hills and the woods. The animals of the jungle belong to them, and so people have to pray and give offerings to the *Taikaleleu* before hunting. It is believed that the deer are the *Taikaleleu*’s pigs, whilst the monkeys represent the chickens fed by the same spirits. The result in hunting depends on the generosity of the *Taikaleleu* who grant their animals to the hunters. Therefore, a successful hunt does not strictly depend on human ability, but on the good will of the spirits who allow the humans to capture their animals. It is for the same reason that skulls of pigs, monkeys and deer are well conserved under the roof of the *uma* (house of the clan), so as to persuade the animals’ spirits that it is a good choice to stay in the house and willingly surrender to the hunters.

The spirits living in the trees are called *Taikabagat loina*. People ask permission and apologize to them before cutting trees.

The list of the spirits could be much longer, since they are virtually present everywhere. Moreover, the classification and the names given to groups of spirits can differ according to the areas and local traditions. At any rate, their influence on human life is felt very strongly. Usually they can help or at least have a neutral attitude towards humans,

9. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 21.

10. B. Spina, *Mitos dan Legenda Suku Mentawai*, op. cit., 267–78; 483–89.

11. Interview with Siprianus Sagoroujou.

but it is very important not to offend them and to ask permission when human activities can affect their realm.

Caissutti states that all these spirits, except *Ulaumanua*, are in fact souls of the dead, now self-subsistent, having been separated from their corpses. Such an interpretation can fit some categories of spirits,¹² whilst in some other cases it seems to be somewhat inaccurate. For instance, some of the sea spirits are believed to have originated from human souls. But on the other hand, the myth of creation of men and women, speaks of a previous cosmic war between good and evil spirits. The humans unexpectedly came out from a bamboo tree cut by an evil spirit who was about to make a weapon of it. This legend seems to indicate therefore, that, according to the Mentawaiian tradition, at least some of the spirits are supposed to be pre-existing human beings.¹³

ANCESTORS

As we have seen before, most of the spirits that populate the Mentawaiian spiritual world are in fact the souls of the departed. The Mentawaians believe that the vital spirit (*ketcat*) does not die at the moment of physical death. It leaves the corpse and joins the members of its clan who have already passed away. They gather and dwell in a particular place called *laggai sabeu*, which means “big village;” its physical location is near each village, often situated on a hill well known to everybody.

Moreover, according to the traditional lifestyle, the Mentawaians do not live together in a real village, but separately as single families living in small houses spread along the rivers; and they only periodically gather as members of the same big family in the main clan house (*uma*). Likewise, the *laggai sabeu* is not really a village in the sense of a classical cluster of houses located in the same territory, but an ensemble of the *uma* which in fact are separate from one another.

After death the departed goes to his or her *uma* and rejoins the relatives. The ancestors' life style is not much different from that of the living. They have relationships with other clans and pay visits to other *uma*. They live a happy life and cannot get sick or die anymore. It seems that death does not represent a substantial change for the souls. Death is seen as a passage to a new place, where life conditions are only partially different from before, rather than a real process of purification of the soul towards perfection. Likewise, life in the *laggai sabeu* is not depicted as full “beatitude” and paradisiacal happiness. At the same time, there is not even the idea of a sort of *visio beatifica*, because *Ulaumanua* is

12. According to a myth, at the beginning people did not die. When the humans realized that they were growing too fast in number to share the same land, they split into two groups. After that they cursed one another by the use of black magic and became invisible to each other. The curse created the division between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, both of which basically share the same nature, but live in two separate and at the same time interlaced worlds. See S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 76.

13. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiiani*, op. cit., 17–8. On the myth of man, creation of man and woman, see S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 85–6.

so distant and uncaring that, even in “heaven,” human souls are not allowed to reach his throne and enjoy communion with him.

The ancestors are called *saukkui* which means “the fathers” or “the elders.”¹⁴ They still have relationships with and take care of the members of their clan. Thus they are invited to attend the main celebrations as welcome guests since they are believed to help the clan in their needs. In the *uma* (the clan’s house) there is the “ladder of the spirits” by which they can come in and go out freely.

The ancestors want offerings, which consist of necklaces, fishing nets, clothes, machetes, bows, spears, tobacco, coconuts, taro, eggs, and especially some pieces of pork or chicken liver. After the *buluakanen* (offering) has been given to them, everything goes back to the owner, and people attending the celebration eat the food previously given to the ancestors. A mouthful of food is always thrown behind the house (the traditional houses are elevated on piles) by the father to honor the ancestors before starting the meal.

The relationship with the ancestors is a mix of veneration, trust and fear. The Mentawaians invite them to attend the main celebrations, and offer food and ornaments to them as a sign of respect; they also sing and dance to honour and amuse their departed. The dance (*sipulajo*) is performed in order to entertain both humans and spirits. For this reason the dancer can invite the ancestors to attend the ceremony and when the dance stops, some of those present can fall into a trance, which signals that the spirits have already arrived.

The length of the ancestors’ presence at the celebration can vary according to the local tradition: in Siberut their visit is very short, whilst in the Rereket area the spirits can attend the celebration for an entire week. At the end of the celebration, all the ancestors are invited to go back to the *laggai sabeu*. The *kerei* (shamans) perform rituals to invite them to leave the house where the celebration has taken place and, at the moment of the farewell, the *kerei*, who are able to see the souls of the deceased, start crying desperately at the vision of their relatives leaving their company.¹⁵

At the same time, the farewell rituals are meant to convince the *simagere* (the vital spirits) of the living to let the ancestors go. In fact, the *simagere* are so happy to be together with their ancestors that they can hardly be kept from following them to the *laggai sabeu* at the end of the celebrations. But this can be very dangerous, because a *simagere* that leaves its body for too long may induce diseases or even death.

Finally, some of the ancestors called *sabulungan* can help the *kerei* (shaman) in casting the evil spirits away. Nevertheless, although they help the shaman, they never take possession of his body as in other shamanic traditions.

As we are going to see in some depth further on, the Mentawaiian Shamanism does not know the phenomenon of possession or embodiment of the spirit in the shaman’s body:

14. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 16.

15. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 80–1.

the *kerei* reports what he sees and hears from the spirits, especially during his celestial trips in the ecstatic experiences of trance.

SANITU

The spirits of the dead are not only good spirits. Some of them can become evil spirits, the so called *sanitu*. They are feared because they can induce diseases and even death. Generally, the *sanitu* are the spirits of those dead people who died because of the *kamateijat sikatai* ("bad death") namely death by accident or violence, such as homicide, drowning, falling down from a tree, being crushed by a falling tree, death because of childbirth, suicide, etc.

The souls (*ketcat*) of the deceased who died in such ways, after separating from their corpses and being transformed into self-subsistent spirits, become unhappy and angry. They will not reach the *laggai sabeu*, the village where the other ancestors' souls gather in happiness for eternity. The *sanitu* are destined to live alone in the place where they died. Very often, therefore, they are simply given the name of their death place.

These unhappy souls are envious of humans because of the condition they experience after death and then they can attack people who enter their territory or attempt to trap their vital spirits. For this reason, those people who are compelled to go through the *sanitu*'s territory or have work to do there, need to make offerings to calm the anger of the *sanitu*.

The *sanitu* inhabit the waters (sea and rivers) and the woods, and are more likely to be seen at night, and can also dwell in houses. Their presence can be felt (strange smells), heard (terrifying or strange noises), or even seen. In this case, they can assume the shape of animals (dogs, cats, birds, monkeys or deer) or human beings. Their appearance is varied, but generally terrifying and similar to that of the classical ghost: with long hair, red eyes, and other similar attributes.¹⁶

If we try to investigate the cause of the *kamateijat sikatai* (evil death), we will possibly be disappointed. The Mentawaians only know that they must avoid this unlucky death as far as possible, trying to avert its bad consequences for eternity, but they do not know precisely what may bring about such a bad destiny.

Is it *Ulaumanua* who punishes the person because of his sins? Is bad behaviour in life punished by the *kamateijat sikatai*? The Mentawaians are not able to answer; maybe yes, maybe no. In fact the traditional concept of afterlife differs somewhat from the eschatology conceived by other religious traditions, like Christianity or Islam. They only know that life after death simply results in two possibilities: gathering again with the members of the same family (the ancestors living in the *laggai sabeu*) or becoming a *sanitu*. Besides,

16. Some examples of *sanitu* can be found in T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 19–21. A more complete classification of them is compiled by Daniele Cambielli. See D. Cambielli, *Sanitu Mentawai* (Sikabalu: Pro Manuscripto, 1977).

they tend not to believe that the bad death could be the consequence of immorality, sin, or bad behaviour in life. So the *kamateijat sikatai* takes place for the most part beyond human control, and virtually even a good person could become a *sanitu*. Thus, we can draw the conclusion that for the Mentawaians the soul's destiny, that is, living in the happiness of the ancestors' village or, on the contrary, becoming a *sanitu*, depends only on the way a person concretely dies and not really on his or her moral behaviour in life.¹⁷

Finally, it is interesting to note the conclusion drawn by Caissutti who says that, due to its human origin, it seems inappropriate to translate the word "devil" by the Mentawaian "*sanitu*" as in fact has been done so far in liturgical books.

BAJOU AND KINA

Everything has the *bajou*, which is something not easily definable. The Mentawaians themselves do not know how to clearly describe the *bajou*, which is a sort of radiation or energy that emanates from all objects and bodies. In itself the *bajou* is neutral and does not directly damage nor badly affect people.

Nevertheless everybody knows that they must be careful in dealing with the *bajou*, because the encounter of two entities whose *bajou* differs in intensity can become fatal for the weaker one. For this reason, at the beginning of ceremonies the shamans perform rituals in order to cool down the *bajou* in the house where the celebration is held, so as to protect the guests from diseases. Sometimes the *bajou* is related to heat and fever or, conversely, to cold. An old and experienced *kerei* normally has a stronger *bajou* than a young one, and this is made evident by the temperature of his hands which are cooler than those of the younger *kerei*. The *bajou* emanates also from objects and tools, so that, for example, a not so sharp machete is considered to have a weak *bajou*.

One who encounters a stronger *bajou* can fall sick or even die: his or her *simagere* (vital spirit) becomes terrified at the vision of the powerful *bajou* (which is invisible to human eyes) and then runs away, leaving the body, in its search for shelter at the *laggai sabeu*, with its ancestors. If the *simagere* does not go back to its body within a short time, the consequences can be tragic. Similarly, a tool that encounters a stronger *bajou* can be damaged or even destroyed.

People make use of amulets (*gaut*) as protective tools against the *bajou*'s bad influence. These amulets are made of special leaves of the *ailleppet* (which means "refreshing") plant, roots and other objects, which are folded in a small piece of cloth and hung on a necklace. Likewise, the ornaments on the quiver, made of monkey or deer hair, have the power to restrain the spirits of the animals living in the jungle from running away.

Besides the *bajou*, everything has its own *kina*. Caissutti claims to have done research in several areas in Siberut, investigating the meaning of this *kina*, and he draws the

17. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 16–7; some information on this topic was collected by Siprianus Sagoroujou in his interview with Donatus in Madobak, June 21–22, 2011.

conclusion that the *kina* is comparable to the philosophical concept of “essence.” Thus, everything has its own *kina*, both in the material and in the spiritual world and even *Ulaumanua* has his own *kina*: during the ritual of *tippu sasa* (swearing), *Ulaumanua* is called as witness by invoking “*kina Ulau*.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the common use of the term *kina* seems to overlap with the concept of *bajou*, so that *kina* is often understood as the energy that radiates from an object.

HUMAN SOULS

The Mentawaians have no doubt about the existence of the immortal soul which survives after death. This soul is called the *ketcat*, and it always accompanies the living body. Some believe that the *ketcat* dwells inside the human body, whilst some others think that this soul just follows the body like a shadow. In any case, the *ketcat* does not separate from the body as long as the body is still alive. After death, the *ketcat* leaves the tomb and goes to the *laggai sabeu* to gather with the other departed members of the clan. As we have seen above, if the person has died of a “bad death,” the *ketcat* becomes a *sanitu* (evil spirit).

Every human being has also his or her own “vital spirit,” the so called *simagere*. This second soul is located inside the human body, but has the characteristic of freely leaving the body through the fontanelle of the head (which in Mentawaiian is also called *simagere*). It is this vital spirit which wanders outside its body during the time of dreaming, roams around, and meets other spirits, undergoing different sorts of experiences. Then, everything the *simagere* has experienced during the dreams is taken back to the body at the time of awakening, and it is for this reason that one wakes up in a good or a bad mood. A bad psychic condition is also caused by bad experiences which have occurred to the *simagere*, especially at night.

Moreover, the health status of the human body is strictly related to the condition and location of the *simagere*, which, as we have already seen, can easily come and go through the fontanelle of the head. The *simagere* is also curious and longs for new experiences. For this reason it likes wandering around and often meets other spiritual entities.

However, when the *simagere* comes across a strong *bajou* or meets with some *sanitu*, it gets terrified and runs away, seeking asylum among its ancestors in the *laggai sabeu* and, if the *simagere* does not go back soon to its own body, then the person gets sick. On the occasion of the initiation rituals of the *eneget*, the members of the clan pray the *simagere* to be willing to dwell in the house: they try to convince the *simagere* that they will be happy in the *uma*, being the vital spirits of rich people, who possess lots of pigs and chickens.

Likewise, the roofs of the Mentawaiian houses are adorned with simple statues made of wood representing birds, snakes, and nowadays, also helicopters, airplanes, and ships. These simple artefacts called *uma' simagere* (birds of the spirits) are the toys for the *sim-*

18. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 14.

agere so that they can play and enjoy the place, and not be tempted to leave the *uma*. Conversely, making the *simagere* unhappy can have tragic consequences. Therefore, parents try to avoid displeasing their children because they believe that if the child cries, the *simagere* becomes unhappy and is likely to leave the child's body. It is for this reason that generally the children in Mentawai are spoiled and treated like little kings.

Finally, just as the *simagere* is allured by good food and flowers, it can be easily trapped through simple tricks in order to procure diseases by means of black magic.

Besides the *ketcac* and the *simagere*, the final spiritual human component is the so called *pitto*, which is the spirit that emanates from the decomposing flesh of a corpse in the tomb. This spirit is feared as the possible cause of sickness and death, and therefore the Mentawaians are afraid of the cemetery. If the *pitto* comes across a wandering *simagere* it can terrify the vital spirit, which runs away, inducing sickness.

SHAMANISM

One of the most characteristic aspects of Mentawaian culture is the figure of the *kerei*, namely the shaman or medicine man.¹⁹ Coronese enumerates some essential components of Shamanism in general. It is enough to mention only some of them, namely the division between the human and visible realm and the spirit world that constantly intervenes in the visible world; and the crises, either at individual or collective level, which are due to the influence of the spirit world on the human one. The recognition of the causes of these crises and the reestablishment of equilibrium between visible and invisible worlds are entrusted to the shaman, who operates through the ecstatic vision.²⁰

Generally speaking, Shamanism must be divided in two kinds: inspirational and non-inspirational.²¹ The former refers to the phenomenon of the possession performed by the spirit, so that it is the spirit that works, speaks, predicts the future, cures, and frees from bad influences, by hosting the shamanic body. The latter, refers to the kind of shaman that Loeb labels as a "seer." In this case, the shaman is able to establish relationships with the spirits which guide and help him in his healing work, although the spirits do not inhabit the shaman's body or possess it: they only speak and give guidance to him during the ecstatic experiences. The non-inspirational Shamanism makes use also of tutelary spirits which help the shaman in his work.

19. Information on shamanism in Mentawai can be found in S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 105–17; T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 122–26; R. Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh*, op. cit., 112; one of the main works on Mentawaian Shamanism is E. M. Loeb, "Shaman and Seer," in *American Anthropologist*, 1929/31. It is indeed an old study, since it reports on the trips made by the anthropologist to Mentawai in the 1920s, but it still represents one of the main sources on shamanism in the area. This work was noted by Eliade in describing the Mentawaian shamans in his major work on the theme of Shamanism. See M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, op. cit.

20. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 106.

21. See E. M. Loeb, "Shaman and Seer," op. cit., 1929, 31: 60–1; M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, op. cit., 349.

Both kinds of Shamanism are rarely present in the same area, but, as a matter of fact, Indonesia is the exception. In his important work on Shamanism in Mentawai, Loeb asserts:

In every primitive culture area except Indonesia, Shamanism is of the inspired or non-inspired type. In Indonesia alone we find both types of shamans. This is probably due to the fact that in Indonesia very primitive culture exists almost side by side with cultures overlaid with Hinduism and Mohammedanism. Thus, in Sumatra the shaman is always, as far as I have information, of the inspired type, in the islands west of Sumatra [that is the Mentawai], of the non-inspired type, or, as I have labelled it, the seer.²²

Loeb believes that the non-inspirational Shamanism, as it is found in Mentawai, represents the most archaic form of Shamanism that, in other places, has been transformed and therefore has evolved into the inspirational form which, as a matter of fact, has become widespread. This transformation has been driven by migrations and cultural contaminations: "The phenomenon of inspired Shamanism arose once, in one spot, and then was diffused throughout the world, escaping only the marginal or more primitive peoples."²³

The *kerei* in Mentawai are mostly men, but in some cases, women also are recipients of the same vocation. Besides, the person who is called does not usually decide by himself to become a *kerei*, although in some cases it is possible that after feeling the call it is the candidate himself who asks to be initiated and introduced to the art of curing.

At any rate, most of the candidates are called through the experience of a particular disease which represents the sign of vocation to Shamanism, and that disease can be cured only if the candidate agrees to become a shaman. Of course, not everybody is ready and willing to assume such a vocation, especially because being a medicine man bears some consequences, such as some additional taboos. But there is no choice: if one refuses to become a *kerei*, he probably dies.

Once one is called to the function of curing, he or she must undergo the process of initiation under the guidance of an experienced shaman. The candidate goes into the jungle with his master, seeking for magical herbs in order to make a *gaut*, the talisman. The master cleans the body of his disciple by wiping it with the herbs, which are finally thrown in the river, so to cast away evil influences.

After that the master seeks other herbs in order to make a new talisman which will be used to contact the tutelary spirits. Later, the master washes the hair of his disciple before going once again into the woods to gather those herbs which can give "eyes which can see" to the candidate. Those new eyes will enable the apprentice to see and talk to the spirits.

22. Ibid., 62.

23. Ibid., 64. Loeb says also that "No one stock of people ever has both types of Shamanism, and that the inspirational type, once introduced, will exterminate the typical non-inspirational variety." Ibid., 61.

At this point, the candidate is accompanied to his master's house, where the spirits are invited to enter a recipient made of a coconut shell. Once again the master asks the spirits to give his disciple "clear eyes that can see" the spirits. Then he wipes the eyes of the apprentice with the herbs.

After these preparatory rituals, the two sit, one in front of the other, for three days and three nights, singing and ringing bells, and neither of them is allowed to sleep. This ritual is considered to be finished when the candidate receives the "clear eyes." Only then, the two go back to the jungle seeking new herbs which have the power of making the bodies of the spirits beautiful, so that the spirits will not be ashamed to introduce themselves to the candidate. At this point, if no spirit appears to the apprentice, the two go back seeking new herbs. If after seven days, the spirits are still not visible to the candidate, then the whole process of initiation must be performed again from the beginning.

Once the initiation has succeeded, the candidate receives the tools for the work of healing. The master prays over the candidate, asking that the young *kerei* receive cold hands, which are a sign of healing powers, eyes able to see the spirits, and ears able to hear their voices. The master prays that the magical power received by his disciple can give him long life and the ability to cure the sick. Then the master blindfolds the candidate, as a sign that people will not be able to see the spirits as the *kerei* does when he cures.

Then, the eyes of the candidate are rubbed with ginger juice, whilst the master prays over his disciple, asking that he be given eyes able to see what is invisible to other people. The master blows through a bamboo stick into the ears of the young *kerei*, praying that he will be given the ability to hear the voices of the spirits. Then the disciple is instructed in those rituals and healing techniques which are essential for his future work as a *kerei*.

So the apprentice must learn about, and become skilled in curing diseases, beseeching the spirits of the *bakkat katsaila* (the main fetish of the house), gathering and choosing the herbs in the woods in order to make medicines, calling the souls (*sogai simagere*), making diagnoses, casting away the evil influences of the *bajou* and *pitto*, or neutralizing the curses. He must also learn the dances, the myths and the secret language of the *kerei*.²⁴

The dances of the *kerei* tell the stories of the animals of the forest. These dances are meant to amuse people, but they are enjoyable for the spirits too. It is for this reason that dances are performed for the purpose of gathering the spirits. The *uma*, the big house of the clan, has a particular location where the floor is made of boards without nails, so that the rhythmic dance of the shamans can produce the typical sound of feet hitting the wood.

The dances are accompanied by the rhythm of drums (*kateuba*) and other percussion instruments (usually a glass bottle hit by a metal stick in order to keep the beat). These dances induce the phenomenon of trance which represents the clear signal that the shamans have entered the world of the spirits and established communication with them.

24. E. M. Loeb, "Shaman and Seer," op. cit., 71; M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, op. cit. 96.

When the communication with the supernatural realm is already established, the *kerei* receive the extraordinary ability to walk on burning coals without being burned. The ancestors are believed to protect the *kerei* and to prevent them from being harmed.²⁵

The main task of the “seer” in Mentawai is to cure the sick, so that we can basically define the *kerei* as a medicine man. In the Mentawaian mentality, almost any disease occurs when the equilibrium between spiritual entities and the physical body is somehow altered. As long as the *simagere* (the vital spirit), remains in the body or close to it, the person will be in good health, both physically and psychologically, but when the *simagere* leaves the body for too long the person gets sick. Thereby, the master of the spirit, the *kerei*, must be called to re-establish the broken equilibrium, and restore health.

DISEASE AND HEALING RITUAL

If not serious, the disease can be cured by means of ordinary medicines (*laggek*) obtained by herbs and roots prepared by an experienced member of the family. But in the case of a serious illness, common medicines do not suffice anymore, and therefore the medicine man’s intervention is necessary.²⁶ The therapeutic ritual (*punen pabetei*)²⁷ starts with the interrogation of the spirits which can give information to the *kerei* on the cause of the disease.

This preliminary investigation is performed in the house of the sick person at the *buluat* (the place of offerings) or at *bakkat katsaila* (the main fetish), whilst in some places the ancestors can be asked directly. In some cases, the *kerei* questions the soul of the sick person which knows precisely what the source of disease is. Caissutti enumerates some possible causes of sickness, and all of them are of a spiritual nature. It could be that the wandering *simagere* meets with an ancestor, follows him to the peaceful *laggai sabeu*, and does not return to its body. Or one could come across something or someone that has a stronger *bajou* (energy), so that his *simagere* becomes terrified and runs away.

The same thing happens when someone meets a *sanitu*, namely an evil spirit. But one could get sick because of other reasons: during dreams, if the wandering soul chooses not to return to the sleeping body; because of excess of fatigue which makes the *simagere* unhappy; because of maltreatment of children; because of the curse that entraps the vital spirit; because of the violation of taboos.²⁸

It is interesting to note that, according to the cause there will be a suitable cure. This means that the diagnostic process in Mentawai has more of an etiological than a symptomatic approach: the *kerei* must be able to neutralize the causes of the illness, instead of concentrating on its symptoms.

25. R. Shefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh*, op. cit., 112.

26. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 82.

27. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 113.

28. T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 82–4.

After the preliminary steps aimed at identifying the reasons of infirmity, the *kerei* goes to the woods to gather the opportune herbs, leaves, roots and tubers, in order to prepare the medicine. While searching, the *kerei* sings prayers, asking where the herbs he is looking for are located. Needless to say, the plants answer the medicine man's petitions.

Once having collected the raw material, the *kerei* grinds it together in order to prepare the medicine, but before giving it to the sick person, he must offer a victim: young people (not yet married, because it is taboo) slaughter a chicken whose entrails are investigated for divination, whilst part of the liver and some pieces of meat are offered to the spirit which has caused the illness (*sipusasala*). Then, the *kerei* rubs the sick body with the herbs and prays, and after that he invokes a blessing on the watery medicine conserved in a bamboo stick and pours it on the body. The *kerei* begs the medicine to purify and free the body from evil influences and illness.

During the *punen pabetei* (healing ceremony) the vital spirit of the sick person is called back. In normal contexts anybody has the power to call the souls (*sogai simagere*): for instance, everybody calls on his *simagere* before leaving a village assuring that it will follow him home.²⁹ But in the healing ritual context this task is performed only by the *kerei*. We must remember that the spirits, and therefore also the *simagere*, stay in a place if they find the environment comfortable enough. It is for this reason that the Mentawaians do whatever is possible so that the *simagere* feels at home and enjoys staying close to its own body.

Likewise, people have to take some precautions: any work must be done slowly (*moile-moile*); people avoid arguing or forcing others to do something; parents try not to upset their children. And since the spirits, like human beings, enjoy flowers, songs and dances, the lost souls are called back by means of beautiful ornaments and the joyful atmosphere of the feast, where the *kerei* sings and performs dances depicting the stories of animals of the jungle, all done in order to amuse and attract back the roaming souls. It is the cheerful atmosphere that will convince the *simagere* to go back home and not leave again.³⁰

The shaman has also the function of cleaning the house from evil influences which can produce diseases in the family. One of these rituals is called *masituituiake si pitto'*, which means sending back the *pitto'* (spirit of decomposing bodies). The spirits coming from the tombs are accustomed to nestle in the houses, bothering and harming the living. It is the *kerei* who is able to discover their shelters and cast them out. The medicine man gently invites them to leave the house, pronouncing some mantras: "Please *pitto'* go back to your place; here is some food for you." Then a small pig is offered to the spirits in order to free the house from them.³¹

Some particular plants are used as talismans into which the *kerei* gathers the evil spirits before throwing them far from the village. The fear of the *pitto'* clearly appears

29. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 113.

30. R. Shefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh*, op. cit., 126–27.

31. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 117.

during funerals. In fact, it is still common to see people breaking little sticks of wood to be disseminated along the way back home, after the burial ceremony at the cemetery. This simple act is meant to damage the road so that the *pitto*' will not be able to find its way to the village.

BLACK MAGIC

As we have already seen, the *kerei* is able to control spiritual powers in order to cure the sick, making use of mantras, prayers, talismans, medicines, songs, and dances. Nevertheless, the dominion over spiritual powers can also have negative outcomes, if performed with the aim of damaging other people. This is the case of black magic, the so called *tae*, which is still practiced in Mentawai.

The misuse of the power over the spirit world is not necessarily the realm of the *kerei* who, basically, are faithful to their vocation to work for the good of people. Concerning this matter, Coronese gives a positive evaluation of the *kerei*'s work.³² It is true that some *kerei* can be tempted to damage people, making use of their powers for sorcery, but the medicine men have, in general, an honoured and esteemed position in the Mentawaiian society.

The *kerei* are the traditional doctors. Given the fact that in several areas, up to the present day, modern medicine is still not available because of lack of governmental and non-governmental medical structures, the *kerei* are still the only concrete chance to cure infirmities. It is for this reason that, to a certain extent, the Catholic missionaries have accepted positively, or at least tolerated and not banned their work, diverging from the approach of the Protestants who have perceived Shamanism in general negatively, since the beginning of their presence in the area.

The sorcerer in Mentawai is called *panae* (the one who performs *tae*). As we have seen above, he is not commonly a *kerei*, but an expert who is able to deal with the spirit world, and with poisons and fetishes. Usually he or she is a person who starts to learn and practice sorcery because of hatred, revenge or envy. The candidate has to be trained by another experienced sorcerer and then starts practicing. Nevertheless, once learned, black magic sticks to the person as a permanent curse. The sorcerer cannot stop practicing black magic anymore: from time to time he needs a victim to damage, whilst if he wants to give up practicing *tae*, his magical powers will fight against him, even to the point of killing him.

The reasons for making use of the sorcerer are manifold: envy, hatred, vengeance, reciprocating an offence, or neutralizing a curse. Sometimes, silly things can induce people to make use of *tae*, for example, being disappointed at not having been given some tobacco. So the recourse to *tae* is believed to be rather frequent. Moreover, people too easily draw the conclusion that they have fallen victim to the evil eye, whatever bad event

32. Ibid., 123–24.

affects the members of their family, creating a suspicious atmosphere which negatively affects the relationships inside the village.

The sorcery starts by taking something which belongs to the victim, such as leftover food, a strand of hair, a handful of soil from the place where he had sat, or a piece of cloth... Then the sorcerer makes an agreement with the *sanitu* by giving a chicken, a piece of cloth, tobacco, or a necklace. The offering to the evil spirit is given while the sorcerer pronounces the curse and cuts the victim's belongings into pieces. Then the object is burned, and during the following days the victim of the evil eye gets sick or dies.

If someone suffers from a persistent disease which is not curable by the *kerei's* rituals, then people start suspecting that it must be because of *tae*. In this case people have recourse to the egg proof. An egg is positioned in the middle of a plate and asked to answer questions. If the cause of infirmity is the *tae*, then the egg will stand still on the plate. Once it has become clear that the disease is produced by the evil eye, it is necessary to perform a ritual called *rau* (bath) in order to clean the sick person. A *kerei*, or another experienced person, is called on for this ritual, in which he prays, imposes his hands on the head, hands and feet, and rubs the sick body with herbs which are believed to have special powers.

Sometimes, the recovery of the sick is not enough to calm the spirit of revenge, and therefore the victim's relatives ask the healer to return the bad influence to the sender. For this purpose it is necessary to make a fetish composed of a poisonous snake (called *sasasala*), some snake teeth, scorpions, scolopendras, poisonous arrowheads, and other harmful materials. Therefore people go to the woods to call on the souls of the suspected authors of the *tae*, often with the help of a *kerei*.

Once the souls have arrived, the innocent ones force the guilty spirit to go inside a wrap containing the fetish. It is the *kerei* who knows when the culpable soul has been trapped in the fetish. At this point the spell can be neutralized or sent back to its origin and, if so, the punishment can be of two kinds: the fetish is burned, and then the culpable one will die; otherwise the fetish is positioned over the fireplace where the fish is usually smoked: the guilty person will get a persistent fever as long as the fetish remains over the fire. Therefore, if someone suffers from such a fever, he will be asked whether it is he who ordered the *tae*. If he feels that he is not guilty, he lets the fetish be burned: it will be the guilty one who dies and people will know definitely who was behind the evil eye. At this point it will be necessary to beseech the dead soul not to take revenge on the victim's relatives.³³

Other versions of the *tae* are also possible. Things belonging to the victim can be taken and offered in sacrifice. The sorcerer lifts up the victim's belongings in the air and hits them with poisonous herbs, pronouncing the curse and begging the help of evil spirits. In other cases, the victim's belongings are thrown in a swamp so as to putrefy, or on a tree

33. Coronese reports this version of the *tae* as related to him by Caissutti. See S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit. 119–23.

top or behind the fireplace to burn, causing fever. If the victim is a woman suspected of adultery, some pieces of her clothes are placed in a bamboo stick which is positioned over the fire and the curse is pronounced, so that her womb will dry like the clothes over the fire. Likewise, if she is already pregnant, fetishes will be made in order to kill the baby. In other cases, the victim's objects are put into a bamboo stick and thrown in the river and left to drift: the members of the victim's family are cursed to die (drift) like the bamboo.

DIVINATION

Everybody in Mentawaian society is able to make oracles. The process of divination is commonly public: while interrogating the fate, all those present gather together and give their own interpretation and predict the future. There are not real specialists in this field, although some people are considered more experienced and trustworthy than others.

Divination can be performed by use of the intestines of chickens or the hearts of pigs.³⁴ The animals are first exorcized and part of their meat is offered to the ancestors. The divination using the heart of the pig is based on the shape of a big artery which vertically crosses the organ. It is good sign if the artery is superficial and has lots of ramifications. Conversely, it is a bad sign if the artery shows masses of fat, or other ligamentous tissues. It is good if white stripes cross the artery from below, whilst a white stripe which crosses the artery from above is considered a deadly sign, especially if the stripe crosses close to the heart's apex.

The divination using chicken intestines is based on the shape of two segments of tissue (the *lauru* and the *salou*). The response depends on the shape of the band of fat which gives information on the result of hunting (the *lauru*) or on possible diseases (the *salou*). The divination using chicken intestines is commonly performed during big celebrations. The chicken is slaughtered and the intestines are examined with a light behind them. The meat is cooked and consumed during the feast.

Sometimes the response is inauspicious and gives indications that the sick person is going to die. In this case, another chicken is slaughtered and divination is performed once again. This second try is meant to assure a more precise response, but it is also done because the Mentawaians believe that the spirit of the chicken does not just passively deliver the message of fate, but instead takes an active part in the formation of the response itself, actively influencing the unfolding of events. It is for this reason that the animals need to be entreated before the divination.

The investigation of the fate begins with the request of the petitioner who has entrusted his wishes to the spirits of the animals, which become mediators and intercede so that the requests can be granted. The response will indicate whether the petition has been accepted or not. Therefore, entreaty is necessary so as not to waste chances to modify the future. For example, one asks the chicken to keep away diseases. If the response is

34. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 129.

negative, another animal will be slaughtered hoping that the latter victim will turn out to be more helpful than the former. Three inauspicious responses are a clear demonstration that evil influences are more powerful than the mediation of the animals.³⁵

One example of divination is the so called *mulia*. The ceremony is led by the *rimata* (the ceremonial leader in the clan) who offers the chicken to the spirits of the main fetish in the *uma* (*bakkat katsaila*). The *rimata* asks for a long and healthy life and turns the victim's body so that its back faces the fetish. In this way he asks that all diseases turn their back to the house and stay away. Then the *rimata* asks the sun to avert all illnesses. Suddenly he runs back to the *bakkat katsaila*, acting as though to leave all the diseases behind. At this point, the drum ceases beating and the *rimata* starts caressing the chicken to calm it down. Then, the chicken is pushed towards the floor simulating a spear-attack and hunting, and expressing a hope for good game. After that, the chicken is ready to give a response through divination.³⁶

Divination is not only aimed at knowing the future, but in some cases it can be used for revealing something that has happened in the past, especially when there is the need to identify who is responsible for a crime. In the case of theft, for example, a simple ritual makes use of a floating hibiscus flower. The suspects sit in circle around a basin full of water on whose surface floats the flower. Then the flower is pushed while it is entreated to say the truth. The ritual is performed twice, but if the flower does not stop in front of the same person, then it is said that the flower "does not want to help." The response will be considered true only if the same person is indicated for three times consecutively, and once the criminal is already identified, the stolen things will be stealthily given back to the owner, usually at night.

Another kind of identification of suspects is the ritual of *tippu sasa*³⁷ which has already been mentioned above. The suspect swears his or her innocence and cuts a rattan stick, calling in testimony *Ulaumanua* himself. If the suspect speaks falsely, then he or she will die soon. This simple ritual is taken very seriously; usually the suspect prefers to admit the crime instead of putting his life at risk. Coronese reports that before performing the *tippu sasa*, people make observations of signs appearing in the surrounding environment.

If some leaves fall, it means that the ancestors confirm that the suspect is guilty. At this point, everybody will start trying to convince the suspect to admit his fault and to give back the stolen things, in order to avoid the *tippu sasa* procedure, which will be fatal to him. It can happen also that after cutting the rattan, the accuser dies in place of the alleged perpetrator. This means that the one who made the accusations did it on purpose to defame or disparage. It is for this reason that people will have recourse to the *tippu sasa*

35. Ibid., 131–32.

36. Ibid., 132–33; The same kind of divination process is reported by Abis in the context of the ritual of initiation, the *eneget*. See F. Abis, *Eneget*, op. cit., 44–9.

37. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 136.

only if strictly necessary to clarify the truth. If the accuser does not dare to go through with the test, then the family of the suspect will ask compensation for defamation, the so called *tulou paboko*.³⁸

Many signs coming from the surrounding environment or from ordinary circumstances are often interpreted as presages. The sighting of the *kemut* bird flying is considered a bad sign for sailing: it is better to go back home rather than facing a storm. People travelling by boat will not speak of drowned people. The snake which crosses the way from right to left presages danger, whilst a barking dog at night is believed to have seen a spirit. If a child sneezes before leaving home for a trip, it is better to wait a while.

Sometimes the ancestors give warnings to the members of their clan by use of particular signs, such as a snake under the place for sleeping, or rattan plant in a particular shape, or a butterfly carrying spiral designs on its wings (reminder of funerary symbols). All these signals are interpreted as signs of misfortune. Other events and phenomena, such as earthquakes, the moon, the stars, the rainbow or the shower in sunshine, carry messages which can be positive or negative.

Finally, dreams can speak too. The soul wandering during the time of sleep has experiences and meets other spiritual entities; and all these events are taken undoubtedly as authentic. Dreaming about dead people or dreaming about drowning, are considered bad presages. Nevertheless, the interpretation of dreams is usually very difficult and equivocal, and therefore, in fact, dreams are scarcely taken into consideration for the oracles.³⁹

PULIAIJAT

The routine of ordinary life in Mentawai is intercalated by celebrations on the occasion of particular events in the life of the clan. These celebrations have different meanings and levels of importance, but certainly the major one is the *pulijajat*,⁴⁰ which involves all the members of the clan and is held on the occasion of funerals, weddings, or other extraordinary events. The leader of the rituals is the *rimata*.

The word *rimata* is commonly translated by the terms “king” or “chief,” but no such figure is found in the egalitarian Mentawaian society, where only the *kerei*, the shaman, has a special position and is given particular honours. As a matter of fact, the *rimata* is an adult and an experienced man in the clan, one who masters the mantras and the necessary rituals for celebrations. Except for these functions, the *rimata* is not given a special position and role inside society.

The *pulijajat* is an intimate event which only the members of the clan are allowed to attend. Some *kerei* from other clans can join the opening of the *pulijajat* but at a certain point they have to leave the celebration. This means that the *pulijajat* is a special oppor-

38. Ibid., 138.

39. Ibid., 141–42.

40. See R. Shefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh*, op. cit., 136–38; T. Caissutti, *I mentawaiani*, op. cit., 127–32.

tunity to strengthen the unity inside the clan, although the presence of “foreigners” at the beginning, as a sign of courtesy, contributes to good relationships among different groups as well.

Moreover, during the celebration, which can last for several weeks, no productive activities are allowed. This fact stems from the idea that human work, although necessary for living, can in some way affect and destabilize the cosmic harmony. Therefore, the main purpose of the *puliaijat* is the restoration of such equilibrium, in order to preserve or even increase health happiness and welfare inside the clan. Besides, as we have seen in other aspects of Mentawai life, the spirits play an important role in the unfolding of the whole celebration, while the *kerei* are in charge of dealing with them and of casting away evil influences from the *uma*.

At a certain point the men go hunting. This phase of the *puliaijat* is important for its symbolic value. As we have seen above, good game is believed to be given to the hunters from the ancestors’ generosity. Therefore, a good result in the hunt is seen as a positive sign indicating the ancestors’ benevolence: it shows that the spirits are satisfied with the offerings given during the *puliaijat*, and so they grant in return part of their goods to the clan. The apex of the ceremony is the calling of the vital spirits, the *simagere*.

As we have seen above, it is very important that the *simagere* feel happy and comfortable so as to remain inside the *uma*, close to the members of the clan, thus ensuring the preservation of a healthy and happy life. Therefore the dances, the atmosphere of happiness, the food, the offerings, are meant to convince the *simagere* not to leave the people to whom they belong. For this purpose the ancestors too can give a hand, and so flowers, offerings and ornaments are placed on the veranda to welcome them at the entrance of the *uma*.

When the *simagere* arrive, the *kerei* have the important task of detaining them. The shamans try to make them enter the tray (*lulak*) of the offerings containing food and flowers, placed on the floor. They call the *simagere* by means of the dances and rhythmic bells, the sound of which fascinates and amuses them. Once the vital spirits have entered the tray, it often happens that they run away once again, and so they must be called back several times. It is just as the *simagere* arrive, that the *kerei* start experiencing the trance. This excited phase of the celebration lasts until the *simagere* are convinced to enter the tray, and after that, the *kerei* invite them to dance, moving around the tray containing the vital spirits in random movements.

The next step is the delivery of the vital spirits to the people attending. The tray is brought near to the heads of the clan members, while particular mantras are pronounced by the *kerei* inviting the *simagere* to enter the bodies through the fontanelle of their heads. Nevertheless, the restive vital spirits sometimes run away once again, but at least now they know where they should stay. At this point in the celebration, the *kerei*, under the protection of the ancestors, are able to walk on the burning coals unharmed.

During the following days, men go hunting again and people can eat pork. Gradually the rhythm of life goes back to normal and other clans are visited and food is brought in

as a sign of friendship. The ornaments at the entrance of the *uma* are left as they were at the end of the *puliaijat*, as evidence that the celebrations have been performed successfully.

CONCLUSION

This description of some aspects of the spirit world at the threshold of religion in Mentawai is obviously far from being complete and conclusive. The lack of literature and studies on Mentawaiian traditions (which are basically oral and not theologically systematized) and the differences ascertainable among the customs of different areas, might have induced some generalizations and inaccuracies. Nevertheless, we can try to draw some conclusions.

The first thing which must be underlined is the pervasiveness of spirit belief in every aspect of Mentawaiian life. Nothing is free from the influence of spiritual entities, both uncreated (*Ulaumanua*) and created (ancestors, vital spirits, *sanitu*, etc.). It is simply inconceivable to think of the “visible” world apart from the “invisible” one. The mutual influence between the two realms is so concrete and “touchable” that no phenomenon or event is ever felt as merely “physical” or “worldly.” In some ways, everything is always strictly related to the spirit world, and to a certain extent every aspect of Mentawai life could be positioned at the “threshold of religion.” It is for this reason that diseases and misfortune are always seen as the effect of disharmony between the two realms, and that the healthy condition of the sick person must be regained by calling back the *simagere* to stay united to its own body.

Moreover, thinking of traditional Mentawaiian belief as “animism” seems to be reductive and somewhat inaccurate. It is true that the Mentawaians are busy safeguarding harmony with the spiritual entities which are present almost everywhere, but we must honestly acknowledge that the Mentawaians believe in the existence of one God, namely *Ulaumanua*. This fact has some concrete consequences.

In the past, the Mentawaians were forced to leave their traditional beliefs and choose among one of the “recognized” monotheistic religions in Indonesia, since, among other reasons, the *arat sabungan* (traditional belief) was considered contradictory to the first point of *Pancasila* (the five ideal foundations of the Indonesian Nation) which states the belief in one God. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, ever since they have been in Mentawai, this population has believed in one God. So we should draw the conclusion that they are not animistic, but monotheistic instead. They do not have any doubt about the existence of *Ulaumanua*, who corresponds to the Cosmic God of many other traditional religions in Asia.

On the other hand, the relationship with *Ulaumanua*, is weak and not really felt as important in everyday life. *Ulaumanua* is too remote (he dwells beyond the skies) and somewhat uncaring. He does not play any role in saving human souls or helping people. We are not strictly sure about his function as creator, since, as we have already pointed

out, no myth on creation *ex nihilo* is known. As a matter of fact, *Ulaumanua* is the *deus otiosus* who intervenes in human matters only on the occasion of major taboo violations. Therefore the Mentawaians are more concerned about their relationship with the pervasive presence of other spiritual entities, which in fact are more influential in their everyday life. Once again, the Mentawaians seem to be positioned more at the “threshold” rather than already “inside” religion. On this point, we can easily imagine the change of mentality which is produced by the Christian message about God’s paternity and love.

Believing in God as a Father who loves His children, to the point of giving up His Son for them, is something totally new and in some ways disconcerting. Although the belief in the spirit world is still very much alive, according to the testimony of some old people who have witnessed the arrival of the Gospel in the area, the change produced by the evangelical message has been keenly felt. Christianity has brought God closer to humanity, people have started feeling God’s care in their lives, and the relationship among clans has become more peaceful.⁴¹

According to traditional Mentawaiian cosmology, the world is not ruled by autonomous laws which are rationally acknowledgeable so that, to a certain extent, man can dominate creation. Instead, everything is ruled by the spirit world, which governs events and the destiny of human beings, who are subjected to the spirits through rules and taboos to be observed, ceremonies to be performed, etc. Roughly, we could say that people live under the power of the unpredictable will of the spirits, and therefore they must appease them and keep them happy, in order to get some benefits in exchange. This relationship seems to be a kind of “spiritual bartering” that is built more on fear than on mutual respect and care.

Finally, we must also reflect on the need for the inculturation of the Gospel within the Mentawaiian culture, especially with reference to the theological background needed to facilitate the process of evangelization in such a context. The classical curriculum of theological studies does not put much emphasis on the study of angelology, demonology, relationship with the dead, healing, spiritism, *communio sanctorum*, etc., which the Western and Christian mentality seems to have somewhat forgotten or put aside, whilst this is the realm that in fact represents the main concern in the Mentawaiian culture. It seems that the missionaries who have been prepared in religious and theological matters, do not know much about that “intermediary world,” between the “uncreated” and the “visible,” which most strongly attracts the Mentawaians.

Moreover, the local Church itself needs to make further efforts to deepen the knowledge of and a critical approach to the traditions, cosmology, beliefs, rituals, moral laws, etc., in order to find and nurture the *semina verbi* already present in the local culture. The missionaries of the past have made a contribution in terms of research and studies of the local culture. This effort must be carried forward. This would represent a sign of

41. See M. Rebecchi, “Gli inizi a Sikabaluan. Intervista a p. Giuseppe Bagnara (2 e ultima parte),” in *Quaderni del Centro Studi Asiatico*, 2008, 3/2: 79–80.

the Church's love for the Mentawaians, an invitation to move from "threshold religion" towards communion with the true *Ulaumanua*, who is Father, cares about, forgives and loves His beloved children, and does not leave them alone, struggling for life at the hands of the cosmic powers, "for indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham" (*Heb 2:16*).

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JAPAN

TIZIANO TOSOLINI

Goi Masahisa, the founder of the new religion Byakkō Shinkōkai, wrote: “A religion that offers no miracles cannot attract people and will hardly spread among them. A religion that only preaches and has no miracles to show may eventually fall back into a mere collection of dead formalism.”¹ This quote illustrates in a concise and precise manner the contrast between the traditional religious systems that gradually elaborated a solid metaphysical-religious structure, a refined set of values, and a clear ethical code, and all those religious manifestations which (even if little known due to their almost esoteric nature) attract or appeal to another, parallel universe of people who are troubled by deep spiritual or physical problems and are looking for a convincing answer to their suffering. These religious expressions are not meant (nor do they attempt) to replace the institutional religions; instead,

1. Cited in I. Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Hampshire: McMillan Press Ltd., 1991), 205.

they are found and operate in that hybrid and liminal sphere in which the divine (or the sacred—experienced, according to Rudolf Otto’s formulation, as *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*)² reveals itself in all its might, splendor, and sublimity.

In this context, what characterizes these lively spiritual manifestations is the fact that in them the person tries in every way to come into contact with the sphere of the “sacred,” both individually (by trying to gain the power necessary to solve a negative situation) and by turning to those who act as mediators, psychopomps, healers, seers, visitors of the afterworld, shamans, exorcists, those in possession of ascetic powers, fortune-tellers, charmers, as well as people who practice divination, witchcraft, and magic, oracles and those who cast spells and consult spirits and the dead... What all these activities have in common is not only their appeal to the instinctive, superstitious, magical, and non-rational side of people, but also the fact that they offer a tangible and immediate solution to the problems—whether religious or otherwise—of human existence. Here, reversing the adage of the Gospel, “to see” is “to believe”—and there is no doubt that in the eternal dialectic between faith and works most people would immediately choose the latter.

The study of these interesting spiritual expressions and the fascination exercised by their miraculous aspect shows that, at least in Japan, they have a very long history. The rapid spread of Buddhism in Japan, for instance, is due not only to the fact that prince Shōtoku Taishi (574–622) was a fervent advocate of that tradition and decided to make it widely known in the Japanese courts, but also that from the beginning Buddhism was perceived as a powerful form of magic.

In fact, when in the XVI century the Korean ruler Syōng, king of Pekche, sent a statue of the Buddha, some Sutras and several other religious objects to the Japanese court, he included a letter in which he praised the supernatural efficacy of Buddhist practices: “Imagine a man in possession of treasures to his heart’s content, so that he might satisfy all his wishes in proportion to his use of them. Thus it is with the treasure of this wonderful doctrine. Every prayer is fulfilled and naught is wanting.”³ And later:

Mūmako no Sukune, by way of experiment, took the [Buddhist] relic and, placing it on the middle of a block of iron, beat it with an iron sledge-hammer, which he held aloft. The block and the sledge-hammer were shattered to pieces, but the relic could not be crushed. Then the relic was cast into water, where it floated or sank as each one desired. As a result of this, Mūmako no Sukune, Ikenobe no Hida, and Shiba Tattō held faith in Buddhism and practiced it unremittingly. Mūmako no Sukune built another Buddhist Temple at his house in Ishikaha. From this arose the beginning of Buddhism.⁴

2. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

3. *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*. Transl. W. G. Aston (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972), vol. 2, 66.

4. *Ibid.*, 102. What is particularly worth noticing in this text is the relation between experiment (“by way of experiment”) and faith (“In consequence of this... held faith”); this shows that Buddhism was adopted in Japan only *after* its miraculous powers were ascertained.

Even after more refined and sophisticated forms of Buddhism (such as the Kegon, Shingon, and Tendai Schools) became predominant, and Shintō was first systematized into a doctrine and purged of its shamanic origins in order to become the religion of the imperial system, the courts did not repudiate those elements that ensured this-worldly magical benefits and instant rewards.

During the Heian period (794–1185), the aristocracy began to organize its life according to the practices recommended by *onmyōdō* (陰陽道), or “The Way of Yin and Yang,” an esoteric cosmology of Chinese derivation that combines natural science and occultism.⁵ Specialists in these techniques were recognized as public functionaries in the political system of the time and were responsible for consulting the calendar and the stars, for practicing divination to gain protection against evil spirits, and for predicting the future. They also had the power to divine auspicious or harmful influences in the earth, and were instrumental in providing instructions about lucky or unlucky directions: for this reason they were consulted whenever a house had to be built or when the capitals had to be moved. *Onmyōdō* practitioners were particularly feared for their power to evoke *shikigami* (式神), invisible spirits capable of taking possession of the body of a person (or cast a spell on him), causing physical pain and even death.⁶

Throughout the Medieval period, the new social elite, represented by the warrior class, still depending on the land for their material support, continued to practice geomancy, astrology, tantric rituals aimed at preventing misfortune, and ever more refined forms of *onmyōdō*. With the exception of a few prominent Buddhist thinkers such as Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, Nichiren, and Ippen, and certain Confucian representatives of the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), magic and esoteric forms of religiosity were practiced as “skillful means” (*hōben* 方便) for the enlightenment of the ignorant and uneducated or, more generally, the considerable practical benefits that were believed to derive from the observance of these customs.

The various eschatological and apocalyptic doctrines that were elaborated in this period—and which are often found also in the new religions (e.g., Reiyūkai and Ōmotō)—focused particularly on the veneration of the figure of Maitreya (in Japanese, *Miroku* 弥勒), the future or “messianic” Buddha, the last Buddha who will appear on this earth. It is no coincidence that some of the peasant uprisings that broke out in several areas of Japan during the last Tokugawas shogunate were initiated by believers of Maitreya, who thought that his coming would be preceded by miraculous signs and natural disasters.

The most common expression used during these uprisings was the belief in the magical “renewal of the world” (*yonaoshi* 世直し); since it was thought that this renewal would affect both society and nature, destroying the property of landlords and the account books of the moneylenders was seen as part of a glorious (and at times even carni-

5. On this theme see the recent study by M. Hayek, “The Eight Trigrams and Their Changes. An Inquiry into Japanese Early Modern Divination,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2011, 38/2: 329–68.

6. See the entry “Onmyōdō” in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), vol. 6, 103.

valesque)⁷ eschatological drama. Accordingly, these movements hardly ever challenged the social and economic privileges of the ruling classes or fought for a new social order: like the magician the rioters looked for instant relief from their miserable condition and for a quick and more egalitarian redistribution of wealth.⁸

Other popular movements, such as *Ee janaika* (ええじゃないか “Isn’t it good?” which flourished in Western Japan between June 1867 and May 1868, were inspired by doctrines that were less political than religious. In fact, from the very beginning, the form assumed by this movement was that of a dancing festival; it included dances for the dead, frenzied behaviors that violated social conventions and practices, and street choirs singing the praises of food and sake. When, during one of these festivals, amulets portraying the Buddha and other Shintō deities miraculously started to fall from the sky, people began spontaneous celebrations of thanksgiving that lasted for several days and paralyzed the regular course of public life. Other people showed their gratitude to the Buddha and the gods by going on a pilgrimage to Ise or to some closer local shrines.

In its thirst for renewal, the Meiji period (1868–1912) began to condemn every popular religious expression as “irrational,” “superstitious,” and “obsolete”—something that had to be eradicated as soon as possible in order to focus all thoughts and efforts on the formation of a strong and modern Japan. The ascetic practice of Shugendō was banned, as were shamanic practices and all divinatory or magical activities. However, as one might have expected, all these religious expressions simply found a way to lie hidden in Japan’s emerging social scenario, patiently awaiting the moment in which they could be practiced freely again. This happened in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when the Americans granted freedom of expression, of thought, and of association to every religious organization.

Meanwhile, the religious vacuum created by the prohibitions of the Meiji period was gradually filled by the rise of the “new religions,” all those syncretistic movements combining elements from Shintō, Buddhism, Christianity, popular religion, and Shamanism. This religious excitement is certainly a token of how the “little tradition” (i.e., the tradition usually identified with popular beliefs) was able to withstand the attempts of the “great tradition” (i.e., the tradition of the “established” or “mainstream” religions) to eliminate it or limit its prestige. From a purely statistical or quantitative perspective, we could say that in Japan the “little tradition” *is*—for all intents and purposes—the authentic “great

7. Jansen writes: “In the last few decades of the Tokugawa rule, ‘world renewal’ (*yonaoshi*), vaguely millenarian, movements swept major urban areas. But their net total was as often ludicrous and carnival as it was purposeful... Yet the ‘world’—*yo*— of those who rejoiced was more a cosmos than a society, and most participants seemed to have assumed the imminence of a more just and moral society than the one they knew,” in M. B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 236.

8. See for example S. Vlastos, *Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan* (California: University of California Press, 1990); A. Walthall, ed., *Peasant Uprisings in Japan: A Critical Anthology of Peasant Histories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

tradition:" to this day, to assess auspicious and inauspicious years, to consult the calendar, to calculate favorable and unfavorable directions, carefully to avoid words or situations considered taboo, to follow countless local superstitions... these and many other practices continue to influence the activities and thoughts of the so-called common man.

The belief in esoteric and magical practices and the faith in the new religions seem to represent a satisfactory answer to people's preoccupations and anxieties even in today's Japan. And while some of the established religions run the risk of merely sedating the masses with their opiate, these novel expressions of popular religiosity—these new religions—appear to infuse a special energy and confidence in the hearts of people. We can rightly say, therefore, that today believers find themselves facing the challenges of daily life with the same vision, if not with the same of courage, of the ancient shaman, geomancer, or fortune-teller.

Thus, nowadays there is still room, in this ultramodern Japanese society, for all those "marginal" expressions through which people try to solve their most immediate needs and desires or eliminate from their lives the countless causes of dissatisfaction and suffering. To analyze some of these religious expressions, as we shall do presently, means to try to understand both the ancient and the modern soul of the Japanese people and enter that realm in which faith and reason are measured solely on the basis of their effectiveness.

It means, fundamentally, to let ourselves be amazed by a world that is made to amaze, to astonish, and to attract all those who want to find solutions to their problems—solutions that have to be, not so much just or true, as useful, tangible, and immediately effective.

THE NEW RELIGIONS

One of the phenomena that have occupied the students of Japanese religions in the last few decades is that of the so called "new religions," those countless spiritual movements that bloomed and developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some of these movements turned into powerful and influential religious organizations (e.g., Tenrikyō, Sōka Gakkai, and Risshō Kōseikai) boasting a considerable (and growing) number of adepts; others have a handful of members centered around the charismatic figures of their founders (e.g., Taiyō Shinjiru Piramidō no Kai); other still have experienced a sudden decline after the demise of their leaders or have undergone internal division, as was the case with Mahikari.

Their rise has often been stimulated by social factors: some of the greatest developments and expansion of new religions occurred during periods of unrest, crisis and disorder, as well as the profound uncertainty caused by rapid changes in the economic system. The transition period from the Tokugawa to the Meiji regimes, the time of economic depression and urban poverty of the 1920s, and the catastrophic period at the end of the Second World War—during which the major Japanese cities were razed to the

ground, the government and the imperial system were discredited, and State Shintō was banned—have all been times when new religions have grown rapidly.⁹

In the 1980s we witnessed the proliferation of the *shin shin shūkyō* (“new new religions,” so called in order to distinguish them from the earlier movements that arose before World War II), which immediately attracted the attention of media and scholars. For, despite the fact that these religions came about at a time of widespread affluence and in the midst of a rapidly internationalizing, technologizing and modernizing society, they expressed anti-modern attitudes and sentiments centered on the promotion of the old Japanese spirit, focusing on miracles, spirit possession, and a view of causation rooted very firmly in the Japanese folk tradition.¹⁰ For this reason, as Kitagawa pointed out:

These new religions present nothing new, as far as their religious contents are concerned. Many of them derived their doctrines from Shinto, Confucianism, Buddhism, or Christianity. Their teachings are eclectic and not well systematized, but their simple, direct, and practical beliefs and practices appeal to the masses who do not feel at home with the complex doctrines of established religions. It is important to note, however, that they make full use of group psychology by offering both informal small group meetings and elaborate mass assemblies. Most of them are highly centralized in their organizational structure, utilizing cell group systems as well as incentive plans. A few of them have semi-militaristic disciplines. All of them use modern mass media communications and have efficient methods of tithing or its equivalent. What gives each of these new religions its distinctive character is the personality of the founder or organizer. Many of these boast unusual spiritual powers in divination, sorcery, incantation, fortunetelling, and healing, which betray the shamanistic roots of their religious orientations. They also have the capacity to attract and maintain a rapport with a large number of followers. For the most part, these new religions draw their adherents from the lower middle class, especially middle-aged and older women, although a few of them claim to have followers among the upper middle class and young people as well.¹¹

As we attempt to elaborate on this statement by Kitagawa, we may say that although each movement has unique characteristics that distinguish it from the others, we can also notice some elements which, to different extents, are common to many of them.

9. For a detailed analysis of the historical factors that contributed to the rise of the New Religions, see H. N. McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods. A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York, London: Macmillan, 1967).

10. The following movements are included in the number of the “new New Religions”: Mahikari (“True Light” 真光), Sekai Kyusei Kyō (“Church of World Messianity” 世界救世教), Shinreikyō (“God-Soul Sect” 神霊教), Byakkō Shinkōkai (“Society of White Light” 白光真宏会), Makoto no Michi (“True Way” 真の道), and the recent Kofuku no Kagaku (“Happy Science” 幸福の科学), founded at Tokyo in October 1986 by Ryuho Okawa.

11. J. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 333.

The first element is the role of the founder, who already in life is worshipped as a *kami* and in death assumes an important messianic role. It is not so much that the founder is worshipped as a deity, as that the divinity “uses” him as an intermediary or a mouthpiece. This explains the cult surrounding the founder and the lavishness of his tomb or mausoleum, which usually becomes the destination of visits and pilgrimages.

Secondly, these religions are characterized by a millenaristic outlook, which is mainly visible in frequent prophecies about the end of this world and the coming of a new one. This feature goes hand in hand with the fact that the new Japanese religions boast of possessing hidden truths, revelations, and new sacred scriptures that are said to be of supernatural origin. Some of the new religions derived from Buddhism, for example, claim to have discovered, in the seminal Buddhist texts, new meanings, formulas or expressions that communicate their power to those who recite them.

Thirdly, the new religions present a well organized structure and a stronger sense of community than those found in other Japanese religious experiences. This sense of community is symptomatic of the widespread phenomenon of urbanization and alienation from one’s cultural and spiritual roots, since the new religions try to reestablish that sense of belonging that people lost when they moved to live and work in the city.

The fourth element that these religions have in common is their relation with the world of the spirits. Western scholars have associated certain phenomena of the life of the founders (who were “possessed” by a divinity) and certain practices that aim at solving problems caused by the spirits with possession, exorcism, and spiritism.

The fifth, important element of the new religions is their practical and concrete character and their guarantee that their followers will enjoy “worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku* 現世利益). They present themselves as “techniques” or “arts” by which one can obtain immediate relief from one’s physical and spiritual problems, as well as a certain degree of happiness and prosperity in this life.

The last element is certainly the one that exercises the greatest fascination among the adepts of these religions, and the main reason they give when asked why they joined a new religion. For example, Winston Davis, who produced a thorough study on the new religion Mahikari, writes:

Most of those who join Mahikari are motivated by serious human needs, such as sickness or difficult personal relations. Ill health, however, seems to be the predominant motive for joining. Many informants said they had joined out of curiosity, but I found no clear-cut cases of members who joined simply to learn about the meaning or composition of the universe.¹²

It should not come as surprise that many members of these new religions joined in order to find a solution to physical problems: after all, religion aims not only at managing the interaction between problem and solution, but also at providing a plausible reason for

12. D. Winston, *Dojo. Magic and Exorcism in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 114.

suffering. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz would say: “As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer.”¹³

The new religions provide a variety of explanations for why life is so solitary, nasty, brutish, and—above all—short. Spirit possession stories, for instance, emphasize that usually the miserable existential situation of the members of a given religion does not depend on something they did, a personal fault, but on an ancestor who was not paid sufficient respect, on the mistaken positioning of the Buddhist family altar, or on the spirit of some animal that amuses itself by torturing the person out of jealousy.¹⁴

By contrast, Tenrikyō considers that every problem stems from spiritual dust that accumulates on the mind due to one’s bad actions, and that if one fails to take steps to clear away this dust (i.e., does not polish one’s mind), it will accumulate and gradually cloud the soul, causing further aberrations, troubles and misfortunes.

Other new religions, such as Risshō Kōseikai, offer a path of transformation and renewal through self-reflection and counseling, often running special discussion groups, through which members share their problems and, under the guidance of the more expert members of the group, find the source of their fault. Thus, by means of appropriate practices (for instance, by offering reparatory ceremonies for neglecting the memory of an ancestor), they succeed in eradicating the problem and regain some peace of mind.

Other religions still, such as Mahikari, identify the source of existential unease with the fact that the person was possessed by evil spirits (curiously, in particular by the spirits of ancient samurais who died a premature death in battle); these spirits can be appeased only by means of repeated purificatory rites and powerful exorcisms carried out through the *okyome* technique, which in the new religion of the god Su is granted to its members through the mediation of the founder Okada.

Since the solutions we have mentioned are personalized and require actions and practices that imply the transition from a state of need to a state of fulfillment, the rites by which these solutions are achieved often involve magic and are acclaimed as true miracles. “Between a wish and its fulfillment there is, in magic, no gap,” wrote Marcel Mauss.¹⁵ The magic practiced by these religions (which should not be understood negatively, as it often is in the Western world) seems to satisfy the criteria for which people appeal to it: it is quick, tangible, pragmatic, this-worldly, and at times automatic and mechanical. The practitioner is convinced that human existence is not trapped in the unstable compromise between natural causation and luck: he wants to shatter the ties of contingency and necessity in order to be in control of both; he desires to subject blind fate to human power and will. In order to do this, the practitioner of magic or exorcisms has to subdue

13. C. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 104.

14. In Japan, animals that are thought to be capable of possessing a person are the fox, the badger, and the snake. See C. Blacker, “Witch Animals,” in *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 1999), 51–68.

15. M. Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London, New York: Routledge Classics, 1972), 63.

the forces of this world, discover their intrinsic dynamism, and piece them back together so as to be able to use them when and how he thinks fit.

As the social anthropologist Edmund Leach explained,¹⁶ all this occurs through a radical transformation of the common use of language and its tropes. Some of these tropes are well known; they are: the symbol (A is a symbol when A replaces B metaphorically); the sign (A is a sign when it stands for B either metonymically—when the two terms are in a logical or material contiguity—or through the use of synecdoche—if the relation between A and B is quantitative, e.g., a part for the whole); the signal (between A and B there is a mechanical and automatic relation: A triggers B); the index (we have an index when A indicates B and, contrary to a signal, the relation between the two terms is purely descriptive. Within this general class, Leach includes natural indices, in which the association between A and B is natural; for example, “smoke is an index of fire”). Now, according to Leach, what happens in magic is that indices are treated as though they were signals, and the practitioner succeeds in persuading himself and his clientele that his metaphorical nonsense makes sense from a metonymic point of view. More precisely, Leach states that in order for the “trick” to succeed, three things must be in place: first of all, the practitioner must treat the metaphoric symbol as a metonymic sign; second, he must treat the sign as though it were a natural index; and finally, he must treat the natural index as a signal capable of triggering automatic consequences at a distance.¹⁷

Therefore, thanks to the strict correlation of signals and indices, there appears a bilateral relation between words and events: words not only cause events (many new religions recommend their adepts to recite litanies or mantras in order to solve undesired or painful situations), but the occurrence of events also indicates that words have been spoken to bring about those effects. Thus, every event reveals also the intention of the one who caused it, an intention that can originate not only in this world but also in invisible worlds beyond. This fact also explains the attention that many new religions reserve for the phenomenon of omens or premonition, which people suddenly and occasionally experience in their lives. Often these omens are warnings from an ancestor: by paying attention to them, a person can cure maladies that are afflicting family members and ward off disgrace and misfortune.

Thus, in the human world there are forces that influence the life of individuals, energies that become materialized in events and can be manipulated through magic, exorcisms, and all those practices that have the power to blend word and event. Obviously, these practices do not always achieve the desired effect. It is no accident that one of the major reasons for an adept to end his relation with a new religion is that this was unable

16. E. Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected. An Introduction to the Use of Structuralist Analysis in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 9–16.

17. The most famous example of this process of replacement of indices with signals is the experiment known as “Pavlov’s dog:” when the bell rang, it triggered the dog’s salivation; thus, even if it was simply an index of the presence of food, the ringing bell was in fact treated as a signal.

to meet his expectations. Sooner or later even the most potent spell fails, prayers go unanswered, magic potions no longer work, and the frailty of hope and desire alike is exposed. The cause of these failures is usually traced back to the adept's lack of faith: the death of a relative happened because the adept was unable to convince that person to join the movement, or because the adept himself was not devout enough or was indifferent to the omens, or because he did not participate in the gatherings organized by the new religion, or again because he failed to follow the advice given to him.

However, there are members whose tragic experiences have brought them to embrace a kind of religious realism that transcends the exorcist's or magician's illusions. Even though they do not doubt the existence of a "world of miracles," these people know that whatever the deity, spells, incantations, omens, and miraculous formulas have in store for them is neither quick, palpable or automatic. It is precisely because each new religion promises pragmatic results and immediate change in the life of people that one's hopes are always vulnerable to the intractable, shattering, and inevitable realities of suffering and death.

Few neophytes have the patience or composure to wait for the slower magic of religious consolation, or endure the fact that spells and incantations do not immediately produce the desired effect. This is because, in the end, the world of miracles, oracles, exorcisms, and divinations stands or falls entirely on the validity (or lack thereof) of the creed professed by these religions—a creed that could be summed up in a quote from Malinowski: "Hope cannot fail, nor desire deceive."¹⁸

SHUGENDŌ

Many scholars who study this particular ascetic practice are convinced that "Shugendō provided the central model for the religious activities of many of the 'new' religions... which proliferated from the latter part of the nineteenth century and continue to this day. In this sense it can be said that it is impossible to understand popular religion (*shōmin shūkyō*) in Japan without taking Shugendō into consideration."¹⁹ Before we proceed to analyze this religious tradition, we should remind ourselves that Shugendō—which strictly speaking does not have a proper founder (the tradition traces its origins back to the legendary holy man En no Gyōja, a mountain ascetic of the late seventh century)—is deeply rooted in the oldest Japanese spirituality and combines autochthonous shamanistic elements with Taoist and tantric principles derived from the esoteric Buddhist schools of Shingon and Tendai.

Japanese Shamanism can be said to have originated in the prehistoric customs of the people who lived in the Northern islands (the Ainu of Hokkaidō) and in the South (the

18. B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), 87.

19. H. Miyake, "Religious Rituals in Shugendō. A Summary," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1989, 16/2–3: 102.

Ryūkyū islands, later called Okinawa).²⁰ There were several kinds of shamans: those propitiating good fortune, mediums who were able to communicate with the dead, psychopomps who could procure happy rebirths (and even nirvana) for their followers. Some of them were itinerant people who practiced religious disciplines and magical arts on the mountains. Others, especially after the Muromachi period (1338–1573), lived in villages, officiating at religious services, such as prediction and divination (*bokusen* 卜占), obtaining oracles through mediums (*fujutsu* 巫術), offering of prayers (*kitō* 祈祷), and the practice of exorcisms (*chōbuku* 調伏). As we already mentioned, during the Meiji period the central government banned many shamanistic practices; it was only at the end of World War II that attempts were made to revive these activities.

The ascetics who practiced Shugendō were known as *yamabushi* (山伏 “those who lie in the mountains”), *shugenja* (修験者 “those who practice Shugendō”), or as ancient hermits (*hijiri* 聖). Some of these mountains and retreat places soon assumed precise symbolic connotations: Mount Kumano was associated with the “Womb-world mandala” (*Taizōkai*), Mount Yoshino with the “Diamond-world mandala” (*Kongōkai*), while Mount Ōmine became the ideal synthesis of these two mandalas, the locus of supernatural power and the matrix from which this power emanated.²¹ The fact that the mountain is conceived of as a mandala, namely as the symbol that encompasses the invisible dimension of the sacred space, means that it is the material representation of the ascent to the primordial unity which is found above the elements of the cosmos, that is, above the earthly condition which ascetic practices aim to overcome in order to achieve union with the whole.

Accordingly, the cosmological views of Shugendō state that the mountain is the dwelling place of many gods, *kami*, guardian spirits, divine beings, and Buddhas, who are not separated and distant from daily human affairs but interact with them and control them. At the top of this pantheon we find the figure of Fudō Myōō (不動明王), the most important of the Five Wisdom Kings or Godai Myōō (五大明王), who in esoteric Buddhism represent as many emanations or different qualities of the Buddha.²² The beings that dwell in this sacred space, with Fudō at their center, are of three types.²³ The first type comprises

20. On Shamanism see the important study by I. Hōri, “Shamanism in Japan,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1975, 2/4: 231–87.

21. Another famous destination for pilgrimages, still visited by Shugendō practitioners, is that of the Three Mountains of Dewa (Dewa Sanzan 出羽三山), that is, Mount Haguro (Haguro-san 羽黒山), Mount Gassan (Gassan 月山), and Mount Yudono (Yudono-san 湯殿山), located in the Yamagata Prefecture.

22. The other four Wisdom Kings, placed at the sides of the central figure of Fudō Myōō, are: Gōzanze Myōō 降三世明王 (Positioned in the East; the one who subjugates the three worlds, i.e., the worlds of desire, form and non-form); Gundari Myōō 軍荼利明王 (Positioned in the South; the enemy of devils); Daiitoku Myōō 大威徳明王 (Positioned in the West; the one who has the power to suppress evil and create goodness); Kongōyasha Myōō 金剛夜叉明王 (Positioned in the North; destroyer of foolish human desires; symbolizes strength). See I. Hisao, *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms* (Berkley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2007).

23. Here I follow the precise and schematic classification by H. Miyake, “Religious Rituals in Shugendō. A Summary,” *op. cit.*, 114–15.

not only esoteric figures (such as Fudō Myōō and Dainichi Nyōrai, the incarnation of the cosmic Buddha), but also divinities that are objects of veneration in Shugendō (such as Zaō Gongen 蔵王権現)²⁴ and other *kami* who are worshipped in many Japanese shrines and who usually serve as symbolic representations for the entire universe. The second type includes individual gods, tutelary or guardian deities and the wide array of spirits surrounding the most powerful gods. Third come the evil deities, who are the cause of misfortune and disgrace; when these negative deities are brought under control by the *shugenja* and enshrined in a small temple, these deities take on the character of those of the second type.²⁵

Shugendō teaches that each human being is a part of the universe and himself a microcosm. Since all things possess the same sacred nature, which is the primary form of all that exists, the human being too can become a divine being. This transformation can take place only after a hard and prolonged ascetic practice, which includes a period of retreat on the mountains—a phase that usually is preceded by a particular *nyūbu shugyō* (入峰修行 or “mountain practices”), during which the neophyte offers flowers, reads or buries Sutras in honor of the local Buddhas and deities. By cultivating ascetic practices on the mountains and receiving esoteric teachings, the *shugenja* will succeed in being reborn as Fudō Myōō. This rebirth entails a ritual death, a long process of shamanistic initiations that include very hard physical and meditative practices undertaken in a condition of almost complete abstinence from food and drink. The physical ascent to the sacred mountains corresponds to a spiritual progression toward ultimate knowledge, and the various stages of meditation are associated with several existential stages on the path leading to the mountain peak.

For example, the *shugenja* who decides to undertake his practices along the road that will lead him from Mount Yoshino to Mount Kumano begins his experience of rebirth at the feet of the sacred mountain when, going through the “Gate of Awakening” (an enormous brazen *torii*), he decides to die to the world and enter the womb of the mountain. Another initial symbolic action is practiced at night and takes place near the Kimpusen temple: the neophytes are led into a small wooden hut with a thatched roof; after the door is slammed shut, they are invited to repeat some magical formulas at the rhythm dictated by the *sendatsu* (i.e., a Shugendō religious guide). The effect they wish to obtain in this pitch-dark place is a sense of suspension in space, of total loss of direction and of the abil-

24. According to the legend, when En no Gyōja visited Mount Kimpusen (Yoshino), he prayed that a guardian god would appear and help him to save all sentient beings and subdue the demons. According to the tradition, after all the other gods had appeared to En no Gyōja in reply to his prayers and after he had rejected them as overly meek, at last Zaō appeared. From that moment Zaō became the patron of the ascetics who retire to that mountain, encouraging and inspiring them in their practices. See C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 176–77.

25. Two of the better known evil spirits are Zenki (前鬼) and Goki (後鬼): En no Gyōja gave them a few verses in honor of the Buddha, which had the power to cause “awakening;” as the two demons recited these verses, they were transformed into human beings and became faithful guardians of En no Gyōja (as well as protectors of the ascetics who take refuge on Mount Yoshino).

ity to trace the precise contours of things and objects. The neophyte, left in a trancelike state, is then traumatically awakened by the deafening sound of a bell at the same instant the door is thrown open to flood the hut with the dazzling morning light of dawn. The purpose of the shock provoked by this experience is to help the neophyte to come to a sudden awareness of the ultimate emptiness of his nature and of all reality.

In the course of his journey the neophyte reaches the celebrated spot known as *nishi no nozoki* (西の覗き), a mountain edge from which he will be left hanging—head downwards and hands clasped above his head. In this desperate position, he is required to confess his sins by replying with a simple “yes” or “no” to such questions as: “Are you dutiful to your parents?”, “Are you working hard?”, “Is your faith firm and strong?”.

The neophyte undertakes many other trials, practices, and rites (all of which are jealously kept secret), until he reaches the mountain peak and is completely reborn as a divine being. The symbolism accompanying these practices seems to correspond to the transmigration of the nine realms undertaken by the Buddhist disciple before entering the tenth realm, or the realm of the final awakening. The first six realms are those of rebirth: hell (*jigoku* 地獄, or the realm of suffering and hatred); hungry ghosts (*gaki* 餓鬼, or the realm of greed and passion); beasts (*chikushō* 畜生, or the animal realm based on powerful mental states of stupidity and prejudice); demons (*ashura* 阿修羅, in which wrath, jealousy and egoism prevail); human beings (*ningen* 人間, in which one can reach the state of *bodhisattva*, the starting point of the quest for the supreme condition of Buddhahood); and finally, the realm of divine beings or *deva* (*tenjō* 天上, the realm of peace and of a kind of joy that is nonetheless transient).

The other three realms are those of *shōmon* (聲聞, or those who listened and comprehended the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths revealed by the historical Buddha); the realm of *engaku* (縁覚, or those who through their own spiritual effort have reached awakening and the comprehension of the doctrine of dependent origination or dependent arising); the realm of *bodhisattva* (*bosatsu* 菩薩, or those who vowed to reach awakening for the sake of the liberation of all sentient beings); finally, the tenth realm is that of the Buddha (*butsu* 佛, or the one who has achieved nirvana).²⁶

The rites or practices that correspond to these realms differ depending on the various traditions that draw inspiration from Shugendō, but one of the earliest texts (dated 1215) that allude to this battle against illusions and desires describes them as follows: “First, the rite of Hell is weighing one’s *karma*. Second, the rite of the Hungry Ghosts is fasting. Third, the rite of the Beasts is abstention from water. Fourth, the rite of the titans is wrestling. Fifth, the rite of men is repentance. Sixth, the right of the *devas* is the Dance of Long Life.”²⁷ What is required to correspond to the next three realms of “awakening” is not clearly stated, although the last stage, the one culminating with the entrance into nir-

26. For a description of these realms, see R. Causton, *The Buddha in Daily Life. An Introduction to the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin* (London: Rider Books, 1995).

27. Text cited by C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 212.

vana, is expressed through the *shōkanjō* (正灌頂), one of the most important ceremonies of consecration in Shugendō (and one which so prominently figures in the initiations of the orthodox Schools of esoteric Buddhism). In this ceremony, water is poured on the head of the neophyte as a symbol that as a *shugenja* he has passed through the ten realms during his practice in the mountains and has attained the state of “Buddhahood in this very body” (*sokushin sokubutsu* 即身即仏).

Having reached the end of the journey and concluded his ascetic practices, the *shugenja* returns to the starting point and takes part in the final ceremony, in which he is called to offer a demonstration of the powers he attained through his initiation and subsequent austerities. The *shugenja* is now able to control and use the spiritual powers of Fudō Myōō, especially those that have to do with fire (according to Mircea Eliade, the “mastery of fire” is a distinctively shamanic power).²⁸ In short, the powers that the ascetic acquired through his initiation and practices fall into two distinct groups.

The first consists in a display of his magical art so as to convince the community that the disciple has indeed transcended the normal or ordinary human condition (to this day, the repertoire used by the *yamabushi* seems to comprise three rites: *hiwatari*, or fire-walking; *yudate*, or immersion in boiling water; and, more rarely, *katana watari*, or climbing up a ladder of swords).²⁹

The second type of powers are those which are put to some practical use, either at the service of the community or in his own daily life. These consist principally in the practice of exorcisms, the consecration of land, the foundation of temples on places considered sacred, the blessing of the mountains before a pilgrimage, and the orphic power of charming animals and communicating with them.

Today, the most widespread religious practices seem to be reduced to the following: commemorative rites such as participation in *matsuris* (or Shintō festivals) carried out in honor of the *kami* (through which the *shugenja* pays his respects to various deities by chanting some Sutras); the ceremony of fire, carried out to ward off misfortunes (this is a central rite in Shugendō: it consists in the recitation of Sutras before and after the lighting of fire on the altar where offerings will then be burned in honor of Fudō Myōō); several feasts to worship the sun (after being purified, one stays awake all night and awaits the dawn while reciting various Sutras and performing several other rites to ward off disasters and invoke prosperity on the village), the moon (during certain periods of the lunar phases, the *shugenja* and other believers gather to eat, drink, and pray while contemplat-

28. “Like the devil in the beliefs of the European peoples, shamans are not merely ‘masters over fire;’ they can also incarnate the spirit of fire to the point where, during séances, they emit flames from their mouths, their noses, and their whole bodies. This sort of feat must be put in the category of shamanic wonders connected with ‘mastery over fire’... The magical power involved expresses the ‘spirit condition’ obtained by shamans,” in M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 474.

29. These practices are mentioned by C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 235.

ing the moon), and the stars (the North Star is revered and several types of divination are performed based on the calendar and on astrology).

All these rituals show once more that in the particular worldview of Shugendō the human being is a part of the universe and is related to the powers that are constantly at work in the word—powers which can also be negative and as such ought to be subdued. Thus, evil is caused by spirits that interfere with the natural unfolding of cosmic forces. In this context, the *shugenja* is able to trace the causes of evil by identifying with Fudō Myōō and persuading his guardian spirits to possess a medium so as to obtain an oracle. Based on the response of the medium, the *shugenja* will then perform the necessary exorcism to drive out the evil spirit from the body of the patient, or to threaten the spirit and show him the way back to the netherworld. In some extreme cases the *shugenja* resorts to exorcisms to ask that Fudō Myōō's servants themselves drive out the undesired spirit. At other times, the *shugenja* simply drives away the evil spirit through the force of powerful amulets (*majinai* まじない) or through the words of traditional spells (*fujū* 呪).

Today Shugendō has lost much of its past vigor, fame and popularity. And yet, it is not unusual for those who visit Japan to

come upon intriguing figures wearing tiny black caps and bright pom-poms, with conch shells at their waists and deerskin sit-upons flapping behind them, striding along a street or even stepping out of a bus—real yamabushi! The same visitor may even watch yamabushi performing an impressive *saitō goma* rite. One who wishes to learn more can, with any luck, join a yamabushi pilgrimage through the Ōmine or Katsuragi range, or elsewhere, and so participate in contemporary Shugendo. In short, Shugendo is alive even now.³⁰

Books and DVDs dealing with Shugendō continue to be published and produced for enthusiasts and amateurs of religion.³¹ In many of these works, emphasis is placed not only on ancient practices, but also on the possibility of integrating lessons learned from one's contact with nature in daily life, and on the probable mindset of a devotee returning to the city after an enlightening experience in the mountains.

Certainly, the motivations of those who choose to practice this religious life and leave their communities to submit themselves to hunger, sleep deprivation, and the harshness of life—or, during the winter, to the severe cold of reciting mantras under a frigid waterfall—differ considerably from the reasons given in the past. The “classic” shamans were

30. R. Tyler and P. Swanson, “Editor's Introduction to Shugendo and the Mountain Religion in Japan,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1989/2–3: 94.

31. Here is a list of some of the most recent texts and DVDs in Western languages about Shugendō: H. Miyake, H. B. Earhart, eds, *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion* (Michigan: University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2001); B. Faure, M. Moerman, G. Sekimori, eds., *Cahiers d'Etrême-Asie*, n. 18, 2009; *Shugendō: l'histoire et la culture d'une religion japonaise*, École Française d'Etrême-Orient, 2009; *Shugendō Now*. 今の修験道. Directed by Jean-Marc Abela and Mark Patrick McGuire, 2010; *Là où les montagnes volent/Where mountains fly*, directed by Sandra Roth and Carina Roth, 2010.

those who, after a prolonged period of suffering, were suddenly snatched from their ordinary mode of life by a shattering inner experience, a kind of psychic convulsion which they considered to be unmistakably of supernatural origin.

This experience (which represents a typical trait in the lives of the founders of the new religions) took broadly three forms: that of a supernatural dream (in which a deity appears to the future shaman while he is asleep and orders him to abandon his current activities and enter his service), that of a divine possession (*kamigakari* 神かきり), in which the person becomes the mouthpiece of the god), and that of a mantic journey to other worlds, in which the soul is guided for all, or part, of the way by a guardian divinity.³²

By contrast, today it is more probable that those who are attracted by Shugendō are people who feel desperate or disgusted with their daily lives, or simply individuals who wish to find a different meaning for their existence and are still opened to be inspired by the combination of effort, prayer, and the beauty of nature.

Therefore, Shugendō—this “Way of acquiring spiritual power”—is truly a symbolic return to the womb of the mountain, a return in which the individual is called to leave behind the countless obsessions of daily life and is helped to come into contact with his true self, that hidden zone where the divine awaits him to share again its true power with him: the power to tame the fire of human passions and desires and be granted, if only for one day, the experience of being finally at peace with oneself.³³

FORTUNE-TELLERS AND CHIROMANCERS

In Japan, divination (that is, the various methods used to communicate with supernatural beings in order to obtain answers to questions insoluble by ordinary human faculties) has a very old history.³⁴ In the past, the methods used in this practice (called *uranai* 占) could be reduced to four. First, there was *futonami* (太占), or the divination obtained by interpreting patterns of cracks made on a deer's shoulder blade when heated. The fact

32. These vocational experiences are described in detail by C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 167–74.

33. In Japan there is another group of people who act as mediums and that is on the verge of extinction: the *itako* (イタコ). This group is made up only of women who share a common trait: they are blind from birth and have been entrusted to guides who force them to undertake extremely harsh ascetic practices, thus enabling them to develop the power to come into contact with the souls of the dead and communicate with them. Today the *itako* women still offer their services during a festival that is celebrated every two years in July in Osorezan, a site located in the North of Japan on the Shimokita peninsula (a place identified with the gateway to hell in popular tradition, and thus very near to the realm of the dead). See I. Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, op. cit. 129–32; C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 140–63.

34. The data for the following description are taken from M. Lowe, C. Blacker, eds., *Divination and Oracles* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 63–86, and under the voice “Divination” in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. Vol. 2 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 121.

that this divinatory activity is mentioned in a few chapters of the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*, 712 AD) invested it with a halo of mystery.

The second method is that of *kiboku* (亀木), or divination of the cracks caused by heat on a turtle shell. From the seventh century to the Meiji restoration (1868), this method was used by *Jingikan* (神祇官 Office of Shintō Worship) to settle religious questions, such as the selection of the princess who would serve at the central shrine of Ise and the choice of her residence. This practice, described in detail by Ban Nobutomo in his *Seibokukō* (1844), requires the incision of the shell of a figure called *machi*, and the insertion of a burning brand of cherry-wood into five marked points in the incision. The cracks that radiate from each point are either “good” (*kichi* 吉) or “bad” (*kyō* 凶). The method is still used to determine which of two paddies (*Yuki* 主基 or *Suki* 悠紀) will provide the rice that the new emperor will offer to his ancestors, and in particular to the goddess Amaterasu, during the enthronement ceremony (a ceremony called *daijōsai* 大嘗祭).

The third method, that of dream incubation for divinatory purposes, was practiced especially during the Heian (794–1185) and Muromachi (1333–1568) periods and took place in both temples and shrines. The pilgrim journeyed to a sacred place to consult the divinity and obtain a solution for his health problems, or an oracle explaining the reason of his misfortunes. After having prayed and kept vigil (usually for seven, twenty-one, or one hundred days), he would receive the solution in a dream from a messenger of the god—who normally would appear in the form of a prodigious child (sometimes depicted in gilt) or of a Buddhist monk (described as an elderly man wrapped in dark garments).

The fourth method is divination through *ekikyō* (易経), namely the techniques to elicit responses from the classic Chinese text called *Yi jīng* or *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*). These techniques are still practiced by fortune-tellers in temples and other places of worship.³⁵ In modern times, the most popular divinatory practices are three:

The first, *meisen*, refers to methods of reading fortunes based on birthdays, including various versions of Eastern and Western astrology. The second, *boku-sen*, uses objects to offer divinations for those seeking advice on decision-making. I Ching, tarot cards and crystal-gazing belong to this genre. Finally, *sousen* involves divinations based on visual perception, including palmistry, physiognomy, *feng shui* and dream interpretation.³⁶

Interestingly, in these modern forms divination can be practiced without resorting to any divinity, and the fortune-teller is not required to possess any particular spiritual power. In fact, even in the context of fortune-tellers associations and state legislations, this activity is left unregulated, so that whoever chooses to practice it can do so freely and without the recognition of a controlling organ (and without a license certifying that the practitioner

35. For other types of divinations and petitions in Shintō, see the following pages from the online *Encyclopedia of Shinto*: <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/category.php?categoryID=28>.

36. *Japan Times*, 21 April, 2009, “The Past, Present and Future of Fortunetelling,” at <<http://www.japan-times.co.jp/text/nn20090421i.html>>.

knows at least the bare fundamentals of the subject).³⁷ For this reason there are no reliable statistics or data about the number of those who practice this activity, nor about their actual yearly income.³⁸

People come in contact with these forms of modern divination in two ways: through a face-to-face interview with the chiromancer (that is, through a real encounter, which usually takes place in a consultation venue set up by the fortune-teller in which reciprocal communication or dialogue between the subjects can occur), and through “anonymous” methods, in which there is no direct contact between the chiromancer and the petitioner, and communication is univocal and unidirectional (from the fortune-teller to the client). Before we turn to the people who make use of these forms of divination, let us briefly analyze these two approaches.³⁹

The most classic, and perhaps most popular, face-to-face consultation with fortune-tellers and chiromancers occurs in locations with a high density of people, such as entertainment districts and shopping malls, or the vicinities of large urban stations. In most cases their place of business consists of nothing more than a folding table, two simple chairs, with an advertisement placard on the side listing the prices of the different types of divination available (which vary based on the content and duration of the consultation).

Despite the fact that these booths are often found in the same locations, and the fortune-tellers must share the same working space (whence the keen competition), long lines of people will form in front of the more popular practitioners (for some of them are occasionally featured in the mass-media). The kinds of clairvoyance practiced by these “street fortune-tellers” are mainly chiromancy and physiomancy, but astrology and Chinese and Oriental astrology are also popular (the latter—called *shinchū shimei* 四柱推命, or *kyūsei jutsu* 九星術—consists in consulting a particular calendar and, based on the client’s date and time of birth, finding out whether his character is compatible with that of other people).

A second type of direct consultation is the one practiced by the “home fortune-tellers,” a diviner who has a fixed work schedule and maintains a set place of business (usually the fortune-teller’s home or office). These fortune-tellers receive only on appointment, have regular clients, and their consultation rates are usually very high. In the 1980s, when the

37. Two of the better known associations are the Japan Astrology and New Age Science Association (*nihon senjutsu kyōkai* 日本占術教会 at <<http://www.urandai-japan.com/>>), and the Oriental Fortune Society (*tōyō unsei gakkai* 東洋運勢学会 at <<http://cgi.touyou-unseigakkai.com/unsei/>>).

38. The article I just cited also informs us that since the fortune-tellers’ activity is not recognized by the State, they do not receive a pension and their job lacks security, bonuses and health insurance. As for their income, it varies based on the skill and popularity of each chiromancer. The best fortune-tellers can ask up to 30,000 yen for a single reading, while the average cost of a 30–45 minute visit is 5,000 yen. Often enough, the average fortune-teller will supplement his income by writing articles for astrology magazines or practicing divination by phone.

39. For the analysis of these forms and the information about the ensuing statistics, I rely on the excellent study by K. Suzuki, “Divination in Contemporary Japan. A General Overview and an Analysis of Survey Results,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1995, 22/3–4: 249–66.

NTT (the national telephone company) introduced pay-dial services many fortune-tellers began to offer consultations by phone, thus providing their clients with a greater choice in terms of available types of divination and the duration of the session, as well as the benefit of a relative anonymity.

This type of divination usually relies on chiromancy and Oriental astrology, even though it often also makes use of techniques of Western origin, such as tarot cards. Other frequently seen practices are *seimei handan* (姓名判断), or divination based on the number of strokes in the Chinese characters of the client's name (in some cases, the client is advised to change name in order to increase his good luck), and *kasō* (家相), or the prediction of one's prosperity or success by consulting the shape and arrangement of one's house (or by indicating the direction in which it should be built).

A third type of fortune-teller, who somehow comes half way between the first two, is the "touring fortune-teller," who appears for a limited time and only during some special events. These events can be meetings promoted by companies or firms (in which case the fortune-teller is invited to the gatherings by the sponsoring organizations) or in conferences on divination held periodically in pensions or hotels. The practices undertaken on these occasions are the same that were mentioned earlier.

As for the second approach to divination (the indirect and univocal one), it utilizes chiefly the forms of the written media. Many weekly publications, aimed particularly at women, include columns on (Western) astrology reporting zodiac sign readings. In addition to this, many periodicals publish several articles on divination; in this way, they familiarize their readers with the divinatory jargon (as well as providing useful information on how to contact fortune-tellers and chiromancers). Another source of indirect information are books dealing with divination written by people who practice it professionally (and who are famous because they appeared on TV—another form of indirect divination). Not only do these books often help the reader to become familiar with divination terminology and techniques, they also contain instructions on how to perform a divination on oneself.⁴⁰

One last and recent divination technique is practiced through computers (which are found in the entertainment venues of all the great shopping malls) that can read palms or compute predictions based on the customer's date and place of birth. The diffusion of divinatory software that recently has enjoyed a certain success belongs to this type of divination. Generally speaking, we can say that this second type of divination (which we have called indirect or univocal) produces three types of information. The first type concerns the introductory information on individual fortune-tellers themselves: their

40. Another form of indirect divination is that related to the *omikuji* (おみくじ), tiny paper strips that are either drawn by lot or purchased from special vending machines. Originally, the *omikuji* were used to decipher the will of the gods about one's life. This practice is still very popular in the temples: to buy some *omikuji* on the occasion of one's visit to the temple on new year's day is one of the traditions followed by all Japanese without distinction.

popularity, the special kind of divination they practice, their availability, etc. Usually the intended goal of this kind of information is to establish a direct communication between the chiromancer and the client.

The second type of information concerns the results of divination: the client supplies some personal data (date of birth, blood type, etc.) to a magazine column, a computer, a TV or radio program, and he receives the outcome of the consultation in a quick and efficient manner. In the process, however, that which happens between the input and the output—the real essence or substance of divination—is lost or becomes completely irrelevant.

Finally, the third type of information explains the method or nature of divination, thus enabling the person to practice it on himself: whoever succeeds in acquiring this information will then be able to use the complex world of chiromancy to his own advantage, even if some differences based on the ability and experience of each practitioner do, of course, remain.

Who are the people who make use of these modern forms of divination, and what kind of response do they seek? Recent studies tell us that the clients of divinatory practices are for the most part women (95%); among them the largest group is represented by unmarried women between the age of 23 and 26. In terms of social status, these clients are mostly full-time employees (56%), followed by university students (16%). 93% of these people say they consult the columns of magazines devoted to divination, while 76% of them declare that they are ready to accept the advice resulting from the consultation with the fortune-teller.

That they believe in divination is proved not only by the fact that, admittedly, they turned to these practices when they were going through some trouble or felt insecure about some choices they had to make, but also by their realization that the responses of their consultations somehow came true. Moreover, their faith in these practices is fostered by a close group of friends, relatives, and sympathizers, with whom they can freely discuss their experiences in this area. The techniques found most effective and credible are tarot cards (28%), palmistry (22%), and astrology (20%). The first two practices indicate that people seek answers that should be as original and personal as possible, that is, answers that provide not so much a “generic reading” of the situation, as a focused, circumscribed, and accurate reading that aims to solve the particular problems and questions of each individual.

In fact, for all these people divination means a technique through which they can access information that can hardly be learned through the normal channels of consultation, a practice to which they resort in order to know the near future, obtain convincing explanations about some recent mysterious events, reveal hidden traits of their personality, and obtain some advice. All these motives have to do with a request for information about their present condition, with how things will turn out if they will decide to listen to the result of divination, and what they should do to achieve immediate success and happiness. These data indicate that what divination grants to these people is the strength

or power to decide about questions that they consider essential for their lives, such as love life and the suitability of one's partner (74%), whether to accept a marriage proposal (26%), work related problems and the opportunity of changing their job (26%), future and career (16%).

In short, we can say that through a face-to-face encounter with fortune-tellers and chiromancers, these unmarried women seek an accurate and contextualized answer about the events that will affect the people close to them, a response as precise and personal as possible on the attitude they should assume or the course of action they should take among those available to them. After all, these are desires that do not differ much from those of their ancestresses; both then and now, these desires remain unsatisfied until someone or something appeases them by offering a solution, a word of reassurance, an anticipation as precise as possible of their all too mysterious future.

CONCLUSION

In the previous pages we have attempted to establish contact with some of those spiritual areas, miraculous powers, and visions of future events and destinies that seem to exist alongside ordinary reality (and that always require a mediator or supplementary information to explain the reason for our preoccupations and show us the best course of action). At the end of this brief excursus, we cannot fail to notice once again how people desire to broaden their earthly perspective in order to reach a much deeper, more complete, and dazzling reality.

Even if much of that mythical and legendary world, populated by gods, spirits, and tutelary beings, has been eroded and undermined by progress and modernity, these seem to have been unable to erase from the soul of man the instinctive appeal to something, or someone, that may reassure and comfort him by dispensing all the material and earthly benefits considered necessary for living a peaceful existence.

It is indeed true what Carmen Blacker wrote, with a healthy dose of realism, at the end of her dense study on the phenomenon of Shamanism in Japan:

The vision of another plane utterly different from our own, ambivalent, perilous and beyond our control, has faded. Instead the universe has become one-dimensional; there is no barrier to be crossed, no mysteriously other kind of being to be met and placated. The storms, droughts, sicknesses, fires which used to be laid at the door of *kami*, ancestors, foxes and ghosts, are now believed to lie within the competence and control of man... Time and again I have seen a rite made meaningless, its direction altered, its timing falsified, to suit the convenience of the television cameras. Gone therefore is the truth and beauty of the ritual, that which enabled it to make contact with another plane of existence.⁴¹

41. C. Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow. A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*, op. cit., 315–16.

And yet, even if these considerations may in part apply to Shugendō, the same cannot be said of the new religions and the modern divinatory practices. On the contrary, the latter seem to have emerged precisely as an answer to the troubles of modern man, for which he seeks a quick and miraculous solution. One no longer has the patience to entrust one's problems to the slow methods of institutional religions, nor does one have the time to investigate whether these religions are valuable and meaningful regardless of the effectiveness of their remedies.

In spite of everything, people know that the world cannot be reduced to, or completely identified with, the mere reality that unfolds before their eyes. On the contrary, in the dark of a restless night or in the sudden awakening from the nightmares that torment their souls, they seem to perceive the whispers of someone unknown close by;⁴² the premonitions that surprise their senses and thoughts are, perhaps, warnings from afar that they need to decipher in order to grasp their hidden meaning; illnesses, failures, and the misfortunes that afflict their loved ones surely have a reason which they are called to interpret and comprehend; the future must be known in advance if they want to tame, or at least weaken, its power; the occasional madness and meaninglessness of life must have a reason if they are to learn to overcome them...

Somehow everyone senses that there are forces beyond one's reach, spirits (both ancient and new) that pull the invisible strings of the cosmos and of one's existence. Then, it is a matter of turning to the great market of the available mediations and choose the most original ones, those that guarantee a greater effectiveness: whether one seeks a miracle, an exorcism or a divination, whether from ancient intermediaries, fortune-tellers, crystal balls, computers or zodiac signs, man wants to avert misfortune at all costs, take possession of his destiny and defeat the unknown. In fact, the only certainty he has is that it would be foolish and unseemly to surrender to uncertainty. And this is the reason why man, today as well as in the past, has relentlessly endeavored to unravel mysteries, to shed light on arcane enigmas, to interpret his destiny.

And yet, despite his zeal in trying to appease his curiosity and make the invisible concrete, man does not realize that perhaps there is a further religious realm or sphere, a dimension in which what rules is not the sacred but the Holy, not fear but Love, not doubt but the certainty of what man already is and will be.⁴³ This dimension does not belong to the *numinous*, in whose proximity the subject is annihilated and by whose invisible net he is held captive.

42. The "sensation" of being surrounded by strange creatures (monsters, spirits, goblins, phantoms, ghosts, supernatural or imaginary beings... called *yōkai* 妖怪 in Japanese), and the "perception" that there may be a parallel world that is nevertheless close to our world, are the object of an original study by F. D. Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade. Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009).

43. "My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is" (1Jn 3:2).

On the contrary, this religious sphere gives back to man that freedom that he seemed to have lost as he faced the unavoidable fact of making a choice; it reassures him about the “not-yet” by indicating how the “now” is already inscribed in the “already;” it invites him to consider the spiritual realm not as something that he must place under his control, something that he is allowed to profane through magic and by bending it to his own will, but as a world to approach humbly and with reverence, in a prayerful attitude for all that he has received and all that Providence holds in store for him.

This is a world that can give him that hope and that the sense of fulfillment, forgiveness, mercy, and love that he is constantly seeking.

And, finally, this is a world that can give man the necessary strength to become reconciled with that which no fortune-teller, shaman, seer, chiromancer, or founder of new religions will ever be able to drive away or exorcize: his own death.

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PHILIPPINES

EUGENIO PULCINI

People reach out to the Ultimate reality in many different ways. Furthermore, while psychological, sociological and emotional elements influence religious experience, none of them can fully explain it. Although local religious traditions in the Philippines have been heavily influenced by Western religions (i.e. Islam and Christianity), they still maintain a distinct Southeast Asian flavor. Nevertheless, folk spiritual beliefs, practices and symbols reveal a form of syncretism that contains elements of both traditions, namely, the so-called organized religions and the “traditional” religion. This phenomenon—which is also called folk religion—is still an object of interest, discussion and controversy among scholars.¹

This brief paper aims to portray—from various perspectives—some of the still widespread practices and practitioners

1. Although the expression “folk religion” has a larger application, for our discourse it will mainly refer to folk Catholicism. In the same line, terms like “traditional,” “folk,” and “popular” are used interchangeably since in the “real” world, the concepts, the practices as well as the practitioners, often overlap.

of the Philippines Folk-religion, without idealizing them. They have a very long history and, currently, many of their features have penetrated Christian belief. The author does not look upon these as a bizarre museum exhibit, or some form of illusion induced by emotional stress, nor does he merely dismiss them as being different and disengaged from other religions. On the contrary, we will try to describe how they occur at the threshold of religious experience, without a rigid distinction between the natural and supernatural, or “sacred” and “profane,” revealing a mentality that is beyond verification and indifferent to contradiction.

Hence they are a concomitant factor in every religion, in every culture and at any level of development; they preserve an uninterrupted continuity in the midst of a modern and “highly technological” culture. They are not necessarily opposed to “authentic belief,” but are profoundly embedded in the deep levels of the Filipino’s psyche and its cultural belief system.

QUIAPO CASE-STUDY

It is said that “on Fridays all roads lead to Quiapo,” a city district at the very heart of Manila. When the word Quiapo is mentioned, what comes to mind is the Black Nazarene (*Poong Nazareno* or *Señor Nazareno*). This is the common perception and one shared by the author, who has been living in the Philippines for more than twelve years.

In a sense Quiapo—and “Quiapo church” where religious celebrations never seem to end—symbolizes the Filipino soul. In fact, Friday is the day of *Señor Nazareno*. Over the course of generations, thousands of devotees (*deboto* in Tagalog) from a wide range of occupations, educational levels, age, the sick and healthy alike, all go to the Quiapo Church to pray. Some express their devotion by walking on their knees in church, other walk barefooted in the long, crowded processions, donate huge amounts of money and make time to serve in the church.²

The fervent show of devotion to the Black Nazarene in Quiapo by crowds of people is impressive, especially during the annual procession on 9 January (the Black Nazarene’s feast day).³ During the feast, the 7-foot-high image of the black, cross-carrying Christ is brought out and paraded through the district. This is one of the fascinating events that

2. The church of Quiapo in Plaza Miranda, Manila, is the shrine of the statue of the Black Nazarene. The Augustinian Recollect Fathers brought the image to the Philippines from Mexico between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its famous procession takes place twice a year: on January 9 and on Good Friday.

3. “The Black Nazarene procession is a Manila tradition that was already in place during the early nineteenth century... To mark the start of the novena ending in the spectacular procession, the Nazarene is brought out on 1 January. In this particular procession, the Nazarene stands not on a *carroza* (processional float on wheels) with long ropes, but on *andas*, or platform that is carried on the shoulders. The core activity of the 9 January procession is the pulling of the two long ropes of the Nazarene’s *carroza*. Men vie with each other for the honor of holding and pulling the rope. This requires both guts and, as in a dance, a good sense of rhythm.” C. Bonilla, “Devotion to the Black Nazarene as an Aesthetic Experience,” in: N. F. Zialcita, ed., *Quiapo: Heart of Manila*. (Manila: Quiapo Printings, 2006), 114–15.

vividly portray the Filipino idea of what it means to live in this world and their experiential understanding of religious belief and practice. The procession of the *Señor Nazareno* attracts throngs of people and the occasion is marked by intense fervor and enthusiasm. Television cameras capture and reveal the staggering images of Quiapo's Black Nazarene procession, which now has millions of devotees.

The incredibly huge crowds ebb, wave and surge, releasing tsunamis of adrenaline infused with supplications, compunctions, *panata* (pledge), gratitude and hopes. With single-mindedness, they jostle with one another and risk their life to get close to the Black Nazarene for the rare privilege of wiping with their shirts (the *punas-punas* ritual), a handkerchief or a towel, the wooden cross, or any body parts of the *Señor Nazareno*, or even just touching the platform on which the image rests.

The number of people who get crushed and maimed increases each year. Most of those who pull the rope and are closest to the float are men,⁴ but in the past decade, there has been a sharp rise in the number of women (and children!) who, wearing pants and T-shirts, like the rest, recklessly plunge into the frenzied crowd and dare to shoulder their way into the densest section of the procession. A deadly stampede can happen anytime. Indeed, no other piety in the Philippines can equal the “manic fervor” that marks the devotion to the Black Nazarene.

Needless to say, the words “pagan,” and “superstitious” appear in writings on popular religious practices such as the Friday processions of the Black Nazarene. Flippant onlookers often dismiss ‘the irrationality’ of the devotees as “fanatical,” “superstitious” and “overacting.” “Fanatic” has been applied to those who participate in the 9 January procession, especially those who pull the ropes of the *Nazareno's* float. The beliefs, practices and visceral reactions experienced by the devotees, in fact, do not always conform to those prescribed by the Catholic hierarchy. The 9 January Black Nazarene procession in Quiapo seems to proclaim the hegemony of Catholic ideology in Philippine society, but in fact it shows its limitations.

The Church teaches that the image of the Nazarene is only a mute statue that merely represents the person of Christ; that the priest represents Christ on earth; that processions and novenas are not as important as the Mass; and that practices such as walking on knees should not be done while Mass is being celebrated. While ordinary people may seem to understand this, the devotees' reactions lead them elsewhere. The devotees invest the Nazarene, the shrine, and the procession with meanings and practices that are largely at cross-purposes with the official line. Without realizing it, ordinary people do write—so

4. It has been called a display of masculine spirituality. “Some of the more outstanding processions in the Philippines are violent and male-dominated, such as the ‘Black Nazarene’ procession in Quiapo and ‘Peñafrancia’ in Bicol, where men struggle with one another to wipe the image of the Blessed Virgin with their handkerchief. In Quiapo, men struggle with one another to obtain the honor of pulling the rope of the float on which the *Nazareno* stands. Other men scramble on top of other men to wipe the image of the Nazarene with their handkerchiefs or their towels.” F. Hornedo in: N. L. Mercado, ed. *Filipino Popular Devotions. The Interior Dialogue between Traditional Religion & Christianity* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc. 2000), 87.

to speak—their own unwritten “scripts” during these ceremonies. They draw the content from their culture, their biographies, their beliefs and embodied values. Although Church officials prescribe what is legitimate and what is not, with the *Nazareno*’s devotees they do not have the monopoly on the formulation of the “script.”

They have their own ways of actualizing these meanings and their own explanations. They ask the spirit of the *Nazareno* to enter the core of their being. They express wishes and intentions for themselves and their loved ones, but they do not press these as entitlements. They entrust the *Nazareno* with the task of deciding their worthiness. In return, they make a lifelong commitment to virtue and personal transformation, albeit limited; they promise to attend the procession every year and to visit the icon whenever the opportunity arises.

Together with the icon’s appearance, the devotees create a mood that transcends the everyday realm and becomes connected with the “other world,”⁵ which constitutes an emotionally satisfying encounter with the divine. “Faith healers” even go beyond the pale by falling into a trance, thus experiencing the divine without official priestly guidance: if the city shaman existed, he would be a devotee of the *Señor Nazareno*.

Other major reasons that explain why Quiapo is so famous in popular culture are connected with cheap, pirated music, digital video and the district’s fame for alternative medicine, fortune-telling and magic. In this well-known Manila district, just a few meters from the basilica of the Black Nazarene, one can find the underground economy of enchantment, healing and divination—all on display and for sale: herbalism, amulets and talismans, fortune telling and Shamanism.

Quiapo’s wares have roots in a long, local tradition of belief in magic that began in “pagan times” and persisted in new forms after baptism. One only has to go to Quiapo, in front of the church, to find all kinds of local *anting-anting* (amulets), *gayuma* (love charms), *kontra-kulam* (anti-sorcery) and *kontra-usog* (against *usog*, a childhood folk-illness). The fascination of the charms extends to all age groups and capitalizes on a strong tradition of animism that dates back to the pre-colonial era; animism is the belief that objects have magical powers which protect people.

Although both amulets and talismans are called *anting-anting* in Filipino, they are not the same. According to Felix Fojas, a talisman is either offensive or defensive, whereas an amulet is always defensive and/or protective, always protecting the wearer from specific or general harm.⁶ Most of the vendors sell well at Quiapo because of its proximity to the

5. “The key is the point of ‘liminality.’ It is at this point that the pilgrims experience distance and release from mundane structures and institutions where they are placed in their assigned roles and statuses in society. During the ‘limen,’ they reach the threshold in and out of time. It is here they receive ‘liberation,’ undergoing a direct experience of the sacred, either in the material aspect of miraculous healing or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirit and personality.” J. Clemente F. Ignacio, “Devotion to the Black Nazarene (A Pastoral Understanding),” at <<http://quiapochurch.com:8080/MBBN/featured/features-articles/understanding-the-devotion-to-the-black-nazarene>>.

6. Karl R. De Mesa, “Street Magic,” in N. F. Zialcita, ed., *Quiapo: Heart of Manila*, op. cit., 132–33.

Nazarene and his Basilica. Aside from fortune-tellers, it is only the majority of the amulet vendors who express a profound belief in the matrix of power that surrounds and permeates Quiapo and gives their wares their efficaciousness.

The medal of Saint Benedict (*San Benito* in Spanish) is one of Quiapo's most popular selling amulets. It is espoused by the Roman Catholic Church as a protection against attacks by evil spirits and demons. Jaime Licauco, a paranormal researcher and author, describes its function: "When properly blessed by a Benedictine monk it can protect one from demonic possession, snake poisoning, even earthquakes and other such calamities. It can also protect against demons, *incubi*, or *succubi*."⁷ According to the vendors, these functions correspond to its uses on the street. While the commerce of magical items entered the third millennium without a hitch, the vendors admit that it has been sluggish in recent years.

Most buyers of these magical items are from the countryside and Filipino overseas workers who bring their purchases to their respective destinations, either to sell or give them to other coworkers. Interestingly, most of those who buy the anti-witchcraft amulets come from the Bicol Region. Vendors explain that the mountainous nature of this region prompts many residents to seek protection against the many harmful powers that are believed to roam there. Less than half of the vendors are familiar with how an amulet or talisman becomes empowered.⁸

Herbalism in Quiapo is linked directly to medicine men. These are not necessarily shamans, though shamans can be medicine men too. The medicine-man, who is called *arbularyo*, *tambalan*, *manghihiilot* or *manggagamot* throughout the archipelago, uses herbal treatments as a primary medium for healing and community care. In Quiapo, people's needs dictate what kinds of remedies are sold, according to a do-it-yourself ethic.⁹

Quiapo Plaza's fortune-tellers (*manghuhula*) form a minority and they maintain a peculiar place in the district hierarchy. They are part of the magical matrix that is Quiapo and are probably at its heart. However, they are often viewed either as eccentrics or fakes. Residents associate them more with document counterfeiters rather than with seers. Nevertheless, people regard them with a mix of caution and reverence. After all, what if they are true seers?

According to the principle "To know the future is to change it," divination, like talismanic magic, seeks control. Thus, fortune-telling is to be regarded as effective not only when it is accurate, but also when it was helpful or meaningful to the client. Among the common methods used by Quiapo's fortune-tellers—tarot decks, ordinary playing cards, numerology, palmistry, crystal balls, automatic writing, face reading and trance divination (simply closing the eyes, entering into a light trance and telling fortunes)—two or all

7. Ibid., 136.

8. Ibid., 134. The same author presents a list of the most common amulets and talismans sold in Quiapo (according to the vendors).

9. Ibid., 127–31.

of these may be known to them, though they will usually favor only one. Nearly all these diviners are women, mostly above thirty years of age. Most, if not all of them, are devotees of the *Señor Nazareno*, but only some claim that their divination powers come from the *Señor*. Others claim that they receive their powers from the Blessed Virgin or from patron saints. The majority were taught by persons in their families who were also diviners, and by some shamans. Though divination may have been the domain of the shaman in ancient times, today it is more similar to talismanic magic than to herbalism.

It goes without saying that all these elements reveal how folk belief blended with Christian (and Islamic) practices to give a unique perspective on these religions that took root in the Philippines. Consequently, the so-called “Folk religion” remains a deep source of comfort, belief and cultural pride among many Filipinos, affecting substantially the quality of their spiritual experience.

While this religion-leading-to-commerce sequence has also occurred at other major pilgrimage sites both in the Philippines and elsewhere, something unusual has taken place in Quiapo with no equivalent elsewhere in the country. The church and the surrounding plaza have become the focus of a matrix of magical services that heals the sick, protects against various afflictions, and foretells the future. At the center’s eye is the *Señor Nazareno*. He who drove out the merchants from the Temple at Jerusalem, however, now “presides” over an enclosure synonymous with commerce; He, whose name is invoked by Catholic priests when condemning magic, is regarded by the practitioners of the occult as the source of their power. Quiapo is a paradox.¹⁰

Indeed it is so. The very few meters that separate Quiapo Church and the stalls symbolically reveal the insignificant distance between religion and magic, between a “structured religiosity” and another characterized more by whimsicality and emergency. Basically, religion and magic have certain external similarities. If the attitude of persons towards a particular belief or action is one of uncertainty, and there is the feeling of humility and supplications for favors, then such a belief or action could be religious. If the feeling is one of being able to control and manipulate the entities and forces that govern events, acted upon by anguish and fear and always dictated by external forces, then the belief is magic.

This explains why the clergy in particular, and Church authorities in general, look with some concern at the folk religiosity in Quiapo (and not only there) and the quality of the religious experience it involves. Elements of fanaticism and superstition are recognized by the Church-leaders, who admit the need to control and correct them. Some of the Church’s leaders have even suggested that the *Nazareno* procession be ended, insinuating that the time has come for Filipino Catholicism to move away from the motifs of fatalism and helplessness, dependence on miracles and the transactional religiosity that

10. Ibid., 147.

have characterized the Filipinos, who are still attached to indigenous/pre-colonial spiritual beliefs.

Quiapo's microcosm reveals the fact that the dividing-line between the sacred and profane, magic and religion, faith and superstitions, which is exquisitely depicted in ritual observances, is summarily breached in the most inexplicable ways, revealing rather dim—and constantly shifting—boundaries.

One can't help wondering: what is it about the Quiapo church that attracts people, even at the risk of suffocating, getting crushed or slashed? How do Quiapo *debotos* experience transcendence in and through this devotion? How do they give form to the "invisible"? Would any "rational theology" manage to affect/change this kind of religious belief and practice, thereby radically transforming the Filipino psyche? Possibly the most enlightened comment was made by the new Archbishop of Manila, Chito Tagle, who was recently appointed by the Vatican as a member of the Congregation for Catholic Education: "One cannot understand a *Nazareno deboto*. Only a *deboto* can."¹¹

FOLK RELIGION IN THE PHILIPPINES: OLD AND NEW SHAMANISM

The Quiapo case-study shows how the constant interference between the so-called established, or institutionalized religions and older popular religious practices, cannot be ignored. In the Philippines, with the successful introduction of Christianity, Roman Catholicism became the dominant religion without the indigenous beliefs being completely obliterated. They never disappeared and the fundamental differences were to be reconciled, in one way or another, with the "competing" belief system, resulting in the unique way in which religion is practiced in the Philippines today.

The pre-Hispanic belief system of Filipinos¹² consisted of a pantheon of gods, creatures that guarded the streams, fields, trees, mountains, forests and houses. Regular sacrifices were offered to placate these deities and spirits—some of whom were benevolent, some malevolent. Anyone who was reputed to possess supernatural power over the supernatural and natural was automatically elevated to a position of prominence. Every village had its share of shamans and priests, who competitively plied their talents and carried out ritual healing, divination and magic. Many also became famous for their ability to develop *anting-anting*, a charm guaranteed to make a person invincible in the face of human enemies.

The Spaniards reinforced this animism with all kinds of powers attributed to *santos* (wooden and stone images of the saints), *stampitas* or "holy pictures," relics and other "holy" objects.

11. M. Ordoñez, *A Machismo Spectacular*, at <<http://opinion.inquirer.net/21513/a-machismo-spectacular>>.

12. J. Miller, "Religion in the Philippines," at <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/Tagalog/Modules/Modules/PhilippineReligions/article_miller.htm>.

Shamanistic cults and traditions were dominant in pre-Christian indigenous religious practices. When the Spaniards began the twin processes of colonization and Christianization of the Philippines in 1565 (in the form of Catholicism, the only Christian denomination at that time there), they found that the vast majority of spiritual ministers in the islands were priestesses, the unique figure of the *babaylans* or *catalonas*. This was a religious trait that Filipinos shared in common with other *Malay* peoples. In fact, before the arrival of Catholicism,

a form of Shamanistic Animism was the spiritual substratum or bedrock upon which the communities relied... Indeed there are strong similarities between the many animist traditions of Southeast Asia — with Hinduism being the common link albeit with regional variations.¹³

There is wide agreement among authors that the role/place of women in religious rituals was invariably active, highly regarded and unrestricted. Such was the predominance of women in this field that, when men performed religious offices, they had to dress and act like their female counterparts.¹⁴

The pre-Hispanic indigenous religious ceremonies were intertwined with healing and communal well-being. The *babaylans* performed a variety of functions for the community that included healing, making amulets and charms, rituals for the dead, setting out food for the spirits, “the treatment” of children’s illnesses, hysteria, or the insanity of women. Through songs and poetry, they would perform worship and appeasement of the gods, and offer special petitions and thanksgiving to the gods of the spirit world as represented by their *anitos*.¹⁵

No permanent temples were built by the ministers. Their ceremonies, known as *pandot* and *mag-anito*, were celebrated on an impressive rock, in the supplicant’s home, a cave, a river or, above all, a grove where the *balete*, the tree of the gods of the Malays, reigned supreme. The *babaylans* were often women of menopausal age (although they were married and had children): only the assistants were younger. A long period of training was necessary before a *babaylan* or *catalonan* could learn all the religious, cultural and medical knowledge of their respective ethno-linguistic groups. The younger functionaries

13. C. Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), xvii

14. They were called *asog* by the Visayan and *bayog* by the Tagalog and sometimes also by the Visayan, both words meaning “effeminate, or womanish.” Given that they were few in number, the *bayog*, was much revered and sought after. For a more exhaustive analysis of the status of *babaylan* and the terminology used to describe the functions of women in the spiritual realm of pre-Christian indigenous religious practices. Cf. E. Pulcini “Women and Religions,” in T. Tosolini ed., *Women in Context* (Osaka: Asian Study Center, 2008), 79–93.

15. *Anitu/Anito* (or *diwata*): spirit. This is to be understood both as the collective name for pre-Hispanic belief system and the soul of the dead when it is regarded as manifesting itself to the living in some way, such as by apparitions or other tangible signs.

were trained through apprenticeship by a senior priestess, who was usually a relative or friend whom they succeeded upon death.

In ancient times, “the *babaylan* was part of a socio-economic structure which revolved around three main personalities—the *datu*, the *panday* and the *babaylan* or *catalonan*.”¹⁶ The role of *babaylan* “was interesting, because she was the central personality in ancient Philippine society in the fields of culture, religion and medicine and all kinds of theoretical knowledge about the phenomenon of nature. In other words the *babaylans* were a kind of proto-scientist because of their specialization about man and God.”¹⁷ They also took charge of keeping alive the mythology and cultural heritage of the *barangay* itself. The *babaylan* was the priestess who held the community united. She was the medic and consoler, somebody who served, gifted in healing the spirit and the body.

By insisting that all animist ritual was projected onto the “devil,” and entirely satanic in nature, the Spaniards eventually linked the religious practitioners, *babaylan* or *catalonan*, with demonology—thus eroding the vital and positive aspects of their work and knowledge in their communities and negating an entire cultural and religious realm. Many of the aforementioned notions dealing with the *babaylans* and their rituals were something that Spanish priests tried to eradicate by telling the indigenous Filipino that the “spirits” were demons and that healers were witches, in order to persuade them to give up this traditional religion.

Central to the contest between Animism and Catholicism was the introduction of the notion of “miracle” and “intercession of the saints”—both crucial in the takeover of rituals central to life, including fertility, birth, illness and death. Both the miracles and the images of the saints undermined even further the authority of the *babaylans*. Any syncretism was considered heretical and actively discouraged by the missionaries.¹⁸

The blueprint for the marginalization of ‘animist religion’ and its spiritual leaders—especially eradicating the influence of the many women mediums and healers and of the male transvestite mediums called *asog*—was replicated and refined by successive generations of explorers, colonial administrators and missionaries, without however succeeding in suppressing them, even in the few areas with a good number of missionaries. At present, in most of the many societies and ethnic groups in the Philippines (those we call “tribes” or “cultural communities”), the *babaylans* have managed to keep their spiritual and medical traditions alive; indeed female religious-medical expertise remains important in the cults of Mt. Banahaw today, for example, the *ma-aram* tradition of Panay and

16. Z. Salazar, “The Babaylan in Philippine History,” in P.D. Tapales, ed. *Women’s Role in Philippine’s History: Selected Essays* (Quezon City: University Centre for Women’s Studies, University of the Philippines), 211–13.

17. See also C. Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685*, op. cit., 89–94.

18. C. Fenella, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118ff.

native Bicolano healing practices.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it must be said that, whereas the Filipino shamans were mostly female, the present healers and shamans are mostly male.²⁰

Ancient medical lore and religious knowledge are likewise being safeguarded and continued today in the activities of traditional healers or shamans, such as the *sukdan* shaman of Northern Bohol,²¹ a place that is home to a variety of shamans.²²

The anthropologist Ulysses Aparece describes them as possessing a noble quality of mind and will, and placed in their office usually by a divine calling. The typical personality of shamanic individuals, which is generally quiet and introverted, is not given to trivial matters, and is characterized by artistic talents which make the shaman an excellent poet, singer, dancer or dramatic performer.

Following a sequence, the *sukdans* perform different kinds of rituals—healing, thanksgiving, agricultural, and house-transfer rituals. They have an affinity with special places such as sacred groves and grounds; they travel to the spirit worlds during their ecstatic trances; they preside over ritualistic and theatrical performances prior to healing sessions; they make use of prayers which are rich in symbolism, imagery and metaphor. Their prayers are adapted to singing, chanting, acting or dancing like a woman.

The *sukdans*'s family prays the novenas in honor of his *dibusyón*, which is the “patron saint” to whom the *sukdan* is devoted: the Catholic male and female saints (*kasantusan ug kasantasan*) are called upon to perform miracles of healing, or watching over crops and livestock, or guiding the soul of farmers and hermits entering heaven. The most invoked are *San Agustin*, *San Antonio*, *Birhen* (the Virgin) *Maria*, and *Sto. Niño*.

During the healing session, the patient is aware of the tremendous power to which the shaman is heir. All of these spirits and saints are convened at once from all the corners of the earth to attend only to him, with all their powers, and at the petition of all present.²³ The audience's awareness of the present becomes cloudy, as the chant transports it back in time and space to the ancestors and warriors—heroes, through the archaic language, invented terms and poetic expressions. Analysis of the texts reveals the shaman's worship

19. L. H. Claussen, *Unconventional Sisterhood: Feminist Catholic Nuns in the Philippines* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 16–7.

20. “While Catholicism maintained (then and now) an exclusively male/masculine priesthood, the women leaders of the Animist tradition did not feel the need to exercise total control and exclude men from their ranks... (since) there was no revered founder of Animism to provide the biological sexual blueprint for future shamans. In this instance, biology did not represent destiny, and it was sufficient for a male to outwardly replicate the look and behavior of the woman shaman by dressing up and performing the feminine.” C. Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521–1685*, op. cit., 136.

21. U. B. Aparece, “*Rigalu*: The Ritual of Gift-giving among the *Sukdan* Shamans of Northern Bohol,” in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture & Society*, 2006, 34/2: 135–87.

22. N. Burgos, “Siquijor's Young Shamans Continue Healing Tradition,” at <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/regionnns/view/20080726-150766/Siquijors-young-shamans-continue-healing-tradition>>.

23. Catholic saints are seen as a new repertoire of possible allies in healing which has added to, but not replaced, the existing spirits and ancestors on whom healers would call.

of nature, his respect for it, and his wish to live in harmony with it. For him all trees are sacred.

Other important symbols are talismanic crystals or stones used by the shaman in the initial diagnosis. They provide him with knowledge of the supernatural origin of illness.²⁴ In exchange for the favors of the spirits, they must offer a *rigalu* (gift) to them, usually consisting of the following: boiled parts of rooster or hog, betel chews, rolled tobacco leaves, boiled rice, wine, soft drinks, boiled chicken eggs and a service fee. The practice of presenting these kinds of offerings is traditional, and what is traditional is most pleasant to spirits.

FOLK RELIGION IN THE PHILIPPINES: PRACTICE AND PRACTITIONERS

According to Francisco Demetrio SJ, in his *Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs*,²⁵ Filipinos have been wearing amulets, talismans and charms for centuries. These objects are seen as possessing magical powers and they are often made from various materials (wood, metal, herbs) with a religious significance.

Anting-anting varies all across the nation, and there are amulets and charms that address almost every kind of need. The author gives the following reason for people wearing them: to protect themselves from evil spells and malevolent spirits (to ensure that no curse will be effective against them); to gain an advantage over others (some even claim to have supernatural powers); to defend themselves against accidents and sickness; to attract love and good fortune (some people use what they call *gayuma*, a love potion).

Many (included the shamans) believe that the best time to acquire materials for an *anting-anting* is on Good Friday, because there is a belief that the spirits roaming the earth lamenting the death of Christ will add extra power to these objects. In some towns, it is not unusual to see hundreds of *arbuaryos*, *mangkukulam* (sorcerers) and shamans gather on Good Friday in a religious procession, going to the mountains to gather plants

24. M. L. Tan, *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam* (Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2008). In this book, the author looks at folk illnesses in the Philippines including, as the title suggests, *usog, pasma and kulam*. Tan explains the broader social and cultural contexts of these concepts. He discusses these illnesses according to their perceived causes, broadly grouping them into three clusters: mystical, personalistic and naturalistic. Tan uses different social science perspectives to explore the deeper meanings of these illnesses, including their links to social norms, beliefs tensions and conflicts. He gives a fascinating account of “group therapy” among the *negritos* of northern Luzon, where the shaman induces a trance in the patient and instructs him to fight and overcome the “demon” that is causing the illness. The patient not only overcomes “the demon” but demands a dance and a song from this demon. After coming out of the trance, the patient performs this dance-drama for the community, validating his victory over the “demon”. Healing in this context takes place in a whole cultural area; it is not divided between “clinic” and “outside”. Furthermore, the rationale can easily be extended to the notion of social change, where one overcomes the “demon”, and can share the fruits of this victory with the community.

25. F. Demetrio y Radaza, *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs* (Cagayan de Oro City: Xavier University, 1970).

and other materials to be used in their trade, in the belief that the materials gathered would be more powerful as a result of Christ's death.

Beliefs in sorcery are found throughout the Philippines, the term *kulam* being the most popular.²⁶ The early Spanish missionaries themselves were aware of the existence of sorcery beliefs among the “*indios*.” *Kulam* is a kind of witchcraft practiced in the Philippines and thrives on people's fears. Witches, who use *kulam* are called *mangkukulam* and often use black magic. Nowadays there has been a move to revamp the image of *kulam* and present it in a flattering light within a mind-market setting. Nevertheless, many still hold the traditional view of *kulam* as a dark, evil form of a sorcery. Superstitious Filipinos intimate that *mangkukulam* are often from the islands of Siquijor and Samar, and the province of Sorsogon, which are also famous for their many “faith healers.”

Sorcery too involves a process in which one person, the sorcerer, exerts influence over another, but in this case deliberately and maliciously, with the aid of material magic. Sorcerers are always said to be motivated by the wish to oppress their fellow men and often experiment on victims they do not even know. Correspondingly, sorcery may be used to “possess” a person, although in such cases it is a malevolent spirit that is “sent” to take over the individual. Such beliefs remain common, and are in fact reinforced by *fundamentalist* evangelical groups which conduct exorcisms.²⁷

Among Christians and Muslims alike, sorcery is often an individual affair, usually motivated by revenge in cases ranging from being jilted in courtship, or being deceived in a business deal. The aggrieved party consults known sorcerers and pays for their services. Such practitioners continue to exist even in urban areas, where the same terms are used to define the different kind of actions that are still used by sorcerers among contemporary Filipinos.²⁸ In fact, there are different terms used for particular types of sorcery, including *kulam* or *gaway* (Tagalog), *tanem* and *tamay* (Ilokano), *barang* and *hiwit* (Visayan groups) and *pantak* (Muslim groups). Despite the differences in terms, the methods are strikingly similar among the different ethnic groups.

The sorcerers use incantations and prayers, even incorporating ritual paraphernalia associated with the Catholic Church. In addition, “imitative” and “contagious” magical principles are invoked, using hair or nails of the intended victim in a voodoo-like method. *Barang*, a specific type of sorcery found among Filipino Christian groups, uses

26. Among tribal groups, sorcery is usually reported as the effort of a community to inflict illness on a common enemy, using communal rituals, although there seems to be no evidence of such communal sorcery rituals at present.

27. H. Pangilinan, *Hula, Multo, Faith Healing, Atbp. Exposé ng Occult sa Pilipinas* (Manila: OMF literature, Inc., 2001). It is a stark example of that kind of understanding and the literature it is generating. The author, a pastor of the “Church So Blessed”, defines tout-court these practices, and all the people involved in them, as belonging to Satan and his demons, calling on people/youth to salvation through the liberating power of Jesus.

28. For this topic, I have followed the presentation of M. L. Tan. *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam*, op. cit., 55–68.

“pet” insects and other animals to poison the victim. The similarities are found not just within the Philippines, but also throughout the Southeast Asian region.

Belief in witchcraft seems to be limited to Christian and Muslim groups. These beliefs center around the *aswang* and *balbal* for Christians and the *balbalan* among Muslims.²⁹ As in the case of sorcerers, certain individuals are publicly known (or rather, publicly labeled) as *aswang*; however, they are greatly feared and may on occasion be the target of physical violence. Suspects are usually less sociable: “They cannot look you straight in the eye; they are somewhat individualistic and have self-reliance; they prefer not to seek advice from other people.”³⁰ Clearly the *aswang* belief operates as a form of social control. The label may be a social construct, serving a particular social purpose. In some cases, entire barrios may carry the stigma of having more *aswang* than the others. In a sense, a social boundary is created and reinforced.

In fact, the *aswang* belief discourages antisocial attitudes such as secretiveness, solitariness, misanthropy and the like. As we said previously, the Spanish friars transformed native women healers and religious practitioners into the *aswang*; just as in the West witch-hunts and witch-burning were probably part of misogynist or anti-women views. The distinction between sorcery and witchcraft is clear: the former is a socially sanctioned practice while the latter is proscribed. Both labels attribute special powers to certain individuals, but the power of *aswang* is innate. The *aswang* has no way of self-redemption and is permanently excommunicated and the stigma is even passed on to descendants. At the same time, ascriptions of *aswang* and *mangkukulam* clearly reflect social differentiation.

Sometimes the *mangkukulam* will maintain a rivalry with a village *arbularyo* or medicine man. In other times, the *mangkukulam* herself doubles as the village’s witchdoctor or faith healer, “curing” sicknesses inflicted upon them by the local version of *dwarves*, *spiritus*, *engkantos*, etc. Interestingly, Philippine witchcraft often co-exists harmoniously with Catholicism, especially in the country’s rural areas. Good witches invoke the name of saints, whisper Latin prayers and even wear scapulars to ward off the machinations of their evil counterparts.³¹ Here we could well ask if it is enough to have an impressive (if eclectic) collection of saints’ statues arranged at home, into a “shrine,” to be recognized

29. Ibid., 71. The *aswang* belief is probably pan-Malayan. Contemporary accounts of the *aswang* belief are similar for various Philippine ethnic groups and bear a striking similarity to the early Spanish descriptions of the *osuang*: ‘a man or woman possessing preternatural powers of locomotion and metamorphosis, and an inhuman appetite for the voided phlegm sputum of the deathly sick, as well as the flesh and blood of the newly dead.’ The idea of the *aswang* being a ‘vampire’ is probably of more recent vintage, borrowed from western demonology.

30. Ibid., 72.

31. More than once I myself have met people with serious illness, who have been left untreated; and, as if matters were not complicated enough, the mother and other relatives would come up with their own explanation for the lingering illness: whatever the sickness was, it was brought on by *barang* or *kulam*. In other cases, patients themselves might not believe in sorcery, but if people around them keep talking about *kulam*, they will begin to believe that they are victims: “This man/boy/girl is not sick. He is a victim of *kulam* or witchcraft” and this can worsen their condition. Some health professionals allow people to conduct their ‘rituals’ as long as patients don’t abandon professional help from doctors and *western* medicine.

and accepted into the cultic life of the Church; or if the traditional religious practitioners should be called upon to renounce everything related to traditional religious practices in order to be accepted, for example, as “canonical” healers!

The art of healing has deep roots in the Philippines. One study claims that the modern Filipino faith-healers are the continuation and development of a Filipino pre-Hispanic medical-religious system of beliefs and practices.³² In fact, folk healing in the present situation of the Philippines is quite similar to what the early Filipinos did, according to the descriptions of the early Spanish chroniclers too. There are many kinds of Filipino folk-healers today and, besides the *albularyo* (herb doctor), this category includes psychic healers, masseurs, midwives, diviners, sorcerers and general practitioners. A common denominator among them is that they too combine prayer and ritual in their respective specializations, sharing in several of the characteristics and practices of Shamanism.³³

An *arbulario* or (*albularyo*) lives in a village and has an occupation. He may be a farmer, a plow maker or a carpenter. An *arbulario* is a local healer who cures ailments and illnesses caused by the natural and the supernatural through touch, prayers, herbs, water, steam, amulets or power sounds. In some cases, he also deals with sorcery. Often the local *albularyos* have been derogatorily called *quacks* by society. Some of them even ply their trade inside the hospital wards, unknown to doctors, interns and nurses, “slinking” inside posing as a visitor. They treat the patient when the doctors and nurses are out of the room, using herbs and *oraciones* (prayers), and attempt to drive away the bad spirits. They believe that

doctors don't know anything about the illness of the spirit and those that are unseen, as for example, the *sickness of the soil* which refers to being struck down with illness brought on by spirits living in the ground. No one can deny the existence of such spirits, but doctors continue to deny that they are the cause of some diseases. This explains why there are illnesses that doctors cannot cure. Such cases eventually end up with *albularyos*.³⁴

Since modern and efficient medical facilities are beyond the reach of the vast majority of Filipinos who live in rural areas, as well as the fact that state social benefits, such as health insurance, are almost non-existent, the *albularyo* will continue to function for years to come. The term for fate in several Philippine languages is *palad*, which also means the palm of the hand. Palm readers are found in both urban and rural areas and may be consulted on matters of health and future, making palmistry one of the best known forms of divinatory methods, together with astrology, rune casting and fortune telling.³⁵

32. Z. A. Salazar, “Faith Healing in the Philippines: An Historical Perspective,” in *Asian Studies*, 1980/18: 27.

33. See L. N. Mercado, “Power and Spiritual Discipline among Philippine Folk Healers,” in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 1988, 4/2: 51–63.

34. J. D. Tangelder, “Faith Healing in the Philippines,” at <www.reformedreflections.ca/studies/faith-h-in-philippines.html>.

35. Tan quotes Dinawat Ogil, a Bukidnon *datu* saying: “Palmistry may have been introduced only recently

Many of the indigenous communities (but also urban people) were, and are, much given to the practice of divination, even if this has been highly criticized and regarded as something primitive and irrational that panders to superstition. For many people in the Philippines, divination continues to play an important role, revealing that which is hidden, easing anxiety and helping people in coming to terms with challenges that may demand a difficult decision.

Divination has always been an integral part of Shamanism too, where it is considered to be one of the paths to make contact with the “other side” (ancestors, spirits of holy beings), to gain direct knowledge and a deeper understanding of events and influences surrounding a situation or person. As a matter of fact, one of the most important roles of the shamans has been to seek revelatory knowledge from visionary sources, which may be for healing purposes or hidden truths about themselves, or the circumstances surrounding them, or other important communal needs.

The shamans used many different methods for divination, seeking patterns in natural objects and events, or using techniques to directly obtain hidden knowledge.³⁶

CONCLUSION

In the Philippines, the current folk beliefs and practices developed within a multifaceted and syncretic religious tradition. The results of 450 years of Catholicism are mixed and range from a deep theological understanding among the educated elite, to a more superficial understanding among the rural and urban masses. The latter keep combining a surface veneer of Christian monotheism and doctrine with pre-Hispanic rituals, for example, in the form of a folk healer or seer who uses Roman Catholic symbols and its liturgy.

While Catholicism has taken over public rites, significant areas still exist where the indigenous tradition exerts a major influence. Often, while the practice is derived from the Catholic tradition, its rationale stands on an indigenous foundation. It could be said that almost five centuries ago, the Christian Spanish conquistadores found a people that had a religion of their own and, ultimately, today it is still the Filipino people who decide what their religion is going to be like.

The patterns of thought, values and sentiments among the Filipino indigenous people

into the Philippines, possibly accompanying Islam. He bases this on the fact that ethnographic references to palmistry seem to be limited to tribal groups in Mindanao.” According to Tan, “palmistry is not the only method for reading one’s fate. Among the Ilokano, traditional healers examine a person’s *sintas* (linea alba, the midline extending from the umbilicus to the xiphoid or the chestbone) to predict one’s susceptibility to illness.” See M.L. Tan, *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam*, op. cit., 44.

36. An example of the former could be the practice of divination with rocks or with quartz crystals or casting objects. See H. G. Charing, “Shamanic divination An exploration of Traditional Divination Practices,” at <<http://ezinearticles.com/?Shamanic-Divination-An-Explanation-Of-Traditional-Divination-Practices&id=553622>>.

are more mystical than logical, but this does not imply that they are unintelligent or incapable of coherent thought about the universe and the meaning of life. The feeling of awe and veneration for the Supreme Being, the religious beliefs as a matter of intermediary deities and the spirit of the ancestors, make them people who deal with the same spiritual matters and concerns of any religion.

One has the feeling that one tends to make them more superstitious than they really are. Should we define them as “pagans” whose lives are dominated and restrained by superstitions, just because they lack a theological system that acts as a bridge between belief and intellectual culture? What we have portrayed cannot be denounced, demeaned and associated merely to superstition, magic and irreligion. This is simply not always the case. In fact, traditional religious practices are not ignorant and superstitious, but as they represent a different way in which people explain life and the world around them, emphasizing their everyday concerns and needs.

Folk religion and folk Catholicism are thus a complex phenomenon, for they can be considered and evaluated from different perspectives. In connection with this, and by way of conclusion, I would like to briefly expand on the topics of “superstition,” “magic,” “healing” and “Shamanism.”

The term “superstition”³⁷ is a term that is often used by dominant religions to describe other religions. Superstition is a judgmental word, rather than a descriptive word; a language of power, rather than a scientific one. It tells more about the speakers than what the speaker is describing. It is formally a pejorative expression used by dominant powers to indicate any power that challenges them.³⁸ The impression is that this expression is used by people who do not understand what is going on. To the skeptic, all is superstition and, from a skeptical point of view, everything we Christians do is superstition.

There are beliefs we do not understand and that is why we call them superstitious. Before we interpret what we see, we should first find out what this means from the people’s perspective.

When we observe a devotee performing the ritual of the *punas-punas* we could well ask: Who is a better Christian—the one who uses a handkerchief to contact Christ, or one who uses ideas to contact Him? I think neither one, because it is faith that comes to contact with Christ, and faith can be shown either with handkerchiefs that wipe the Black Nazarene icon, or with ideas. Is the *punas-punas* practice in Quiapo not on the threshold of a genuine faith? Is it not a form of inculturated Christianity in the Philippines? What is the boundary between superstition and non-superstition? In the Philippines, we can

37. We are not referring here to those forms of superstition, such as the “belief” that eggs laid on Good Friday will not go bad until the following year; or the “belief” that 13 is an unlucky number. These are all marginal phenomena that are not as such typical of folk Catholicism.

38. I saw a whole list of so-called superstitions, most of which were about herbal medicine. In fact the *arbularyo* is from *herbario*, which indicates a folk medic who uses herbs. Nowadays, everybody is going *gaga* about herbal medicine and, consequently, what was superstition fifty years ago is science today. The word used then was superstition.

say that popular devotions, and a good part of folk religiosity, are a form of inculturation and can certainly contribute something to the major religion traditions.

Magic is understood here as the manipulation of enigmatic forces for practical purposes. It must be acknowledged that the question of magic is much more present in a context of syncretism between animism and Christian religion, which is the case in the Philippines religious tradition.

Experience shows that people turn to magic because knowledge and science are unable to control chance, eliminate accidents, or foresee the unexpected outcome of natural events. Hence, even in industrial societies, or among educated people, many are turning to spiritism and occultism; many others carry charms, amulets and talismans which are believed to be imbued with what anthropologists identify as a formless energy that permeates, animates, and binds all forms of life. "Magic has a strict meaning: magic spells are outside religion. They are even opposed to religion."³⁹

Shamanism is one of the ways people in the Philippines deal with the Mystery, reaching out to the Ultimate reality where "God" remains always the *tremendum* God, the mysterious unpredictable reality. It belongs particularly to the sphere of sages, seers, healers and prophets, those who are able to see, hear, touch and understand what others can not. It provides an important window on primal or cosmic religion, and is an invitation to appreciate better the different experiences of the "Beyond" within a mythical framework, which supplies the paradigm for all significant human acts. There is indeed an opposition between Catholic rituals and many of the Filipino shamanic practices. However, there are also some similarities and possible points of encounter to be discerned in further studies.

Shamanism helps to reflect on the nature of religion as awareness and recognition of the Mystery, to which we confidently surrender. People also look for protection, help and comfort from a mediator that they are not afraid to approach. This desire for trustworthy closeness is not necessarily seen as a superstition in a miraculous power that emanates from "this" holy person, place or object, although it can be, and in fact, often has been the case. This explains why we could say that, in the Philippines, Shamanism encourages Christianity to be more of a "healing religion."

Since the beginning of human society, there has been a more or less close link between religion and health, between spirituality and human growth, with a different emphasis according to traditions and cultures. In all the major religious traditions, there are rituals, practices and mediators that promote and heal their followers. And within the Philippine culture as well, there has always been a connection between spiritual quests and therapeutic practices.

How the Filipino healers (*manggagamot*) perceive health and sickness depends on their worldview. It supposes a philosophy of health and sickness that is closer to ancient

39. A. Vergote, "Folk Catholicism. Its Significance, Value and Ambiguities," in *Philippine Studies*, 1982/30:23.

traditions, where the personality of the therapist and the conception of his role are at least as important as the techniques he uses. Hence, there must be an implicit anthropology, a cosmology and an understanding of the person's relationship with the beyond. The healer was sought as a healer, and the traditional chief as a protector of the life of their people, by virtue of their privileged relationship with the world of the invisible.

If the truth be told, in the Philippines too, the credibility of a religious or spiritual group is evaluated in terms of its ability to heal or, at least, to promote a harmonious and balanced personal life. "Miracle crusades," healer priests, the constant success of Charismatic groups and Pentecostal sects, which spring up everywhere and in great numbers, are always linked to the gifts and the powers of healing and rituals, be they therapeutic and/or spiritual in nature.

Local Church institutions have distanced themselves from an overemphasis on the therapeutic effects of the sacraments. However, physical healings still occur today and God has many ways of answering people's prayers. We must learn how to recognize them. The evolution of the understanding of the relationship between health and salvation implies discernment, and folk Catholicism emphasizes this very strongly. It is not a question of returning to ancestral practices, but the *manggagamot* activity could be an evident example of how spiritual life is inseparable from the affective and bodily life, and how health could come to the "rescue" of Faith.

Ultimately, Christians are not sheltered from the risk of magical demands, or from the desire/fixation for total control and power over our human condition. There is always the temptation to believe that by the strength of prayers, the offering of the Eucharist and lighting of candles, with greater or lesser devotion, one will finally obtain what one wants from God or from Mary. This should be enough to convince us that circumstances and convenience can make of us "modern believers" or "superstitious traditional believers."

All things considered, I am intrigued by this world-view, and amazed by the pervasive style of this "threshold religion spirituality," which has sustained people through 450 years of "merged" Filipino Christianity and pre-Christianity. It has served the Filipino as a defense and protection in an uncertain world, against meaninglessness and disintegration, pervading every facet of daily life and conquering their fears whenever they feel more vulnerable.

Whilst we cannot deny the ambiguity of some of the *threshold religious practices* we attempted to describe in this paper, we cannot share the rational disdain of many for folk religion which belittles it as excessively emotional, imaginative and too realistic if not superstitious or infantile.

Priests, missionaries and pastoral agents often experience a worrying dilemma: they do not want to oppose the desire and the convictions of their faithful, but nor do they wish to commit themselves to what they see as an illusion or a superstition. What does popular devotions/folk practice represent? Is it something connected with the ultimate, the timeless and the eternal, or is it something which only inspires curiosity and wonder? How do people perceive God?

When the Spaniards came to the Philippines at the beginning of Christianization, they were convinced that God was not there. They told people that God was everywhere; they implicitly denied that God had been there in the mission before them. They also presumed that they alone heard the voice of God, and that God had not been communicating with these people. They were bringing God, so they came as “God’s owners” and used God as the justification for some of the noble—and ignoble—things they did.

Yet, the authentic voice of God was there, as a kind of “ancient gospel” that needed to be purified and tested against Christ’s words and deeds. A process of discernment is needed to identify the native and indigenous expressions of the understanding of the divine message. In a spiritual experience, albeit at the *threshold religion* level, how do we distinguish between what is accidental and cultural and the essential that is expressed in an already existing religious culture?

Furthermore we ask ourselves: are there any universally-accepted standards for measuring “authentic” spirituality? Can we sustain that theological systems, organized and institutionalized religions provide the only standard of evaluation? Again, can we distinguish the degree of religious experience by the paradigms of social development or intellectual excellence?

Finally, I would like to end going back to Quiapo and to the Black Nazarene devotion, a “genuine” blend of fervid native animism and formal Catholic piety and devotion. When Archbishop Tagle says: “To understand the devotee, you have to be a devotee. Only a devotee could best understand a devotee”—he is stating that belief, an outcome of experience, is subjective and should not be understood fully by one who has not experienced it. In fact, there is a great danger that others may speak of devotees as a blind man might do of colors; that is, totally unable to grasp the deeply personal, irrational but energetic sort of Catholicism so eagerly displayed by them.

Possibly, I will never understand what would draw otherwise sane and sensible personalities to Quiapo every 9 January, chucking their footwear, having a towel or handkerchief wiped on the *Nazareno’s* limbs, bringing their desires and prayers, their desperation and their hopes, to the foot of a dark wooden image burdened with a huge cross.

And I remember there was a woman in the Gospel who had experienced bleeding for twelve years (*Mk. 5:28*), who said “If I can touch even his clothes, I shall be well again.” And she was cured. Likewise, the *Acts of the Apostles* (19:11–12) say that the handkerchiefs that touched the skin of Saint Paul were used to cure the sick and cast out evil spirits.

Then again, maybe it’s not up to me, or to some other skeptics, to understand. For without faith, there is no understanding.

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TAIWAN

FABRIZIO TOSOLINI

“**B**elief in mysterious agencies characterizes a certain period in the religious development of every nation. Even the Jews, distinguished among the Semites by their soberness, consulted Yahveh through the Urim and Thummim, an oracle the nature of which is no longer definitely known. Kindred institutions among most nations are based upon primitive animism, or a belief in spirits, but in China we have a very peculiar mixture of logical clearness with fanciful superstitions. Chinese occultism is based upon a rational, nay a philosophical, or even mathematical, conception of existence. An original rationalism has here engendered a most luxurious growth of mysticism, and so the influence of occultism upon the people of the Middle Kingdom has been prolonged beyond measure.”¹

1. P. Carus, “Chinese Occultism.” *Chinese Thought* (Chicago: Open Court, 1907), 25: “The *yin* and *yang* elements are supposed to be the product of a differentiation from the *t'ai chih*, ‘the grand limit,’ i.e., the absolute or ultimate reality of all existence, which, containing both *yang* and *yin* in potential efficiency,

These words, written more than one hundred years ago, still work as a fairly good introduction to Chinese divination tradition. Indeed, on the one hand, the perception of living in a world that is house to different kinds of beings, and the importance of negotiating acceptable deals among them are basic features of the Chinese way of life.

On the other hand, however, at the origin of all what is done to get in touch with the invisible, stand not only the perception of living in a world full of gods, ghosts and every possible kinds of souls and spirits, but also a sort of reflected, in a way philosophical, interpretation of what exists as an articulated unity.

Therefore, the Chinese way to divination runs, at least at a first sight, through two different landscapes: one which is populated by beings of supernatural power and their mythologies; and another, apparently unanimated one, the forms of which are symbols and their almost mathematical correspondences and interrelations. The one who walks in such a landscape discovers progressively that he is walking alone; only the deceitful quest after his own advantage accompanies him.

Accordingly, the term “divination” itself is not precise enough. Not only because when gods are not in sight, to “divine” becomes difficult, but also because such a term does not cover all the range of activities connected with the invisible. Divination is just one among the many ways through which the closeness with the invisible part of the world makes itself felt. Its purpose is that of knowing what is really taking place beyond what is visible, what is the mind there, therefore, what is in store for the future, and which are the choices humans can make accordingly, in order to be somehow in control of such developments.

As such, divination stands at one corner of the relationship with the supernatural, on the side of the desire to learn what is thought “there,” or how things interact in the greater universal unity. On the opposite side, magic works in view of having the invisible world comply with the desires of humans and fulfill them, either by using known laws, or bending the will of those there. Many forms or activities, such as exorcisms, the wearing of charms, other rituals and ritual behavior, can be seen as depending on the information retrieved through divination, in view of making the best out of it. Such a distinction, however, is blurred, because what prompts humans to know is already the hope to be in control and assert their own power.

The purpose of this paper is, in general, and without much systematization, to present how, in Chinese tradition, humans interact with the greater world to which they feel they belong and are united; a world which is beyond their reach and yet controls them.

The paper is divided into two parts: the divination activities described in the first part move inside a horizon of symbols where special supernatural interventions seem not to

existed in the beginning. The grand limit evolved the pure yang as ether or air, which precipitated the Milky Way, shaping the visible heaven or firmament; while the *yin* coagulated and sank down to form the earth. But the earth contained enough of the *yang* to produce heat and life. Some unalloyed *yang* particles rose to form the sun, while correspondingly other unalloyed *yin* particles produced the moon, the two great luminaries, which in their turn begot the fixed stars.” Ibid., 33.

be needed or looked for: gods, spirits, ghosts are left, as it were, idle; in the second set of activities, it is specifically their response that is required, they are asked to let their mind be known, even to place themselves at the service of humans.

On the background of the various forms of divination stands one of the major Chinese set of doctrines: popular religiosity with Daoism as its most sophisticated dimension. Buddhism is only marginally interested by divination activities, while Confucianism is at the other end of the spectrum: as a doctrine of social harmony and political wisdom, it concentrates on the human factor and the choices that make such harmonious coexistence possible.

As Confucius in the *Analects* says: “For a man to sacrifice to a spirit which does not belong to him is flattery;” and, when Fan Chi asks him about wisdom, he answers: “To give one’s self earnestly to the duties due to men, and, while respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom.”²

DIVINATION IN THE MAZE OF COSMIC SYMBOLS

The foundations of three important divination tools (calendar, *luopan*, *hexagrams*) are found in a characteristic form of thought (correlative, or analogical thought), and in its fruit, correlative cosmology, shaped into a comprehensive system between the third and the first century BCE.³ This thought elaborates a complete series of space-time categories, through which it offers a systematic classification of the world, inclusive of the fundamental concept of *qi* (氣).

Key to this form of thought is the absolute centrality of the idea of correspondence: Heaven, Earth, Man are seen as ruled by the same principles, so that any phenomenon can be interpreted through the analogous laws ruling the world considered in its entirety.⁴ By integrating already existing symbols, the basics of the theory are put together to form a coherent and comprehensive picture.

Two relevant aspects of such system are: the simultaneous space-and-time value of all the symbols adopted; and the correspondence between what is “above” and what is “below:” terrestrial forms are considered an exact replica of the configurations that can be observed in heaven. Two basic notions are *yin* (陰, the South bank of a river, the North side of a hill), and *yang* (陽), the reverse of *yin*. These two dimension categorize a vast array of other concepts; they are not opposed to each other, and never without the other, but alternate rhythmically; they are a sort of first determinations which subsume basic aspects of all that exists. *Daode Jing* thus resumes the way *yin* and *yang* derive from the Dao:

2. 子曰：“非其鬼而祭之，諂也。” 2(Wei Zhen): 24; 樊遲問知，子曰：“務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。” 6(Yong Ye): 22. Trans. J. Legge. <<http://ctext.org/analects>>.

3. M. Paolillo, *Il Fengshui: origini, storia, attualità* (Roma: Carocci, 2012), 9.

4. Ibid., 14.

Reason begets unity; unity begets duality; duality begets trinity; and trinity begets the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things are sustained by Yin [the negative principle]; they are encompassed by Yang [the positive principle], and the immaterial breath renders them harmonious.⁵

Together with *yin* and *yang*, the omnipresent and all-pervading reality of *qi* plays a central role in the system of correlative cosmology. Etymologically, *qi* (氣) is connected with atmospheric vapor, and has been related to breathing and every form of “thin” exhalation. In the *Classics*, it indicated cosmic energy continually flowing, present at every level of reality.

All the symbols articulating the structural correspondences governing the universe can be considered as different aspects of such flowing energy. *Yin* and *yang* themselves aren’t but aspects of the *qi*. A primordial *qi* is then differentiated in various forms of localized energies; human beings too are part of such primordial *qi*, in it they are contained before their birth, to it they return after death.

The main systems of symbols articulating the universe are: the Sixty-Four Hexagrams (or the Eight Trigrams, 八卦), the Five Phases (五行), the Ten Heavenly Stems (十天干) and Twelve Earthly Branches (十二地支).

THE SIXTY-FOUR HEXAGRAMS AND DIVINATION THROUGH YI JING

The tradition of the Sixty-four hexagrams is found in the *Yi Jing* (易經), which lists sixty-four figures composed of six stacked horizontal lines (*yáo* 爻), followed by short and obscure commentaries. Each line is either *yang* (an unbroken, or solid line), or *yin* (a broken, or open line with a gap in the center). The hexagram lines are traditionally counted from the bottom up, so that the lowest line is considered line 1 while the top line is line 6.

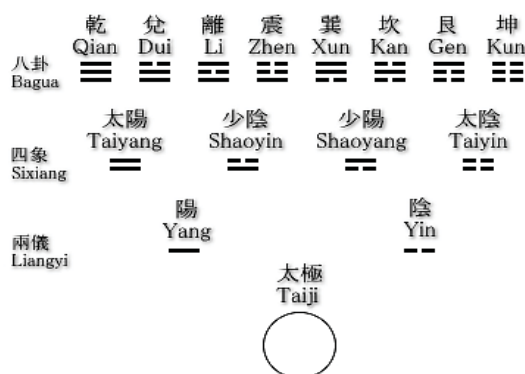
The origins of *Yi Jing* are traced to the remote past: during the Zhou Dynasty it was used for divination instead of the more ancient plastronomy and scapulimancy of the Shang period.

Around the end of the III century BC, a famous appendix was added to the original text, the *Xici* (*Added Words*), which explains the hexagrams by the invention of more ancient figures, the Eight Trigrams (八卦), formed by three broken or unbroken lines only. Their inventor, the mythical Emperor *Fu Xi* (伏羲), used them in order to offer a synthetic image of the world. In turn, the Eight Trigrams are formed on the basis of the Four Figures (四象), the origin of which are the Two Models (兩儀), the broken and the unbroken line.

They come from the Great One: “The Limitless (*wuji* 無極) produces the delimited, and this is the Absolute (太極). The *Taiji* produces two forms, named *yin* and *yang*. The two forms produce four phenomena, named lesser *yin*, great *yin* (*taiyin* also means the

5. Trans. D. T. Suzuki & P. Carus (1913), n. 42. Cf. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/crv/index.htm>>.

Moon), lesser *yang*, great *yang* (*taiyang* also means the Sun). The four phenomena act on the eight trigrams (*bagua*), eight eights are sixty-four hexagrams.”⁶



The Eight Trigrams are also arranged in space around a center, according to the four directions. The arrangement follows two basic patterns: the Primordial (*qian tian ba gua* 先天八卦), “Earlier Heaven,” or “*Fuxi*” *bagua* (伏羲八卦), and the Manifested (後天八卦), “Later Heaven,” or “King Wen” *bagua*. The trigrams have correspondences in astronomy, astrology, geography, geomancy, the family, and elsewhere.⁷

“Earlier Heaven,” or “*Fuxi*” *bagua*



卦名 NAME	自然 NATURE	季節 SEASON	性情 PERSONALITY	家族 FAMILY	方位 DIRECTION	意義 MEANING
乾 Qián	天 Sky (Heaven)	Summer	Creative	父 Father	南 South	Expansive energy, the sky
巽 Xùn	風 Wind	Summer	Gentle	長女 Eldest Daughter	西南 South-West	Gentle penetration, flexibility
坎 Kǎn	水 Water	Autumn	Abysmal	中男 Middle Son	西 West	Danger, rapid rivers, the abyss, the moon
艮 Gèn	山 Mountain	Autumn	Still	少男 Youngest Son	西北 North-West	Stillness, immovability
坤 Kūn	地 Earth	Winter	Receptive	母 Mother	北 North	Receptive energy, that which yields
震 Zhèn	雷 Thunder	Winter	Arousing	長男 Eldest Son	東北 North-East	Excitation, revolution, division
離 Lí	火 Fire	Spring	Clinging	中女 Middle Daughter	東 East	Rapid movement, radiance, the sun
兌 Duì	澤 Lake	Spring	Joyous	少女 Youngest Daughter	東南 South-East	Joy, satisfaction, stagnation

6. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ba_gua>.

7. Ivi.

“Later Heaven,” or “King Wen” *bagua*



卦名 NAME	自然 NATURE	季節 SEASON	性情 PERSONALITY	家族 FAMILY	方位 DIRECTION	意義 MEANING
離 Lǐ	火 Fire	Summer	Clinging	中女 Middle Daughter	南 South	Rapid movement, radiance, the sun
坤 Kūn	地 Earth	Summer	Receptive	母 Mother	西南 South-West	Receptive energy, that which yields
兌 Duì	澤 Lake	Autumn	Joyous	少女 Youngest Daughter	西 West	Joy, satisfaction, stagnation
乾 Qián	天 Sky (Heaven)	Autumn	Creative	父 Father	西北 North-West	Expansive energy, the sky
坎 Kǎn	水 Water	Winter	Abysmal	中男 Middle Son	北 North	Danger, rapid rivers, the abyss, the moon
艮 Gèn	山 Mountain	Winter	Still	少男 Youngest Son	東北 North-East	Stillness, immovability
震 Zhèn	雷 Thunder	Spring	Arousing	長男 Eldest Son	東 East	Excitation, revolution, division
巽 Xùn	風 Wind	Spring	Gentle	長女 Eldest Daughter	東南 South-East	Gentle penetration, flexibility

The “Earlier Heaven” arrangement represents a numeric relationship among the trigrams, anterior to their manifestation; its use remained limited to the Daoists, in particular to inner alchemy (*nei dan* 內丹), the purpose of which is to return to the undifferentiated being. On the contrary, the Later Heaven arrangement represents the phenomenic world, and was widely in use in traditional sciences and in divination.

A hexagram is composed of two parts: the inner (that is: lower) trigram and the outer (that is: upper) trigram. Furthermore, the lines of the hexagrams have also a numeric value in connection with their two possible states: for *old yin* (*yin* ready to change into *yang*) is 6; for *young yang* (a *yang* more stable, not susceptible to change) is 7; for *young yin* (unchanging *yin*) is 8; for *old yang* (*yang* changing into *yin*) is 9. *Old yin* is seen as more powerful than *young yin*, and *old yang* is more powerful than *young yang*. Any line in a hexagram that is old (*changing*) adds additional meaning to that hexagram.⁸

In China the *Yi Jing* had two distinct functions. “The first was as a compendium and classic of ancient cosmic principles. The second function was that of a divination text. As a divination text the world of the *I Ching* was that of the marketplace fortune teller and roadside oracle. These individuals served the illiterate peasantry. The educated Confucian elite in China were of an entirely different disposition. The future results of our actions were a function of our personal virtues.”⁹

8. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching_divination>.

9. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching>.

Using the *Yi Jing* for divination is a form of bibliomancy (divination through books). The process involves a first moment in which the hexagram is determined. In order to reach this goal, several methods can be used. A classical method is that of manipulating yarrow (a plant also called milfoil or *Achillea*) stalks according to a set procedure,¹⁰ so as to identify the hexagram and one of its lines, on the basis of which the diviner will pronounce his oracle. Expert soothsayers may also do without the help of *Yi Jing*.

Many other methods have been practiced in order to discover the hexagram on which to make divination: tossing coins (either two, or three, or four, six, eight), dice, little colored pieces of marble, seeds of rice.

FIVE ELEMENTS/PHASES, TEN HEAVENLY STEMS AND TWELVE EARTHLY BRANCHES

Also called the Five Elements (in sequence: *water, fire, wood, metal, earth*), the Five Phases (*wu xing* 五行) are “emblems of a general division of things in space-time.”¹¹ In them is found the alternation of *yin* and *yang*, in a cyclical form, correlated to space and time. In a classic, the *Yue Ling* (月令, *Monthly Ordinances*, part of the *Li Ji* 禮記),¹² monthly duties show the correspondences between heavenly and earthly phenomena, the unity between cosmic harmony and human events. Basis for such correspondences are the five phases, correlated to the five directions, the five seasons,¹³ numbers, colors, organs of the body, parts of the house, odors, tastes...¹⁴

Two kinds of relationship have been highlighted among the five phases: production (*wood produces fire, which produces earth, which produces metal, which produces water, which produces wood*), and destruction/ triumph over (*water destroys/ triumphs over fire, which triumphs over metal, which triumphs over wood, which triumphs over earth*,

10. Cf. P. Carus, “Chinese Occultism,” op. cit., 36: “Pious people consult the oracle on all important occasions. They are first careful to make themselves clean, and then assume a calm and reverential attitude of mind. The diviner then takes out one stick and places it in a holder on the center of the table. This single stalk is called ‘the grand limit’ (*t’ai chih*), the ultimate cause of existence. He next lifts the forty-nine remaining sticks above his forehead with his right hand, and divides them at random into two parts, at the same time holding his breath and concentrating his thoughts on the question to be answered. The sticks in the right hand are then placed on the table, and one is taken out from them and placed between the fourth and fifth fingers of the left hand. The three groups are now called heaven, earth and man. The left-hand group is then counted with the right hand in cycles of eight, and the number of the last group yields the lower trigram of the answer, called the inner complement. This number is counted after the oldest order of the eight trigrams, viz., that of Fuh-Hi corresponding to the inverted binary arrangement. The upper trigram, called the outer complement, is determined in the same way. After the hexagram is determined, one special line is selected by the aid of the divining-sticks in the same way as before, except that instead of counting in cycles of eight, the diviner now counts in cycles of six. Having thus established the hexagram and a special line in it, he next consults the *Yih King* which contains a definite meaning for each hexagram as a whole, and also for each single line; and this meaning is made the basis of the divine answer.”

11. M. Paolillo, *Fengshui*, op. cit., 18, quoting Granet.

12. Cf. <<http://ctext.org/liji/yue-ling>>.

13. Four cardinal points plus the centre, four seasons plus an interlayer period. The *Yue Ling* connects the five phases to the numbers from five to nine. In M. Paolillo, *Fengshui*, op. cit., 19.

14. Ivi.

which triumphs over water). In *Lyushi ChunQiu* the alternation of the five phases is connected to history: the sequence of dynasties corresponds to the prevalence of one of the phases. In this way social life and history are inscribed inside the flow of natural phenomena, and on the other side Confucianism integrates cosmological doctrines into its own government theories,¹⁵ so that during the Han Dynasty the correlative system based on the five phases becomes the frame of reference for the interpretation of all phenomena.

Two other families of signs, connected with the studies on the calendar enrich the already complex space-time network: the ten heavenly stems (*shi tian gan* 十天干) and the twelve earthly branches (*shi er di zhi* 十二地支).

Originally, the heavenly stems were used to mark the time of a month in three decades, during which appropriate rites for the dead were celebrated, and the royal calendar, while the earthly branches identified the twelve times (of two hours each) of the day, the orbit of 歲星 *Suixīng* (Jupiter, the Year Star), which was completed in about twelve years, the months of the year. They were later associated together to form the sexagesimal annual cycle, with each year marked by a binomial formed by the character of one stem and one branch.

As a result of the combination of trigrams, hexagrams, phases, stems, branches, and direction or moment in time are seen as expression of a given symbolic and qualitative reality, that can be interpreted by using the laws of correspondence.¹⁶ The main fields to which such global interpretation of the universe is applied are times, places and individuals' lives. It originates specialized divinatory areas and the corresponding techniques:

- divination methods based on some specific features of individuals;
- *huang li*, the traditional calendar which identifies which actions should or should not be performed at any given day of the year;
- *feng shui*, by which the right place for the living and the dead is determined.

DIVINATION FOR INDIVIDUALS

Face Reading

Face reading (*mian xiang* 面相) is the interpretation of facial features of the nose, eyes, mouth and other criteria within one's face, and the conversion of those criteria into predictions for the future. This usually covers one phase of the client's life, and reveals the type of luck associated with a certain age range.

A positions map refers to different points on the face and represents the person's luck at different ages. The upper region of the face represents youth, the middle region of the face represents middle age, and the lower region of the face represents old age.

15. Ibid., 21–2.

16. Ibid., 27.

Palm Reading

Palm Reading (*shou xiang* 手相) analyzes the positioning of palm lines for love, personality, and other traits. It somewhat resembles Western palmistry technique.

Bazi

Bazi (八字) is also called 生辰八字 (*sheng chen ba zi*, “birth time eight characters”), and also 四柱命理學 (*si zhu ming li xue*, “four pillars of life” studies). This method involves taking the heavenly stem and earthly branch of the year, month, day and hour of birth, and arranging them into four pillars (*si zhu*), made of two characters each.¹⁷ The four pillars are then analyzed against the Daymaster, the heavenly stem for the Pillar of the day of birth. This method tells one about his or her destiny in life, current situation and area for most successful occupation.¹⁸

Zhi Wei Dou Shu

Zhi wei dou shu (紫微斗數) is a calculation based on the place and movement of the Purple/Noble Star of the Big Dipper (the North Star), and of more than hundred other stars at the moment when someone is born. The person seeking advice, presents the coordinates of his/her birth: year, month, day, and time to the fortune-teller. Without this crucial information, the analysis cannot take place.

Chinese name or strokes count in the characters that make up one's name can be also requested at times for further refinement in the analysis, but although analyzing in combination with the name is practiced, this is outside the scope of *zi wei dou shu*. Calculations are worked out to chart the stars in twelve different palaces or Gong (宮). This would then be one's birth chart or *ming pan* (命盤).

By integrating the stars and palaces, their attributes, environmental factors, the five elements, *yin* and *yang*, their possible combinations and variations, including the position of the *symbolic stars* (*shen sha* 神煞) and their interrelations, not only can personalities be understood, but personal and professional relationships can also be predicted. The final

17. Every year, day, hour can be denominated according to the system of the Ten Heavenly Stems and of the Twelve Earthly Branches. Each is named by a pair of one stem and one branch called a Stem-Branch (*gānzhi* 干支). In this way, every single instant of time enters in the network of the system of symbols and is qualified inside it in a precise way.

18. In his *Il Milione*, Marco Polo writes: “As soon as a child is born the father or the mother has a record made of the day and the minute and the hour at which he was born, and under what constellation and planet, so that everyone knows his horoscope. Whenever anyone intends to make a journey into another district or a business deal, he consults the astrologer and tells him his horoscope; and the astrologer tells him whether it is good to undertake or not... When a marriage is planned, the astrologers first investigate whether the bridegroom and bride are born under concordant planets. If so, it is put into effect; if not it is called off. Great numbers of these astrologers, or rather magicians, are to be found on every square of the city.” *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), 195. Quoted in Mark Caltionhill, *Private Prayers and Public Parades: Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei* (Taipei: Department of Information, Taipei City Government, 2002), 83.

result is a calculated translation of one's destiny in detail, including verification that can be obtained by checking events already happened in the past.¹⁹ The result of the details vary depending on the accuracy of the original four pillars information the client provides to the fortune-teller.

Combinatory divination for individuals can be performed in proximity or in the precincts of a temple; in this way, even if the method in itself has no relationship with a pantheon, the fact that stars have been connected to special deities, and the event of analysis and prediction take place in sacred spaces, link this kind of divination to the world of religious credence.

Divination for Times

The Traditional Calendar (*huang li* 皇歷) applies divination to an objective time, the period of one year. In the same way as for other areas of combinatory divination in the frame of correlative cosmology, the unique relationship of the various symbols for each day of any given year is examined, and the results printed on calendars that are sold before the beginning of the new lunar year. These calendars, in many different forms, are almost omnipresent in houses and shops; they are also presented as a complimentary gift on the occasion of New Year celebrations.

In the West it is already widely known that there is a Chinese Zodiac, a cycle of twelve years, each of which with a particular animal as a symbol;²⁰ and that Chinese New Year does not fall on January First, but on the first day (new moon) of the second lunar month after the winter solstice, because the traditional calendar follows the lunar cycles.

What is less known is that, besides the usual information expected for a calendar (beginning and end of the month, both Western and traditional, indication of special feasts), every day has a list of actions that are 宜 (*yi*, under positive auspices, permitted, predicted as successful), and actions that are 忌 (*ji*, inauspicious so that they should not be performed). The information provided by Chinese calendar had a very big impact on private and social life: as an example, marriages and funerals are decided after consulting its response about which are the auspicious or inauspicious days for such rites;²¹ in the same way, the beginning of the construction of a new building needs an auspicious day, and so do travels, new stoves, sacrifices to ancestors, and so forth.

Since it records the religious feasts of folk religion, traditional Chinese calendar is also one of the points of contact between correlative cosmology and religion, a point where

19. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/zi_wei_dou_shu>.

20. The list of the twelve animals is as follows: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The year 2012 (starting on 23, January) is the year of the dragon.

21. As for funerals, an interesting phenomenon occurs: since city people have less and less time for the long and tiring traditional funeral observances, new and simplified rites have become widespread, with cremation substituting burial; and Saturdays become the favorite days for funerals (crowding the city crematoriums); whether the chosen Saturdays are inauspicious or not for such ceremonies become secondary.

“gods, ghosts and ancestors” get more and more involved into the otherwise neutral combinatory divination.

Divination for Places: Feng Shui (風水)

The rationale that makes the choice of an auspicious place desirable, even necessary, is given in the Zang Shu (葬書), with reference to the choice of sites for burial:

When burying, it is necessary to get the vital *qi*. The Five *qi* (five elements/phases) flow inside the earth; by spreading, they produce the ten thousand beings. A man receives his bodily complexion from father and mother; if the ancestral bones obtain the *qi*, the transmitted bodily structure will receive protection. The Classic says: “When stimulated, the *qi* will give a correspondent reaction; the fortune of the spirits will reach humans”... Therefore, what brings life is the concentration of the *qi*; what becomes condensed forms the bone structure, which the only one persisting after death. Therefore, when burying, if the *qi* is made enter again into the bones, this will protect those who are alive. The *qi* follows the bone structure of hills and mountains, the branches of ridges and mounds. The Classic says: “If the *qi* rides the wind, it will be dispersed; if it is circumscribed by water, then it will stop.” The old ones used to concentrate it, so as not to let it be scattered, they led it so as to create a stop: because of this they called this practice *fengshui*. In the *fengshui* method, to obtain water comes first, to take shelter from wind is secondary.²²

In other words: if the vital *qi* gives strength to the bones of the deceased, then also the bodily structure of the descendants will receive benefits. There is a “resonance,” a reciprocal connection and correspondence among the categories of beings, which not only explains the flow of benefits through generations, but also allows humans to understand the universe as a totality in which they are inserted: human knowledge is at the same time result and reflex of such a resonance, existing between human beings and the environment, because of the unique *qi* flowing throughout the manifested world.

In this context the binomial *fengshui* appears, to indicate the activity through which the channels of *qi* are found and identified. The binomial of *shui*, water, and *feng*, wind, appears as a polarity of positive (water), and negative (wind);²³ it can be interpreted also as a polarity of external (wind) and inner (water) energies, of *ying-yang* forces, of the “virtues” of spring and autumn.

These two seasons, in turn, are connected with the directions of East and West, which are the traditional directions of dragon and tiger. The azure-green dragon, the white tiger, the red phoenix and the dark turtle indicate also constellations, respectively East, West, South and North of the North Pole Star.

22. Quoted in M. Paolillo, *Fengshui*, op. cit., 48–9.

23. In Chinese medical tradition, wind is interpreted as a potentially negative factor, even “the beginning of the One Hundred Sickesses” (*Huandi Neijing*). Ibid., 50.

Following these principles, two major historical schools elaborate two sets of paradigms.

The Jiangxi School specialized in the analysis of the forms of the landscape. The main features to be observed are water courses and shape of mountains or hills surrounding the chosen sites. Particular attention is dedicated to the “veins” (*mai* 脈) and “bones” (*gu* 骨) of the landscape, in order to identify the “nest” (*xue* 穴), a point where the energy is concentrated. The *xue* is identified indirectly, by the analysis of the elements of the surrounding territory (also called *sha* 沙, “sand”): to the North, a hill, or a screen created by vegetation, to protect the place from pernicious influences; to the East and to the West, two configurations that embrace the place, shaped as a horseshoe; in front of the *xue*, that is, to the South, the positive presence of a stream of water, neither too stagnant nor too impetuous.²⁴

The School of Directions (*Fangwei Jia*, also called Method of the Ancestral Temple, *Zongmiao Fa* 宗廟法, flourished during the Song Dynasty) analyses of the correlation of a site with the system of directions, trigrams, phases, stars.²⁵

In connection with the doctrines of the School of Directions, the main tool for *feng shui* is introduced, the *luopan* (spiral dish 螺盤). At the centre of the dish, in ancient times made of wood, now made of metal, there is a compass. Surrounding it, a set of concentric rings (from about a dozen to more than thirty) is carved. They indicate the many series of correspondences inherited from the cosmological tradition. Through them the auspicious or inauspicious nature of a site is determined.

Fengshui techniques were used not only in order to determine burial sites, but also in order to build houses, palaces and cities. In building Beijing, the Yuan rulers availed themselves of a Chinese architect and *fengshui* expert, Liu Bingzhong (1216–1274), who combined traditional Chinese techniques and Tantric Buddhist elements coming from Central Asia. Beijing would be built on the body of Nezha, a Tantric divinity daughter of one of the Four Heavenly Kings; in particular, the eleven gates of the city would correspond to the three heads, six arms and two feet of Nezha.²⁶ In the same way, also the choice of the site for the new Ming capital, Nanjing, followed the principles of *fengshui*. This doctrine was studied and practiced at the highest levels of Chinese society. At the same time, it drew criticism, when people used it beyond reasonability and common sense.²⁷

Another tool used for buildings, but within a geomantic frame, is the “Foot-Rule of Lu Ban,” a measurement square about 43 centimeters (1 foot, 4 inches and 4 fen) long. Passed

24. These Four Configurations, called also Four Spirits, and Four Animals (the Dark Warrior to the North, the Azur-Green Dragon to the East, the White Tiger to the West, the Vermilion Bird to the South) correspond to the sky asterisms quoted above. Representation of the Four Animals were placed in ancient tombs, to confirm the intention of making them into a microcosm.

25. Ibid., 60.

26. Ibid., 64.

27. Ibid., 64–5.

on from master to disciple, it measures the width of door thresholds. It is divided into 8 sections (1 inch and 8 fen each), which have names (in sequence: wealth, illness, separation, righteousness, office, plunder, harm and root). Of these, the first and the last are very favorable; the fourth and the fifth are moderately positive, all the others are negative.²⁸

During the Ming Dynasty, *fengshui* developed also an interior analysis, by which to decide the favorable or unfavorable position and orientation of rooms inside houses, an aspect that constitutes the central theme of modern manuals. There is a correspondence between the Nine Stars in heaven and the Nine Earthly Palaces, in turn connected with the Eight trigrams in the configuration of the later heaven. On the basis of the orientation of the main gate, it determines the positive or negative nature of the different parts of the house.²⁹

Recent times have seen a surprising diffusion of *fengshui* doctrines in the West, fueled by the media, with some economic interests behind the scenes. Whereas inside Chinese tradition its importance and use are not detrimental to the specificity of its doctrines, what is often seen in the West is the transformation of such doctrines, their adaptation to the frame of Western categories, so that the peculiarity of *fengshui* is diluted into poetic insights with reference to shapes and positions in the landscape. Instead of the tiring task of analyzing landscapes in order to find in them the receptacles of *qi*, attention is now given on how to improve defects discovered in rooms and buildings.³⁰ In any case, it is undeniable that *fengshui* belongs to the trademarks of Chinese tradition in its contact with Western civilization.

LISTENING TO THE ANSWERS OF GODS

Although gods, spirits, ghost are not absent from the first kind of divination examined, apparently they do not play in it a leading role, since the parameters leading to a response are the fruit of secular concretions of immediate, un-reflected insights about the structure of the universe perceived as a unified totality. However, in other areas of divination, so-called supernatural beings make their appearance, either un-requested or upon request; they may give answers about many problems, and their oracles can be used to the humans' advantage and success. Interesting enough, whatever the forms of divination might be, the role of interpreters, or diviners, is still important, at times even decisive.

This fact authorizes two kinds of comprehensive readings of the phenomenon. The first is an interpretation that, following the mind of those involved, tends to value the other world as able to let its will be known to humans; the second interpretation high-

28. K. Ruitenbeek, *Carpentry and Building in Late Imperial China: A Study of the Fifteenth-Century Carpenter's Manual Lu Ban Jing* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 169–70; M. Paolillo, *Fengshui*, op. cit., 68–9.

29. M. Paolillo, *Fengshui*, op. cit., 69.

30. Ibid., 118–19, 123, 138.

lights a set of historical conditions as the real drama being enacted, in which humans play the leading roles, even in/through the process of consulting gods.

Two areas may be identified: a first area deals with oracles given by gods without being asked for: it is the case of dreams. A second area analyses all the many ways by which humans on their own initiative ask the gods for some responses.

UNREQUESTED ORACLES: DREAMS

In Chinese tradition, as in many other traditional cultures, dreams are not interpreted with reference to the psyche, they are considered to be omens sent by gods. It is commonly believed that, during sleep, the *hun* (魂), the more spiritual part of the soul, may leave the body through a passage on the top of the head, and wander around, sometimes unseen, sometimes under animal form. In its wanderings, the *hun* may encounter ghosts, spirits, other people's souls, and receive information about events otherwise impossible to know.³¹

Dreams are then interpreted, with the help of handbooks which list hundreds of dream subjects with a possible prognostication based on them. However, much depends on the skills of the interpreter.

UBIQUITOUS ORACLES

Twitching of the Eyelids

As Mark Caltionhill puts it, "sufficient empirical observation of any phenomena combines with meticulous record taking allowed the Chinese to devise innumerable systems of prognostication."³²

He then goes on describing a rather unusual method, by which to know about future events: the twitching of the eyelids (*yan pi tiao dong zhan pu fa* 眼皮跳動占卜法). Although it is not clear why and how spirits could possibly let people's eyelids twitch, if this happens, there are divinatory readings available, according to whether twitching occurs to the right or the left eyelid, and to the time when it happens.³³

Bird Divination

Fortune-tellers may predict the future by availing themselves of the help of some small birds caged on their tables: these birds are trained to step forward, after a petitioner has thought of a question to ask, and pick a piece of paper at random among a little pile in a box. The fortune-teller will then explain to the petitioner the prophesy written on the paper.

31. M. Caltionhill, *Private Prayers*, op. cit., 79–80.

32. Ibid., 78.

33. Ivi.

Interpretation of Clouds and Winds

This very ancient method is based on timing and form of the clouds, and timing, speed and direction of winds. Such phenomena were interpreted as Heaven revealing its will, especially to the Emperor, the “Son of Heaven” (*tian zi* 天子). Clouds were thought to offer predictions on military affairs, winds on the forthcoming harvest.³⁴

These methods show that divination seems to be not only a choice, but an ubiquitous possibility and even a duty, if the voices of the gods can be heard in so many ways.

ACTIVELY SEEKING THE RESPONSES OF THE GODS

ANCIENT DIVINATION METHODS: PLASTROMANCY AND SCAPULIMANCY

At the end of the XIX century, the Chancellor of the Imperial Academy, Wang Yirong, discovered that the bones which were to be pulverized and given him as an anti-malaria medicine had ancient carvings on them. In 1908, another scholar, Luo Zhenyu discovered that the source of the bones was near Anyang and realized that the area was the site of the last Shang dynasty capital. Official archaeological excavations in 1928–1937 led by Li, the father of Chinese archaeology, discovered 20,000 oracle bone pieces, which now form the bulk of the Academia Sinica collection in Taiwan and constitute about 1/5 of the total discovered.

The inscriptions on the oracle bones, once deciphered, turned out to be the records of the divinations performed for or by the royal household. These, together with royal-sized tombs, proved beyond a doubt for the first time the existence of the Shang Dynasty, which had recently been doubted, and the location of its last capital, Yin.³⁵

The bones on which oracles are carved are plastrons (belly shells), carapaces (dorsal or back shells) of tortoises, and ox scapular bones. Tortoises were sent as homage, or tribute, to the royal family by vassal states; some were home raised.

The bones were prepared by cleaning and polishing, then up to thirty pairs of pits were drilled on their flat surface, following the long side of the bone. The pits were in couples: one pit was round, the other oblong, resembling a short line, chiseled parallel to the long dimension of the shell.

The divining session was led by the king himself, who was present along with the diviner, and in later times took upon himself also the role of diviner. Five shells were used. The bones were first smeared with blood, than an initial inscription was recorded, bearing information about the time of divination process, and the name of the diviner. Then the cause of divination was raised, in the form of a pair of antithetical questions, which expected a “yes-or-no” answer.

34. M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Divination, Omens and Prophecy,” in F. Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), vol. 1, 114.

35. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle_bone>.

The charge could be directed to ancestors, natural powers and even the highest god in Shang pantheon, *Di* (帝). Then a red-hot stick was inserted in the pit, until on the opposite side of the oracular bone, accompanied by a typical sound, a crack appeared. Typically, the crack had a 卜 (*bu*) shape, with a vertical line and an horizontal or oblique one. If the angle of the horizontal/oblique line was exceeding the perpendicular by less than 20 degrees, the answer was interpreted as affirmative. If the angle exceeded 90 degrees by more than 20 degrees, the answer was deemed as negative.

The process was repeated for the five shells, and in the end a final response given by the diviner. The question was then engraved, or written with ink on the shell itself; and later an eventual confirmation of the oracle could be also added.³⁶ The oracular bones were then placed in pits, where they were finally discovered, millennia later.

The *Book of Documents* (*Shu Jing*, or *Shang Shu* 書經/尚書, not posterior to the IV century BCE), records that divination through fire applied to bones was used along with divination obtained through manipulation of yarrow stalks; it even offers advice on how to interpret a possible disagreement among different sources of responses, human advice included.

Divination is meant for matters of public interest; it is a combined effort, where human discernment works together with more proper divination methods. The final interpretation is again based on a calculation of the respective importance of responses obtained by different methods:

Seventh, of the (means for the) examination of doubts. Officers having been chosen and appointed for divining by the tortoise-shell and the stalks of the Achillea, they are to be charged (on occasion) to execute their duties. (In doing this), they will find (the appearances of) rain, of clearing up, of cloudiness, of want of connexion, and of crossing; and the inner and outer diagrams. In all (the indications) are seven;—five given by the shell, and two by the stalks; and (by means) of these any errors (in the mind) may be traced out. These officers having been appointed, when the divination is proceeded with, three men are to interpret the indications, and the (consenting) words of two of them are to be followed. When you have doubts about any great matter, consult with your own mind; consult with your high ministers and officers; consult with the common people; consult the tortoise-shell and divining stalks. If you, the shell, the stalks, the ministers and officers, and the common people, all agree about a course, this is what is called a great concord, and the result will be the welfare of your person and good fortune to your descendants. If you, the shell, and the stalks agree, while the ministers, and officers, and the common people oppose, the result will be fortunate. If the ministers and officers, with the shell and stalks, agree, while you and the common people oppose, the result will be fortunate. If the common people, the shell, and the stalks agree, while you, with the ministers and officers,

36. Cf. <<http://www.ablongman.com/samplechapter/oo28639790.pdf>>.

oppose, the result will be fortunate. If you and the shell agree, while the stalks, with the ministers and officers, and the common people, oppose, internal operations will be fortunate, and external undertakings unlucky. When the shell and stalks are both opposed to the views of men, there will be good fortune in being still, and active operations will be unlucky.³⁷

Interest for plastromancy is now mainly only historical, mainly connected with the beginnings of written Chinese.

It is however interesting to know how, since the beginnings of Chinese civilization, stochastic methods, methods based on correlative cosmology, a religious environment, human advice, were all employed together, the last words still being those on the mouths of the diviners, and the final decisions in the hands of the rulers.

DIVINATORY BLOCKS

According to Mark Caltionhill, divinatory blocks are “democratic, accessible and immediate. Nowadays divination is open to all and the simplest methods do not even require subsequent interpretation of antique Chinese quotations.

Perhaps the most accessible is “throwing blocks” (*zhi jiao* 擲筊), better known locally by the Taiwanese “*bwa-bwei*.” Rather like tossing a coin, *bwa-bwei* involves asking a yes-no question. Instead of coins, two crescent-moon blocks of bamboo or wood are used. Curved on one side and flat on the other, they are usually painted red.

A block that lands flat side up represents *yang*; curved side up represents *yin*. Both blocks landing curved side upwards represent the negative-answer “*yin* blocks” (*yin jiao* 陰筊); two flat sides facing upwards represent “laughing blocks” (*xiao jiao* 笑筊) and means that the question should be rephrased; while one flat and one curved side showing is “sagely blocks” (*sheng jiao* 聖筊) and represents a clear “yes.”³⁸

A first question is whether it is opportune to ask the question; then after the question is formulated, a set of throws follows, in order to ascertain the answer. This means is used also in combination with other methods, such as the “lots barrel” (more on this below).

Questions range from life-transforming subjects such as whether to marry or move out of one’s parents’ house, to simple ones such as whether an ancestor has eaten enough of the offerings, in which case they may be taken home for consumption by the living. Sometimes casting blocks is a group activity, presided over by a temple elder or a Daoist priest. On such occasion, one person reads out the questions, one throws the blocks, one records the results, etc., as an excited audience looks on.³⁹

37. *Book of Documents*, chapter *Hong Fan* (洪範) 9. Cf. <<http://ctext.org/shang-shu/great-plan>>.

38. M. Caltionhill, *Private Prayers*, op. cit., 75-6.

39. *Ibid.*, 77.

DIVINATORY STICKS

In most temples large drums can be found, filled with sticks made of bamboo. They are known as the “lots barrels” (*qian tong* 籤桶), smaller versions of which are common among fortune-tellers. The drawing of the lots may be performed by the petitioner, or become a ceremony officiated by a Daoist priest. The petitioner mixes the sticks in the barrel until he chooses one. He reads the number written on it and then refers to a numbered drawer of a close-by cabinet, or to a numerated set of slips of paper hanging from a wall.

On the slips of paper there are sentences written, sometimes in archaic script, or with obscure references; their prognostications need a translation (sometimes written on the back of the slips), or, better, the help of some specialized reader, usually part of the staff of the temple. Divinatory blocks and sticks are sometimes used together (e.g.: the throw of blocks may be used to confirm whether the petitioner has picked up the right stick).

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE RISING OF INCENSE SMOKE

Still, another temple-based method is in use: prognostication through the burning of incense sticks (*shao xiang yu ce huo fu* 燒香預測禍福). The relative speed at which three sticks lit together burn is interpreted as carrying messages about the future. Handbooks are available for consultation.

SPIRIT WRITING

Gods, spirits and ghosts, can be requested to manifest unknown, mysterious or future events more clearly by ways specifically involving their mind: among such means are their written and spoken words. Spirit writing enjoys great importance among Chinese divination methods. It involves spirit possession, which in the remote past was the dominant form of Shamanism in China.

Around the fifth century CE, women used to ask yes-no questions to a particular goddess, *Zi gu* (紫姑), at the beginning of the lunar year, about the forthcoming silkworm season. With time, this goddess became credited with elegant composition, and even with fine painting.

Once the goddess, appearing at a séance, composed ten short poems and then asked a poet who was attending, to make her name known. In this way a tradition grew, associating the name of the goddess—and of other gods such as *Guan Gong* (關公) and *Lü Dong Bin* (呂洞賓, one of the Daoist Eight Immortals)—with spirit writing.⁴⁰

During a spirit-writing séance, the diviner holds above her head a double-handed divining rod with a dragon head. The rod starts moving, swaying back and forth, until it lands on a box filled with sand and starts tracing characters on the sand. As soon as the characters are traced, assistants read them and then sweep the sand smooth to receive the

40. Ibid., 179

next characters. In this way messages are dictated, which then are collected, edited and later also published.⁴¹ Spirit writing assisted in the cure of opium addiction through the believed divine help.⁴²

Since the Song Dynasty, it has been popular among “literary diviners” (*wen ji* 文乩) who, by its means receive explanations on hidden truths.⁴³ At the beginning of the spreading of Yiguan Dao (一貫道) spirit writing, already in use among religious groups,⁴⁴ was among the most successful means adopted:

When spirit writing was well under its way in the 1930s, Zhang Tianran introduced this practice to Yiguan Dao. Previously, Wang Jueyi, the fifteenth patriarch of Yiguan Dao, discouraged the sectarians to do spirit writing, for it was difficult to tell whether the god was good or evil. But the high popularity of spirit writing in the 1930s drove Zhang Tianran to break the sect’s traditions... The innate spirit writing of Yiguan Dao includes two forms: “spirit writing on sands” (Kaisha) and “borrowing spirit medium’s body” (Jieqiao)... During spirit writing on sands sessions the mediums did not interact with the attendees of a séance. When holding the séance of “borrowing spirit medium’s body,” the attendees were supposedly able to contact with gods directly.⁴⁵

Spirit writing also helped the spreading of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan before the 1980s, amidst years of persecution and social stigma. However, more recently spirit writing has been discarded from mainstream Yiguan Dao groups. Among the reasons are questions on the validity of messages and the fact that new revelation easily cause religious schisms.⁴⁶

MOVED BY THE SPIRITS: DIVINATION CHAIRS AND DIVINING YOUTHS (JI TONG 乩童)

In order to answer people’s requests and let their responses be read or heard, spirits may take possession of things and people in other forms.

Among the most relevant phenomena are the movements of sedan chairs and the trance of *ji tongs*, both leading to oracular pronouncements to be interpreted by experts.

41. Ivi.

42. Ibid., 181.

43. Y. Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy* (Lanham MD. Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Lexington, 2008), 34; M. Caltionhill, *Private Prayers*, op. cit., 180.

44. For centuries exhortations and threats were received by means of spirit writing; “many are, by the care of virtuous men of erudition, printed to this day for circulation by thousands, reprinted over and over, and bound up into books for gratuitous distribution,” in J. J. M. De Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (Amsterdam: Johannes Muller, 1903), 1309.

45. Y. Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, op. cit., 35.

46. Ibid., 100–1. “Yiguan Dao believes that spirit writings tend to produce new revelations that threaten the administrative order. In order to establish a stable structure, all of Yiguan Dao divisions except Fayi Chongde have given up the practice of spirit writing, and even in Fayi Chongde it plays a much reduced role in the affairs of the division,” Ibid., 102.

DIVINATION CHAIRS

The 轎仔 (*jiao zi*) is a small wooden armchair, similar in size to the chairs for kindergarten children. Around it, small pickets of wood are free to move up and down in their sockets, making a characteristic clicking sound when the chair is bounced. Two men hold the little chair by the legs in front of an altar and incense is burnt, while a supernatural being is invited to descend and sit on the chair.

When this is supposed to happen, the chair becomes very heavy, difficult to hold. The chair starts bouncing and then falls on a wooden table and traces characters upon it. The characters are considered as written by the summoned god, and their interpretation the response to the questions asked by the petitioners. The characters are often unclear, and must be studied carefully before being correctly read. Sometimes petitioners need ask the god to rewrite the characters before they are understood. If the reading is right, the chair raps on the table once; if it is wrong, the chair raps twice.

The process of divination by *jiao zi* involves three actors: the two men who hold the divining chair, and the reader, who plays the most important role: even if the chair holders have veto power, it is the power of his imagination and capacity for free associations that allows the reading of the characters traced on the table.⁴⁷

DIVINING YOUTHS

At least some of the functions of these spirit mediums can be compared to those for which a divining chair is used. They may be at work in temple precincts, but not necessarily; they answer to individual as well as to collective problems. They are called *tong*, “youths,” because they are believed not to live long, given their close contact with the spirits.

Their special condition is rather accepted, and often reluctantly so, than sought after. Suddenly they enter into trance, become possessed, and cannot free themselves from the occurrence of such phenomenon; they seem to be forced to surrender. Only then they can live kind of normal lives, until the gods possessing them need their service. In the meantime, people may often visit them and ask for any kind of advice and help in mysterious matters.⁴⁸

Ji tongs (in Taiwanese *tang-ki*) need initiation before being accepted as such by the community. Initiation involves an exorcism, and even trial by miracles⁴⁹ lest the *ji tong* be possessed by a demon; it involves also providing the medium-to-be with instruments of mortification, and the first mortification of the flesh.⁵⁰

While divination through divining chair involves the cooperation of different actors,

47. D. K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972), 64–7.

48. *Ibid.*, 68–72.

49. Jordan reports the case of an initiate in 1968 who needed to splash boiling oil on his face with bare hands; he suffered no damage. *Ibid.*, 74.

50. *Ibid.*, 72, n. 16.

neither of whom can control the process, a *ji tong* is endowed with considerable power: s/he is the one in direct contact with the spirits and conveys entire sentences, not only isolated words, so that the public cannot easily make conjectures on the meaning of the messages, since they are already clear enough. Therefore there is a rigorous examination and an initiation before the *ji tong* can be accepted: after he has gone through the initiation rites, he cannot be rejected.⁵¹

A divination séance involving a *ji tong* usually begins⁵² when the medium, after being requested, arrives to the house where his services are needed, usually at evening. He participates in the family conversation until he starts feeling drowsy. He is let sit against the family altar, his shirt is removed. He starts shaking, drums his fingers on the altar, convulsions may follow, and jumps; and suddenly in a high-pitched voice speaks in an unintelligible language, which becomes a variety of local dialect, in which the possessing spirit answers the question posed. The language however is distorted by melodies, belches and vocative shrieks, and only those familiar with the medium are able to interpret his words, sometimes only after asking for clarification.

After about one hour the session concludes, the medium falls into the arms of two men ready to catch him, comes back to himself, washes, puts on the shirt again, then sits and discusses with his host what has taken place. Not all the mediums remember what has taken place during their trance. Different ways of speaking are thought to be a sign that different mediums are possessed by different gods. Skeptics however point out that the same spirit, when speaking through two different *ji tongs*, has two different voices.⁵³

Ji tongs are not only mediums, they are also a spectacle, when they engage in sometimes fearful mortification of their flesh. It is not uncommon to see some of them, in front or in the precincts of temples, hitting themselves with five instruments (a ball of nails, a sword, a saw or a sawfish, a spiked club, and a large axe, the most dangerous of all) until they are covered in blood.

Their wounds are often superficial; some say that they cannot feel them, because they are compelled to do so by their possessing spirits, as a sign of their genuine trances. Such performances are not allowed before the initiation; they take place in occasion of religious celebrations, when the gods are thought to be present in the village.⁵⁴ Their performances on those occasions are recounted after years; after being forbidden in the past, now they attract tourists and add prestige to the local communities.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD

A way to cross the threshold of the visible is the contact with the dead: by the still existing feeling of reciprocal belonging, they may be of help in view of knowing more about life

51. Ibid., 78.

52. This event took place in South Taiwan and is reported in Ibid., 75–6.

53. Ibid., 76–7.

54. Ibid., 80–3.

in that realm. Trying to connect with the dead is common to most of cultures; in Chinese tradition, two main forms can be observed: summoning the souls of the dead, and descending to the nether world to visit them.

Retrieval of souls is practiced in some temples, where a medium offers such a service for very low fees.⁵⁵ The medium uses a piece of cloth to blindfold and also protect himself from evil influences. He then enters into trance, visible by the uncontrolled shaking of his body, while his assistant protects him by tracing exoteric signs in the air with burning charms. The medium then starts taking care of the written petitions, calling the dead person's relatives to himself and talking with them.

Petition after petition, he solves all the cases presented to him; not all the souls can be retrieved and other opportunities need be sought. Retrieval is a difficult matter,⁵⁶ and there is no certainty about who are the souls called back to answer the questions of the living. Among the many effects of the retrieval performance, there is the reaffirmation of the existence of boundaries (place, medium, ritual, rate of failures) that mark the threshold between the living and the dead.⁵⁷

A medium can also help relatives or friends descend into the underworld and meet with the souls of their deceased dear ones and/or find explanations for misfortune in the *yang* world. Those who want to take such a trip⁵⁸ seat on stools, blindfolded, their feet on the floor, while, at the loud sound of a clapper insistently beaten on the table, the medium attempts to entreat some gods to come and possess the bodies of the candidates and lead them.

In any case, even when in trance, the travelers would obey the orders of the medium rather than let the gods guide them. The experience however might be disappointing and saddening, because not necessarily the deceased want to talk with the visitors, and leave them with a feeling of separation and solitude.⁵⁹

LUCID MYSTICISM: MEDITATION

In the recent past, many folk religion temples and new religions emerging from Buddhism, which has an extraordinary rich tradition of meditation, have offered their adepts meditation techniques as a way to communicate with the spiritual realms. In a new Buddhist sect

practitioners are asked to spend at least two and a half hours in meditating every day. During the meditation, practitioners should watch inner lights and

55. W. L. Barnett, *Dealing with the Dead: Rituals of Trance, Transition and Transformation in a Taiwan Temple* (New York: Cornell University Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 2004), 42–5 describes a séance taking place at a Kitchen God Temple near Yilan. The report below follows his description.

56. *Ibid.*, 49.

57. *Ibid.*, 59.

58. I follow the report made by E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 228–35.

59. *Ibid.*, 244.

listen to inner voices. The possible inner lights include blue lights, red lights, yellow lights, etc.; the potential inner voices include the sound of wind, the sound of rain, the sound of train, the sound of bell, etc. The light and sound that the practitioners experience during the meditation represent the level of their cultivation.⁶⁰

The spreading of meditation techniques redefines the role of teachers and masters. On the one side their key importance seems to decrease.

In the past, professionals such as spirit mediums dominated religious experiences. Now the popularity of meditation enables more people to own such mystical experiences. People realize that they can learn to own spiritual experiences if they would like to.⁶¹

On the other side, the traditional devotion to Buddhist masters has got new impulse, in Taiwan, by the spreading of Tibetan Buddhism and the arrival of an increasing number of Lamas. Their disciples, many of whom are well-to-do middle age ladies, surround them with a halo of veneration.

On the Daoist side, meditation, both in the form of concentrating on one object and maintaining an open awareness, has a long history, dating back to the second century CE. It takes the path of visualizing the deities present in the body, active interaction with the gods, ecstatic excursions to the heavens of the Immortals, activation of inner energy. It also receives influences from Buddhism and moves towards a dispassionate observance of body, self and world, towards an empty state of consciousness called “no heart” (*wu xin* 無心).

During the Tang Dynasty, the unfolding of meditative consciousness is described in detail, from concentration exercises to a state of physical absorption in the Dao. The Song times see the development of inner alchemy (*nei dan* 內丹), the strengthening and circulation of inner energies in synergy with the external world.

During the Ming, alchemical practices are mixed with *chan* Buddhist exercises; under the Qing and in the twentieth century new forms of bodily meditation such as *taijiquan* (太極拳) are developed and evolve into the *qigong* (氣功) movement, which employs concentrative exercises and methods to have inner energies circulate inside the body.⁶²

SPIRITS ON DUTY: MAGIC

Although divination and magic belong together, magic can be considered as the counterpart of divination, because while divination focuses on knowing hidden truths, magic embodies the attempt to have supernatural powers at the service of humans, in order to fulfill their plans and desires. It is also clear that things pertaining to magic are well-

60. Y. Lu, *The Transformation*, op. cit., 103.

61. Ibid., 105.

62. L. Kohn, “Meditation,” in F. Pregadio, *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, op. cit., 118–20.

kept secrets, even among the professionals, for fear of being out-powered by one's own disciples. In 1978 a book was published, reporting of a Daoist esoteric ritual aimed at enfeoffing six *jia* (甲, the first of the heavenly stems) spirits placing them at the service of the Dao master.⁶³ It created problems inside the Daoist community, to its author and to the relationship of Daoists with Western scholars.

The central part of the very complex ritual lasts sixty days, but preparation must start one hundred days before and involves selecting a site for the Daoist altar, constructing the battle chart of the eight trigrams, carving a special ritual seal, memorization of spells, of hand mantras and of talismans to be drawn, making standards of the twenty-eight constellations, summoning the spirits to the center of the sacred area, setting of the sacred area and laying the offerings, choosing the appropriate time, learning how to recognize the spirits and their names, the most jealously kept secret.⁶⁴

The core part of the ritual consists in summoning the spirits, by reciting the spells, drawing the talismans on paper and in the air with a sword with the addition of secret mantras, performing the mudras and pronouncing the names of the spirits. The performer is instructed to recognize the coming of the summoned spirit by particular lights, sounds and sudden appearances approaching him from determined directions.⁶⁵ The summoning of the spirits takes five days (on the fourth day two spirits are called) and is repeated twelve times. At the end of the sixty days all the temporary items used are destroyed by fire.

The spirit generals, once brought under the Taoist's command, will come at his summons to obey whatever orders he may give them... Though the spirits are mainly used to combat one's enemies in battle, they can also be used to cure illness, exorcise, and protect the Taoist from black magic used against him by a rival practitioner.⁶⁶

The book reports also the rites of thunder magic, a more orthodox Daoist practice, used to cure illness, to make exorcisms and to subdue the demonic forces of heterodoxy.⁶⁷

The highly sophisticated Daoist doctrines lay behind the more popular magic rituals of folk religion. Temples offer plenty of objects (talismans⁶⁸ and charms) that have supernatural powers and can protect the ones who possess them. Besides Daoism, Buddhism

63. M. Saso, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978). In the first part of the book, chapter 4 deals with the "Dao of the Left," the "Sinister Dao" considered as heterodox, highly dangerous and severely condemned throughout Chinese history.

64. *Ibid.*, 131–60.

65. See, e.g., the "Ritual for refining the Chia-tzu spirit," in *Ibid.*, 164–66.

66. *Ibid.*, 187.

67. *Ibid.*, 244–66.

68. Talismans are strips of paper, cotton or wood, on which stylized graphs or words are written. They are thought to have a range of functions: evoke deities, exorcise devils, cure sickness. Kunio Miura, "Magic," Pregadio, *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, op. cit., 117.

too seems to presents aspects in which magic—at least in historical records—plays some role.⁶⁹

Powers beyond human abilities become available during or through meditation, and can be used for negative purposes. Although orthodoxy rejects such deviations and cautions against them, the possibility that a magic attitude enters into all kinds of religious affiliations is all too known a fact.

A special heading in the field of magic is the one involving the dead. On Monday 21, May 2012 issue of *Taipei Times*, one of the Taiwanese newspapers published in English, news was reported that in Thailand a man of Taiwanese descent had been arrested for possessing the bodies of 6 stillborn babies, covered in gold leaf. They were advertised for sale on a black magic website.⁷⁰ According to a comment in the article, people who possess such fetuses think that they will become rich.

UNINVITED GUESTS: GODS, GHOSTS AND ANCESTORS INTRUDING INTO PEOPLE'S LIVES

In the same way as humans are interested in the life of spirits, like to know their mind and even place them under control, so do the spirits. In particular, in the context of folk religion, spirits may let their problems known to the mortals, especially when they are not satisfied at the way they are treated. The most common case is that of ancestors sending illness or bad fortune to their descendants because they are forgotten, not fed or cared for enough in their new existence after death. In this case too, as it has already been seen, people go to the medium, who may identify the problem and suggest a way to solve it.

These cases have a collective, even a cosmic dimension; folk religion rites such as the *Pu Du* (普渡) on the fifteenth of the seventh lunar month;⁷¹ Daoist rites, in particular the rite of Cosmic Renewal (*jiao* 醮);⁷² Buddhist rites, such as the prayers to the bodhisattvas *Di Cang* (地藏) or *Mu lian* (目蓮) for the deliverance of souls from hell,⁷³ all are ritual and collective answers to the need of keeping harmonious relationships between the living and the dead.

More specific are cases of possession (of people) or of haunting (of places). When they are deemed negative—in many cases mediums are in charge of discerning the kind of presence—the solution is to expel the devils (or the spirits) by way of exorcism. In principle, the procedure is simple. According to the Nüqing Guilü (ca. 400 CE), “If one knows the name of the demon, it will return to its real form and no longer harass one... The

69. S. McFarlane, “The Role of the Magic in Buddhism, With Special Reference to Ch'an (Zen),” in *The Mahachulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 2010, 3/1: 35–46.

70. *Taipei Times*, 21, May 2012. Cf. <<http://www.taipetimes.com>>.

71. Ng Bu-tong ed., *A Guidebook for Christians on Taiwanese Customs and Superstitions*. Trans A. Albrecht (Taipei: China Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1966), 45–9; W. Barnett, *Dealing with the Dead*, op. cit., 118–54.

72. P. Andersen, “Jiao Offering,” in F. Pregadio, *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, op. cit., 539–44.

73. F. Tosolini, “Death and Those Beyond: Taiwan,” in T. Tosolini ed., *Death and Those Beyond*, (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, private edition, 2011), 138, quoting H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*. Trans. F. A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 188–89.

demon that is a tree sprite is named Qunyao... the demon that is a tiger sprite is named Jianzhuangzi" (2.1a-b).⁷⁴ The key point being that of calling the demon by name, other rites are added, such as protective spells and the making and use of talismans.

Protection against malevolent spirits involves the whole community of a village. At the village spiritual boundaries, soldiers are stationed who protect the village. Villagers need to offer them food and paper money so as to show them their respect and gratitude. The appropriate rite is performed in the afternoon of the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month, and in turn a family is in charge of leading it.⁷⁵

The soldiers are thought to belong to the protector god of the village. In case danger is approaching, there is a ritual specifically meant to strengthen the spiritual defense lines of the village, by purifying with fire its central temple and five external forts. The objects of the altar of the temple "pass through oil" (*guo you* 過油), hot oil that is fired (sprayed with rice liquor, so that a flame arises from it) and purifies what comes into contact with it. The purification is repeated for all the forts of the village and strengthens the spiritual garrisons on duty in them to defend the village. In this way a contract is honored on the side of humans, who need a god as their special protector.⁷⁶

On the basis of an oracle, special rites can be performed also to protect a family when things go wrong and nobody can be blamed for what happens. During the rite, called *xie tu* (謝土), the priest performs chants containing exorcisms designed to bring the evil forces present in the house under the performer's control. At dusk he seats on the threshold of the central door of the house. In front of him is a pot, covered by a tightly stretched piece of brown paper, on which little holes are carved, and a few rice grains are placed. As the assistant bangs rhythmically a small gong, the grains hop and fall into the pot. They are thought to be evil spirits, which are then imprisoned inside the pot, which is then hurriedly brought outside the village and secured to the ground.

The charms helping to fix it there are of the same type used to secure the forts protecting the village. After this, in the house, the rite of "passing through oil" is performed: basins of oil are fired, and the objects on the house altar made to pass through different columns of flames and thus purified from malign influxes. The same happens for all the rooms of the house, where the oil is once more fired. After that, a stake with a charm on it is pounded into the floor of the central room, close to the altar.

The rite of "changing luck" (*gai yun* 改運) is then performed: each person in the house is given a paper-made little figure of himself. He carries it across a bench representing a bridge. After crossing the bridge, he sits down. The figures are thought to have become the resting place of the evil spirits; the assistant collects them and burns them outside the village boundaries.⁷⁷

74. Quoted in P. Nickerson, "Demons and Spirits," in F. Pregadio, *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, op. cit., 64.

75. D. Jordan, *Gods, Ghost and Ancestors*, op. cit., 50–2.

76. Ibid., 53–6.

77. Ibid., 128–31.

In many cases, exorcism becomes a sort of negotiation with the spirit—which is supposed to possess the living as a way to have them care of its problems—in order to find a deal satisfactory for both parts.⁷⁸ This is the Buddhist approach too, at least in the words of a Buddhist expert: “Buddhist exorcism does not aim to kill, trap, hurt, or chase away harmful unseen beings. Buddhist exorcism aims for win-win situations for the involved human and spirit—who are seen as two parties negatively affected by grudges that require peaceful negotiation.”⁷⁹ Prayers and meditation are therefore carried out for the purpose of persuading the spirit to leave the body.

Other kinds of possession are valued positively, if not by the possessed, at least by the community. It is the case of mediums (*ji tong*),⁸⁰ who are seen as living tokens of the possibility of communicating with gods and spirits.

MEDIUMS AND INTERPRETERS

A special feature of Chinese divination world is that the roles of mediums and interpreter not always are played by the same actors, or at the same time. The messages conveyed through the mediation of unusual means, or mental states of some people still need to be sifted by the more normal means of discernment by experienced people, under the supervision of the community. This need of confirmation on the side of humans through human wisdom and common sense is already present in the repetition of divinatory trials, and in the advice given on how to deal with conflicting responses obtained through different means. In any case, if the invisible and visible world are not really divided, but just distinct parts of a greater whole, even the division between usual and unusual ways of knowing deeper truths loses some of its sharpness. In the case of Daoist *Dao shi* (道師, Daoist teacher), their esoteric ritual meditations allow them to mediate in full consciousness between the deities and the world of humans,⁸¹ and to become the center of godly dramas, when they perform their complex rituals.⁸²

78. For a similar attitude when training in shamanic practices, see Y.-J. Tsai, “Construction of the Ethical Self: The Medium’s Modulation of Spirit and Exercise of Body in Taiwanese Popular Religion,” in O. Lardinois and B. Vermander ed., *Shamanism and Christianity: Religious Encounters Among Indigenous Peoples of East Asia* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2008), 115.

79. Mr Shen Shi’an, chief editor of the Web and library departments at the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, interviewed in Asia One. Cf. <<http://www.asiaone.com/A1Home/A1Home.html>>.

80. See “Divining Youths” above.

81. M. Saso, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang*, op. cit., 214. “By the ritual perfection of the Taoist, the spirits of the cosmos are prevailed upon to grant heavenly blessing, give abundance on earth, and free the souls from hell. But on an higher, meditative plane, the *chiao* [the *jiao* ritual] is interpreted as a ritual for bringing about union with the Tao. That is to say, the Taoist first unites himself to the Tao of transcendence, and then carries the petitions of the men and women of the community before the thrones of the heavenly worthies. Thus in the final definition, the highest form of esoteric Taoism is seen to be based upon the premise that the master first unites himself with the Tao, and then uses his supernatural powers to save others. From his position of esoteric union, he coaxes and cajoles the spirits of the three realms (heaven, earth and underworld) to give man blessing. All his marvelous powers come to him by reason of union with the Tao.”

82. Ibid., 228: “As the Three Pure Ones come forth to take up their positions of preeminence in the ritual

In the case of shamans, both in a Chinese and Aboriginal context, things seem to be simple as well, in that shamans keep in touch both with spiritual powers and with their community, where they are held in high esteem and considered as leaders, even beyond religious matters. Indeed, people seek them not only in order to ask for their prayers, for indications about causes of negative situations, to ask for remedies, but also when they need any kind of important advice. This on the basis of their acknowledged experience and wisdom. The role of shaman is often inherited and passed from father/mother to son/daughter. For a shaman, being possessed by gods through trance seems not to be the usual way he enters into contact with the invisible realms.⁸³ In any case, he is able to interpret by himself what takes place through him.⁸⁴

Saso reports that once, for some reasons, Daoist Master Chuang decided to perform a rite earlier than due. Suddenly, in the middle of the rite, the local *ji tong* became possessed by a god (*Taizi* 太子) and started shouting that the time for the rite was wrong.

Chuang turned and faced the possessed man, his eyes wide with rage. Taking the posture of the Pole Star *mudra*, he breathed deeply and used the Thunder Magic rubric to expel the deity. In a moment, the possessed man left the temple, collapsed, and came out of his trance. Chuang then declared his own right to determine the hour when the ritual was to be initiated.⁸⁵

This fact, not only shows the superior power of a Daoist master over a *ji tong*; even more surprisingly, it also shows that a Daoist master is able to dictate his will to the gods, contradict and overpower them.

area, the place occupied by the emperor in court audiences, the Taoist master also envisions a splendid court of mythical animal retainers that always accompany the Three Pure Ones. In the east is the great blue dragon that represents the powers of spring. In the south is the red phoenix of summer. In the west is the white tiger of autumn. In the north is the black tortoise, the symbol of winter. The Taoist himself occupies the center, playing the role of the alchemical furnace, the central void in which the Tao of eternity is to be present. In each of the interstices—that is, the northeast, southeast, southwest and northwest—are two lions and two herons, respectively, a total of sixteen guardian spirits. Finally, over his left eye the Taoist envisions the sun with nine rays and the moon with ten rays coming forth.”

83. Although in a Daoist context, the very existence of courses in order to educate mediums, offered by the Mediums' Association in Taiwan, such as the one describe in Y.-J. Tsai (“Construction of the Ethical Self: The Medium's Modulation of Spirit and Exercise of Body in Taiwanese Popular Religion,” in O. Lardinois and B. Vermander ed., *Shamanism and Christianity*, op. cit., 85–125), witness to the fact that being in touch with invisible powers can be possible in presence of normal forms of consciousness. The author reports: “According to You and other mediums, the visitation of the ling feels like a strong electric current. In the process of modulating the vital force, usually the medium manifests the physical symptom of hiccoughing or trembling. When the mediums' bodies are not strong enough, or they are not skilled enough in the modulation of ling, they will probably experience difficulty in breathing, trembling, or even shock or fainting when they are ‘bumped’ by the vital forces of the deities” (pp. 102–3). See also: Y.-J. Tsai “Moving the Body; Awakening the Spirit: Medium's Performance of Healing, Cultivation and Salvation in Taiwan,” in *Fu Jen International Religious Studies*, 2008/2: 99–118.

84. See the experiences reported in S.-Y Tung, “Shamanism from Orchid Island: Their Encounter with the Christian Faith,” in O. Lardinois and B. Vermander ed., *Shamanism and Christianity*, op. cit., 127–44.

85. M. Saso, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang*, op. cit., 120–21.

TRYING TO MAKE SOME SENSE OF THRESHOLD CROSSING

Seemingly, it is materially impossible to present with sufficient detail all the innumerable ways of Chinese divination. At least one question can however be asked, before trying to offer some interpretive lines of such a complex phenomenon: which are the present trends, what is in store for Chinese divinatory ways?

As for the first part of the question, some facts can be listed. Together with the radical changes in family, social and economic life, a new background has emerged, against which many more people now lead their busy and worried lives: city, market and social media culture. Another important factor connected with such processes is memory: how much do young generations know about the life of their parents and grandparents? How much are they willing to remember, to re-enact?

On the one side the media continually report of grand folk religion and Buddhist celebrations, involving tens of thousands of participants; on the other side it is difficult to avoid the impression that the meaning of such parades has changed, because the lives of those who attend to them are not the same. The problems they face stem from city life rather than from a countryside, agricultural environment; such problems challenge nuclear and torn-apart families in anonymous neighborhoods, rather than enlarged clan groups in the closed structure of a village. The need to know more about one's future is and will be always present; perhaps some forms will evolve.

The individual dimension of divination has already become more and more prominent, together with meditation and the need of some affiliation, better if able to give a reassuring feeling of protection. Big, massive folk religion celebrations, even when massively sponsored, might lose their human basis, if more and more youth take to shopping centers rather than to temples. The secretive Daoist masters will probably always be there, behind the scenes, to warrant for the orthodoxy and success of the rituals.

Buddhist abbeys and masters, for their part, will continue their trade, capitalizing on meditation, while still mixing themselves and their prognostications in the melting pot of popular rituals. Above all, the question about the amount of mental time given to such topics looms as a decisive one.

One possible exit is that, perhaps "what will not be conquered will be forgotten:" if traditional divination will not be positively eradicated, the mental time dedicated to it will become less and less, and in the end it will be forgotten. In favor of what? Maybe of divination, again, under new, more electronic forms.

When trying to offer some comments on Chinese divination, an important aspect clearly surfaces. In Chinese divination, a normal state of consciousness, (as expressed through human wisdom and common sense), is generally in control of other forms of contact with the invisible (such as trance, visions, dreams) that go beyond it, and of the results thus obtained.

This is of great importance: if meditation, self-cultivation, community relationships, are in control of oracles, however given, then politics controls religion, Confucian doc-

trine on social harmony gets the upper hand on Daoist, folk religion and Buddhist divination.⁸⁶

The story reported above, about Daoist Master Chuang changing the time of a ritual, shows that human reasons are in control even of the sacred times and spaces, that divination is divined by the human conditions of the diviners.

At this point the question arises about what is revealed by the need, the forms, the results of such a multi-faceted phenomenon. A sentence of Confucius is enlightening: "The Master said, 'The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.'"⁸⁷ "Advantage" (*li* 利) is the positive outcome of divination in the *Yi Jing*, and, we can suppose, not only of divination in all its dimension, but also of all human activity, everywhere.

At this point, however, a question could be asked: is there any difference between justice and advantage, between the superior man and the mean man? Isn't seeking justice just a better way to get advantage? Here the unfinished task of divination appears: it perceives the presence of an all-embracing unity, and also that it is animated, either as an impersonal force or as myriads of gods; it senses that the right way is found only through a good relationship with such reality, and tries to find the right means to get in touch, to dialogue, to know, to listen, and also to speak, to negotiate, to assert human power.

Throughout the process, advantage is the aim, even to the point of ceasing away a god, when it contradicts a human decision. This means that advantage is the brother of solitude, when, at the end of the rite, all the gods are enfeoffed at the service of the powerful master and take good care of all his enemies.

M. Saso published his materials after the death of Master Chuang, and the book is dedicated to his cherished memory.⁸⁸ Does this mean that divination ultimately fails, because the form of relationship it creates, a control over the invisible partners, does not correspond to the real state of things?

That common sense, as wise, and as shared, agreed-upon knowledge, rules above miracles is already a step in the right direction, because this fact shows the acknowledgment of the existence of a reciprocity beyond individual control, at the level of humans. However, to live such a reciprocity at the level of gods is another thing, an impossible task, unless from Heaven somebody comes down, so close to humans that they can live with him a real relationship.

A further problem about the manifold ways of divination is that of the grade of certitude they are able to offer. With respect to this too, Chinese divination shows some

86. R. P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), argues in favor of mutual interdependence between political factors and local religious traditions, both the fruit of human decisions: "People use, manipulate and create culture (including religion) as part of everyday life within a system of social relations," 172.

87. *Analects* 4(Li Ren): 16. 子曰: "君子喻於義, 小人喻於利。" Trans. Legge, <<http://ctext.org/analects>>.

88. M. Saso, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang*, op. cit., v.

peculiarities, again because wisdom, human mind, common sense have the last word. However: how much does this word shelter against fear?

Divinatory blocks seem to be much more solid a shelter than the wavering opinions of advisors, interpreters, shamans, sages, one's own mind. This is one of the reasons why divination is still there, together with the need of receiving words from gods rather than from humans, because the one who asks knows deeply about his own dignity and is not satisfied with words coming just from his peers.

Divination therefore points to the deep need of getting *reassurance* on the words of *gods*. How is this possible, when on earth basically only conflicting words of humans are heard? How much are such reassuring words able to uphold the necessary human freedom—and the involved risk of choosing—without which whatever reassurance coming from divination will not be able to establish man in peace? If in front of men there is not a real, infinitely reassuring and infinitely challenging unlimited act of becoming present, divination does not divine anything else than human limits, solitude and fear: a threshold which is a *trompe d'oeuil* painted on a wall.

When considered from a Christian perspective, the alluring world of Chinese divination—and generally of any kind of divination—is open to multiple considerations. On a subjective stance, the desire of living in harmony with a greater, all-encompassing unity, deserves deep respect; inside such a desire the Spirit of the Lord is at work, paving a road for the full revelation of Jesus' power. When considered from an objective vantage point, some interesting elements can as well be highlighted, especially that kind of omnipresent awareness of existing in a world populated by superhuman forces, kind of living in a dream in continuous contact with such vicinities, and the power of rituality, by which humans enter with their power into such realms.

However, when faced with the interpretation of the main intention at work inside that system, one cannot but make some comparisons with the life of the First Church: in the *Acts of the Apostles*, e.g., all the times and in many ways magic is seen as the work of the devil: in Samaria, Peter strongly reproaches Simon the magician, who gave him money in order to have the power of conferring the Spirit (*Acts* 8:9-25); at Philippi, Paul throws out a devil possessing a girl and announcing through her that the Apostle was preaching the way to salvation (*Acts* 16:16-18); at Ephesus, at Paul's preaching, many burn their books of magic, the value of which was very high (*Acts* 19:18-19).

On his side, Paul declares that he went up to the third heaven, but he does not take pride in that (*2Cor* 12:1-6). He prefers to build up the community by his love rather than let everybody marvel at his ability of speaking mysterious words (*1Cor* 14:18-19). He knows that Jesus has seized control of the mysterious world of the invisible, which has been created through him and for him (*Col* 1:18), and freed humans from any servitude to the powers living there, so that they may live the new life of the resurrection, where the presence of the Spirit of God is felt through reciprocal love (*Eph* 4:1-6).

While in human divination it is man, in its solitude, to have a last word, but in a system which is just the fruit of his natural ability in creating myths, in Christ's divinization

the last word belongs to the power of his Spirit, in a way where what is human is saved and fulfilled. Besides His Name there is no salvation, only the sort of impression given by cats when they play with mice.

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Conclusion

E. PULCINI, M. REBECCHI, T. TOSOLINI

One of the most general conclusions that might be drawn by the analysis of the previous papers is that human beings could easily be defined as individuals whose needs must be met and satisfied. Even more, they want to be in charge, or in control, of their destiny, they abhor their frailty and weakness, they fear their finitude and they desire to avoid any kind of malady and misfortune... One of the lessons human beings learn pretty soon, however, is that this form of omnipotence is not within their reach: what they need is the help of some other invisible entity, or “Being”, something or somebody in charge of powers beyond human control. This certainly manifests the positive side of those human needs, i.e., the fact that somehow there is a holistic view of reality, that there is a hidden bound and harmony between human beings and nature, between humanity and spiritual entities.

Despite the array of the cultures we have analyzed, we cannot fail to notice a kind of similarity concerning these human aspirations and the fact that the human heart will not find rest

until it discovers a satisfactory answer to its quests. This sensitivity might also be seen as a gateway to the richness and varieties of human experiences and a privileged path to the inculturation of the Christian message.

What we have seen at play in all these cultures and religions, however, is that human beings are not only looking for an answer to their many problems, but they would also like to be in charge of and somehow determine the positive outcome of those demands. Spirits must be tamed, invisible powers have to be kept under control, futures must be guessed or divined, uncertainty must be conquered and gods must be appeased. What really matters is to come up with a very practical, tangible and worldly salvation that will dissipate the ever present shadows of death and illusion.

While it cannot be denied that all these attitudes and desires belong to the human condition, we could also ask if the answers human beings seek do not betray a fearful and apprehensive understanding and comprehension of life and reality, entering into a mythological habitat in which the outcome of the relationship with the spirits and invisible powers is always unstable, uncertain and, sometimes, even dangerous. In all this, human beings seem always too ready to bargain their freedom in order to gain the power to steer a positive fate in their own direction, to sacrifice they hold most dear in order to catch a glimpse of divine powers.

This certainly indicates closeness to the gods, stepping on a spiritual threshold which is felt close to the human realm. But this nearness or proximity somehow seems to betray only an immanent outlook on reality, the fulfillment of a need which (precisely because it is all too human) is without a final solution. And it is precisely here that we can draw a distinction between the *sacred* and the *holy*. The sacred consists of attempts to elevate natural things to the level of the divine as a compensation for the fear of not being able to rationalize them. The holy is the desire for the Infinite. The sacred gives us magic, whereas the holy communicates the transcendent to us, it opens up the realm of the Infinite which is beyond exteriority.

Having reached this point, the authors are well aware that it would be unfair (to say the least) to assess or evaluate the validity of all those practices, which they have termed “threshold religion” precisely because all those experiences betray the most inner need to find the fundamental fullness of life which, even though pursued to the ultimate spiritual regions, seems to elude human beings forever.

Nevertheless, the authors cannot but wonder if all these quests do not reveal something more radical, something that human beings are insistently searching for, without ever finding it, even though they have the illusion of possessing it—that is, something or Someone who eventually can only be revealed or given to us, but certainly cannot be fabricated or produced by us. Paradoxically, we could say (with the Gospel, cf. *Mt* 6:25–34) that it is precisely when God answers all the needs of human beings before they are even aware of them that God invites everybody to enter into a new kind of relationship with Him: a novel familiarity based more on trust than on fear, more on freedom and providence than on dependence, a novel relationship with a transcendent God who does not

ask anything but, on the contrary, gives incessantly all that He has and all that He is to us. Thus, in the end, the alternative seems to be that we either accept to be the humble “sons” of this God of Love, or we live in opposition to Him.

On the one hand, we can see a God who, in becoming man, has experienced the same needs that haunt every human being and, on the other hand, we are aware of the new answer He has brought us, a response which goes beyond the immediate fulfillment of those same needs, in order to open us to a relationship with God that is no longer dictated by human necessities or the drive to power.

Ultimately, each human being will either find himself/herself dwelling in the “divine garden” (cf. *Gen* 1–2) in which God establishes bonds of intimacy and transcendence with each one of us, or human beings will be told to leave that paradisiacal place and remain forever self-absorbed, unable to move their eyes away from the pool that reflects their solitary faces and needs. The Christian proposal situates itself precisely within this dramatic situation, in which human beings have to decide whom to trust, which threshold to cross once and for all in order to eventually fulfill their deepest desires, thus reaching the fullness of their own identity and, finally, experience that unique Love who keeps assuring us that it is stronger than death.

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Threshold Religion

Continuing the series of phenomenological presentations of cultural aspects of the Asian cultures in which we live, this issue of the *Asian Study Centre* tackles the ubiquitous and evasive topic of forms of religiosity which are not easily classified under the umbrellas of established religious systems and practices. Despite the array of the cultures we have analyzed, we cannot fail to notice a kind of similarity concerning these human aspirations and the fact that the human heart will not find rest until it discovers a satisfactory answer to its quests. This sensitivity might also be seen as a gateway to the richness and varieties of human experiences and a privileged path to the inculturation of the Christian message.