

Ecstatic Time

ed. by Tiziano Tosolini



Asian Study Centre

Xaverian Missionaries – Japan

ECSTATIC TIME

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Introduction

S. TARGA, L. MARCHIORON

The starting point for *Ecstatic Time* was the realization that the concept of feast, and the role of time in it, are structural elements of any culture, the defining constituents of people's identities. As missionaries, we recognize and experience every day that, for the people with whom we live, feast is a ruptured time, an interruption in ordinary duration to make space for something else, for another kind of time which is qualitatively different from normal, ordinary time. This time, which we have called "ecstatic" reflects, complements and fulfils the meaning of life by recognizing the sacred through the celebration of festivals and rituals.

The four contributions collected here reveal two fundamental dimensions in the way in which festivals are celebrated in the different cultural contexts of the countries under examination. Apparently, the works on the feast, as elaborated in specific anthropological contexts of Bangladesh and Indonesia, highlight a structural relationship with agricultural cycles, fertility, the regeneration of life, and the need of harmonious relations within and without specific social groups and the multifarious spirits

of the surrounding nature. Ostensibly, the relationship between both Mentawaiian and Rishi peoples with a transcendent divine entity is not immediate or directly apparent. In fact, for both Mentawaiian and Rishi peoples, festivals are occasions for creating a more habitable space outside of a primordial, threatening chaos. On the other hand, the works on Japan and Taiwan reflect a more national perspective, where festivals as such establish, articulate and qualify time. More importantly, Heaven's calendar is for the people to observe; it is rites and festivals which give meaning to time. By celebrating them, human time is brought into contact with divine time. Festivals and rituals re-actualize and revive sacred events that happened in the beginning.

For the Rishi of Bangladesh, the festival of *Carak* becomes a way to recompose the harmony between the male and female elements of life, making amends for the violence inflicted on the female by the male, in its agricultural activity. The paper highlights the ideological and instrumental uses the festival may be subjected to, particularly by vested quarters of stratified societies.

The *Puliaijat* celebrations of the people of the Mentawai mark different stages of life and particular events in it. These festive occasions summon the whole clan to the communal house (*uma*). The paper focuses on the ritual words employed by the *rimata*, who is the leader of the celebration. In particular, the article stresses the profound meaning of the *puliaijat* for the Mentawaiian soul.

The paper on Japan's festivals analyzes the meaning, structure, and typology of the various *Matsuri* (festival). While the latter may be private or public, the paper emphasizes the description of the time of praise, that is, the time when the officiant directs prayers to the divinities in order to promote perfect harmony between the will of the *kami* (divinity) and the will of human beings.

The paper on Taiwan concentrates on six major Chinese festivals, all of them connected with agricultural, historical, cosmological, celestial and mythological events, with a clear preference for the vision of "round-circle." The author compares these festivals with Biblical ones, where feasts are an actual memorial of welcoming life as the Creator's gift. Feast is a delightful time, a time of re-union, joy, peace and fulfilment.

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Ecstatic Time

BANGLADESH

SERGIO TARGA

The *Carak puja*, although known and celebrated, often with different names,¹ all over the Indian Northeast, is however particularly linked to the religious and cultural traditions of Bengal. The festival apparently impinges on multiple layers of ancient popular religious customs and beliefs which lend it particular flavour and interest. Anthropologists and historians of religions alike find in it a sort of treasure trove of material useful to pin down and chart the often elusive religious and cultural history of Bengal. The attention of the scholarly community to the *Carak puja* was first attracted by Haraprasad Shastri who recognized in the festival remnants of Buddhist worship and ideas.²

1. Within Bengal, sometimes even from village to village, basically identical religious practices, assume different names. *Carak*, *Gajon*, *Gambhira* are perhaps some of the more common ones. See B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture* (London: Longmans, 1917), 73. *Puja* is a generic term for adoration or feast.

2. See S. Haraprasad, "Discovery of the Remnants of Buddhism in Bengal," in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, December 1894. Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Hara Prasad Sastri, born Bhattacharya (1853–1931), was

Without entering into what turned out to be a vexed question, it is necessary to say that indeed the festival continues to maintain a very heterogeneous character. For a start, god Dharma himself, a local Bengali folk deity, around which the celebrations originated, appears to have a mixed nature so that he seems to be the outcome of “Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina, non-Aryan and Islamic strands having united to form him as he is today.”³ To further complicate things, god Dharma nowadays has come to be identified *tout court* with god Shiva, so much so that most devotees of the *Carak puja* do not even remember about the existence of a god called Dharma.

A clarification is required here. The cultural and historical territorial unit of Bengal had a diversified history which in 1947 eventually led to the political division of West Bengal from East Pakistan, later to become Bangladesh (1971). While in West Bengal the cult of Dharma is still a living one with its liturgies, priests and temples, in the East (i.e. Bangladesh) Dharma has basically disappeared, his festival, the *Gajon* of Dharma, another name with which the *Carak puja* is also known, being simply identified with and replaced by the *Gajon* of Shiva.⁴ This cultic diversification will hopefully find a plausible explanation in the course of the present paper. Indeed, to speak of the *Gajon* of Shiva or of Dharma means to enter not only a religious domain but also a geographic and political one. This reminds us once again that religious phenomena are never abstracted essences but are always instead the resultant of interconnected practices and their agents which determines and modifies their forms and meanings. Significantly, the self-inflicted physical harm of devotees, which is perhaps the main practice of the *puja* in question, is beyond and above a simple display of devotion and might signify a surviving but marginalized powerfulness. This kind of understanding might be reinforced if we consider that the *gajon* is organized and acted out by so-called low caste Hindus and former untouchable groups. The *Carak puja* may thus graphically represent the social gap between powerful elites and resistant marginalized populations. The non-ceremonial, negative evaluation of both British authorities and especially English educated Indian elites, therefore, may be the indirect recognition of an ingrained power struggle within Indian society.

In one of the first descriptions of the *Carak puja*, Ram Cumul Sen writes: “It is a festival improperly termed by many *Carak Puja*, perhaps from the notion that every ceremony observed by the Hindus of Bengal, is a *puja* or religious worship; and whether it be performed by a *muchi* or *chandala*, is considered as Hinduism, and the whole body of the Hindus are charged with the absurdity of the act.” And the reasons behind such an unfavourable judgement are that “the festival is performed by the Sudra class only, and

a famous Bengali Sanskritist. He wrote extensively on many topics related to Bengal and her history. His name is particularly linked to the discovery of the *Charyapada* manuscript in Nepal, the earliest specimen of Bengali Literature.

3. P. D. Rahul, “Some Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study” in *Anthropos*, 1985, 78: 677.

4. The word *gajon* is of difficult comprehension. It is generally understood as to derive from the Sanskrit *garjana* and to mean “roaring,” to indicate the tumultuous nature of the ceremonies performed. See S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), 472.

generally by the lowest castes and most dissipated characters... The ceremony which was called an act of piety, is converted into an occasion of dissipation, drinking, gambling, and acts of immorality.”⁵ Indeed this harsh evaluation does recognise the non-alignment of part of Indian society and implicitly apportioning it a subaltern space where, even only for the time of the festival, carnivalesque reversals seem to take place.

Religion, geography, politics and society are not the only domains which complicate the comprehension of the festival. Literature is an additional element. The *Gajons* of Dharma and Shiva have their own liturgical treatises, which sometimes instead of making things easier just complicate them further. This literature comprises the *Sunya Puran*, the *Dharma Puja Bidhan*, the *Dharma Puja Paddhati* and the *Dharma Mangal Kavyas*.⁶ While most likely this literature was born to explain practices, it has often been used instead the other way round, that is, as a tool to measure the authenticity of practices, to restrict, as it were, the autonomous space of subaltern groups. As a consequence, scholarly studies on the religious practices of the *gajons* have often suffered from a serious drawback: the neglect of the living cult of real people in favour of an overblown importance given to textual witnesses.⁷

At this point, while considering and recognising the complexity of the *gajon* celebrations with their multiple facets and meanings, I must also state the limited purpose of this paper. My interest in the subject admittedly goes beyond religion and anthropology proper and focuses instead on the festival’s socio-political import. History, religion and anthropology do indeed enter the purview of the paper but in as much as they help understand its socio-political relevance for the people involved. The present paper attempts a phenomenological reading of a particular instance of the celebration, narrowing down the topic to the *gajon* as it is celebrated in Chuknagar and surroundings by the Rishi people, derogatively called *Muci*, a former untouchable caste of leather workers and cobblers of South-western Bangladesh. The place designates a traditional Rishi area located midway between the cities of Khulna and Satkhira.

In practice the paper will start with a description of the *gajon* festival as it is celebrated today in the area mentioned. A second section will attempt a first general reading of these celebrations and their meanings, particularly with the background of the partition

5. R. C. Sen, “A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used” in *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 1833, 24: 609–10.

6. As is often the case with ancient and medieval Indian literary works it is difficult to date them exactly. However, the *Sunya Puran* appears to be the oldest of the three classes of literature in question. It is ascribed to Ramai Pandit, the reputed initiator of the Dharma cult. The text collects various materials from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Cosmogony, liturgy and legends collected therein centre on god Dharma. The *Dharma Puja Bidhan*, a later text ascribed to the same Ramai Pandit, repeats much of the *Sunya Puran*’s material. The *Dharma Mangal Kavyas* are instead definitely later poetic compositions (from the late fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries) which somehow continue the *puranic* spirit this time in vernacular. They recount and publicize Dharma and his feats. For a comprehensive but synthetic introduction to this literature see S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 461–76.

7. See P. D. Rahul, “Some Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study” op. cit., 663–64.

of Bengal in mind. My hypothesis is that god Dharma survived in the West of Bengal because it was eventually accepted by the Hindu elite of the region, something which did not happen in the East. A third and last section will suggest a political interpretation of the *gajon* in which two marginalized groups, low castes and women, enact their momentary and fictitious liberation. A conclusion will sum up the findings.

THE CARAK PUJA IN CHUKNAGAR

I had the chance to be witness to parts of the Chuknagar celebrations about seventeen years ago when I was posted in that village as a Catholic missionary. My recollections of those days are quite faded yet confronting the narration of the celebration done at present I could not but recognise three on-going trends. The first relates to a process of simplification; the second relates instead to a process of conformation while the last noticeable trend refers to commercialization. The festival year after year while conforming itself more and more to perceived Hindu standards is however losing its religious character increasingly becoming something of a folkloric event only. This secularization, as it were, is significant in that the *Carak puja* is perhaps the most important religious festival of the Rishi people.

While the term *Carak puja* is widely known to the Rishi, they prefer to call the festival *Del puja* or *Deul puja*. The word *del* or, more properly, *deul* probably means “shrine, temple” and possibly refers to the temporary “shelter” that must be built for the deity at the very beginning of the celebrations. This deity, originally, must have been Dharma according to Amolendru Mitra who writes: “*Deul puja* or *Dehara puja* is another name for the *Gajon of Dharma*.”⁸ Incidentally, in Bhorot Bhaena, a village some 10 kilometres to the North of Chuknagar there exists a Buddhist archaeological site, possibly a sixth century *vihara*, which is popularly known as *Bhokter Deul* (the *Deul* of devotees). The possible linkage between this archaeological site and the usage of the term *Deul* to indicate the festival was explicitly posited by the Rishi people of Mongolkot themselves, who referred to the folk tale of king Bhorot who built in that place a *Deul* for his mother. As a matter of speculation, there might be a link between the *deul* terminology and Buddhism, in the sense that the term *deul* might be a Buddhist technical word. Yet, when I asked Krishnapada Das, a Rishi *baun*,⁹ about the meaning of the word *deul* he instead referred the word to the colloquial *deule hoe jaoa*, that is, “to become a beggar, to lose everything,”

8. A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur* (Calcutta: Pharma K. L. Mukhopaddyay, 1972), 66. My translation of Bengali original. Unfortunately, the writer refrains from explaining the exact meaning of this terminology.

9. Krishnapada Das is a 74 years old Rishi priest of Baratia village some 4–5 kilometres from Chuknagar, towards Khulna. Among the Rishi he is called *baun* (priest) which is a colloquial mispronunciation of the standard *brahmin*. If not stated otherwise what I will be describing of the Rishi *Deul puja* comes from a long interview he kindly afforded me on 22 May, 2017 in Khulna. I take this opportunity to thank him for his invaluable help.

in reference to the *sanyasis* (ascetics) of the festival who must undertake a sort of ascetic regime to be able to perform their assigned roles. Noticeably, academic interpretations of religious practices may not and usually do not coincide with the meanings apportioned them by their actual practitioners and devotees. Obviously there are several layers of meanings and interpretations, nevertheless, I recognise the right of religious practitioners to a continuous trans-signification of their own religious acts.

The *Deul puja* is, in fact, celebrated in the area under scrutiny at two different times. The common date for most of the Rishi hamlets of the region falls on Choitro *songkranti*, that is, on the last day of the Bengali year (i.e. April the 13th). The other date, less common, falls instead on *Bouddho Purnima*,¹⁰ the 27th of Baisak (i.e. 10 May, 2017), the first month of the Bengali year. Thus in Chuknagar the *Deul puja* is held in the month of Choitro while in Mongolkot, a village just 6 kilometres away from Chuknagar on the way to Jessore, the same festival is celebrated in Baisak. Significantly, in Mongolkot the *Deul puja* is called *Dharmer Deul*, literally the *Deul* (temple) of Dharma (the god).¹¹ Not surprisingly, when I enquired about the meaning of the expression, nobody was able to recall god Dharma, referring instead the word *dharma* to its common connotation of religion, justice, the principle sustaining and organising the cosmos.¹² In both celebrations, however, it is the *puranic* god Shiva, in the modern consciousness of the Rishi people, who appears to be the central godhead on which the festival focuses.

The master of ceremonies, as it were, of both the *Deul puja* and/or the *Dharmer Deul* is called *baladar*. The latter is a sort of priest charged with the direction of the whole festival. Notably, while the same person is usually called *baun* while officiating in other festivals and *pujas*, he is specifically called *baladar* while officiating in the *Deul puja*. Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace the etymological meaning of the word, discovering however that a *balabhakta* (a devotee of *bala*) and a *raebala* (king *bala*) also appear as characters within the *puja*. However, a friend told me that the term *bala* refers to a way of singing mantras and songs. The *baladar*, accordingly, is he who sings and pronounces mantras following the melody of *bala* songs.¹³ This piece of information might indeed approximate to the truth if we consider that apparently the *puja* of Dharma originated by singing the rhymes dedicated to him.¹⁴ This *baladar* wears the *poita*, or sacred thread

10. *Bouddho Purnima* is a Buddhist festival marking Gautama's birth, enlightenment and death. It falls always on the first full moon of Baisak.

11. Dillip Das, personal communication, Jessore, 5 May, 2017. The fact that this *puja* is celebrated on *Bouddho Purnima* has contributed to proposing the idea that god Dharma may indeed be a representation of the Buddha himself. See for instance A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 93.

12. Answering a question, Mr. Krishnapada revealed that among Hindus, Baisak is the *dharma mash*, i.e., the month dedicated to *dharma* in which devotees eat vegetarian, water the *tulshi gach* (the *Ocimum Sanctum* plant), sing devotional songs etc. In the *baladar's* consciousness (a sort of priest who leads the *Carak Puja*), it was clear that this *dharma* was not the god Dharma but *dharma* as usually meant nowadays with the word.

13. Bikash Das, personal communication, 4 June, 2017.

14. See N. Bandyopadhyay ed., *Dharmapuja Bidhan* (Kolkata: Bongio Sahitya Parishad, 1916), 2.

of Brahmin priests. In this regard, it should be noted that real Brahmin priests would not officiate at this celebration, considering it as degrading and unsuitable to their high rank.¹⁵ This was true in the past and is generally true even in the present. D. C. Sen writes at the beginning of the last century: “even as late as 1640 AD the Brahmin priests would not venture to mix too closely with the worshippers of Dharma-thakur for fear of losing caste.”¹⁶ This was so essentially because of both the object and the subject of the festival: god Dharma did not belong to the Hindu pantheon¹⁷ and his devotees, the Rishi or any other outcaste group, did not belong to the Hindu fold!¹⁸

The first phase of the festival is the appointment of the so-called *sanyasis*. This is done by the *baladar* one month, 11 days, 9 days, 5 days or 3 days before the beginning of the celebrations. Obviously the *baladar* chooses or accepts the *sanyasis* who are eager to go through the requirements. The *sanyasis*, always and only male, may vary in number even though usually between 7 and 9 but other numbers are also possible. Mr. Krishnapada has been quite liberal in leaving possibilities open. Yet, Mr. Bokul Das, an inhabitant of Chuknagar, who was present at the interview, stated that the number of *sanyasis* may indeed vary but it must always be odd. These *sanyasis* must take the *sanyas broto*, (the vow to live temporarily as ascetics), that is, they have to be vegetarian for a period, live outside their houses, wear only one set of clothes and so on. This regime will continue during the festival as well, where *sanyasis* will be allowed to eat rice only once a day after the conclusion of the ceremonies at night. During the day they may eat only fruits. On the second day of the festival three *sanyasis* will then observe a stricter fast called *nirjola upobash* (fast even without water).

The festival as such lasts three days, and starts three days before the end of Choitro. It should be mentioned, the day before the start of the festival, the *sanyasis* (*jara deuli hobe*) have to enter *hobishshanno*,¹⁹ a word which is also used to indicate the 11 or more days of mourning practices undertaken by close relatives of a deceased. It involves wearing a white, seamless dress, eating outside one’s house, cooking without fish, meat, onion, garlic, and any other hot spice, using new earthen pots etc.

15. This has changed somewhat in West Bengal. See next section.

16. D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1911), 28. Dharmathakur, Dharmaraj etc. are other common names of god Dharma. Krishnapada Das, however, reveals that to become a “priest” he had to receive a consecration from Brahmins to whom somehow he owes allegiance. In his words, “he had to give them *seba* (acts of submission).” He also spoke of an expenditure of between 7,000 and 7,500 *Taka* to accomplish the said consecration (*obhishek*). These particulars are important because they show the way in which a non-Hindu cult eventually comes to be subsumed into Hindu orthodoxy.

17. *Ibid.* 29.

18. See R. C. Sen, “A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used,” *op. cit.*, 609–10.

19. The word *hobishshanno* is defined by the *Bangla Academy, Bengali-English Dictionary* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994) as “eating sacrificial food, rice boiled in clarified butter.” Interestingly, Mr. Krishnapada while explaining the meaning of this word, said that in the same way in which a son for the good of his dead father undertakes *hobishshanno*, in the same way the *sanyasis* undertake the practice for the good of their “father” Shiva.

On the morning of the first day of the festival, the first ceremony, called *ghot sthapon* (the establishment of the earthen pot), takes place in a previously chosen open space. This *ghot*, representing god Shiva, is filled with water and soil from the Ganges, milk, honey and other substances and some five *amer pollob* (shoots of a Mango tree). Afterwards the symbol of Shiva (a sort of stylized man) is drawn on the outer surface of the earthen pot (the *ghot*). The place in which this *ghot* is established becomes the centre of the *puja*. I believe this place arranged and prepared appositely for this festival is what may be identified with the *Deul*, the temple of Shiva. Significantly, this must be in the open and must be someplace new. For instance, the place earmarked in the village for the celebration of a *nam joggo* (the liturgical repetition of Krishna's name), would not do! At most the place may be adorned with leaves of the coconut tree and women may use pieces of clothing as well etc. For the days of the festival this, in the Rishi people's consciousness, becomes the temple of Shiva, a sort of cosmic centre. While the *baladar* did not make any reference to this, Mr. Bokul added that during the establishment of the *ghot* also a small stone, brought out from a house where it has been preserved for a whole year, is established next to the *ghot*. Even this stone represents Shiva, according to Mr. Bokul, and as such becomes the object of *puja* by the devotees who wash it with coconut water, anoint it with mustard oil and smear it with *sindur*, the vermilion powder used by married Hindu women.²⁰ The establishment of the *ghot* culminates with the *ahoban montro* (the calling mantra) by means of which Shiva is invited to enter (*odhisthan kora*) the *ghot*. When I asked the *baladar* where he learnt about this and the other mantras of the festival, he referred to the *Brahmoboiborto* and the *Shiva Purans*. He did not know anything about the *Sunya Puran* or the *Dharma Puja Bidhan*.

After offering *puja* to the *ghot*, the place is somehow fenced and the *baladar* and devotees alike take rest, as it were, until 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon. At this point the *baladar* was asked to recite and sing the kind of mantras used during the *ghot* ceremony. He thus recounted the mantra related to the birth of *kobila* (the milking cow). This rhyme is sung to explain or to actually create the milk needed for the *ghot*. Significantly, the rhyme refers to the white colour of the *pat*, the *cat* (wood) and the *singashon* (throne) and concludes mentioning *dhormo rote ciore elen dhormo niranjon*, that is, "on the chariot of dharma came Dharma Niranjan." Despite the explicit statement of Shiva as being the recipient of devotion and the central godhead of the festival, it clearly appears, at least in this rhyme, that the centrepiece of the *Deul puja* is not Shiva but Dharma Niranjan (Dharma the Spotless), the latter name being an appellation of the same god.²¹ The mention, then, of

20. A characteristic of god Dharma is that he is worshipped in stones and sometimes in posts as well. See P. D. Rahul, "Some Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study," op. cit., 678. See also A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 52ff.

21. "Dharma Niranjan is a compound name for one and the same God" in B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, op. cit., 95. The same author, soon after this quotation, refers also that in the *Dharma Gita*, a very late and spurious text Dharma and Niranjan are separated as two different gods.

three white objects, the throne (*singashon*) made of wood (*cat*) and called *pat*, i.e., small stool, explicitly points to god Dharma who is often associated with this colour.²² Shiva appears to be present only in the consciousness of the celebrants but not in the actual development of the liturgy.

In the afternoon sixteen male devotees, called the *sholoshan* (the 16 disciples), gather together in the place where the *ghot* has been established.²³ They are the *mul sanyasi* (the principal *sonyasi*), the *baladar*, the *raebala* (the *baladar's* helper), the *patshang* (he who carries around the *pat* on his head), the *karashang* (he who jumps on blades), the *bhogshang* (the cook of the festival), the *nilshang* (he who floats this hardened blue thing on water on the last day of the festival), the *dulshang* (he who breaks incense and throws it in water), the *kirshang* (he who carries around an earthen pot full of sugar, coconut water, honey, milk etc. to be distributed to the devotees who want to drink it). The content is also called *coronamrito* i.e., elixir of eternity, the water which washed Shiva's feet; the *darpalshang* (the protector of the gate), the *honumanshang* (he who does all the odd jobs necessary to the festival), the *bhandarishang* (he who keeps an eye on the implements necessary to the festival), the *shadulishang* (he who plays the *dak*, the holy drum), the *raeshadulishang* (he who plays small brass disks), the *jolsaporshang* (he who throws into the water where blades are), the *narodshang* (the messenger). These 16 people are charged with the practical execution of the festival under the overall direction of the *baladar*. Sitting together, they abandon their own *gotro* and assume instead the *gotro* of Shiva.²⁴ This is actuated by the *baladar* while sacred drums are played and the people gather all around. The choice of the 16 people is subjected to the *baladar*, who eventually decides who does what.

Afterwards the *baladar* makes an invocation to goddess Bhadrakali to the effect that she may protect "her" 16 *shang* from any sort of *ban* (evil), *kugyan* (evil wisdom) etc. Basically, the invocation is a curse against whoever dares to attack the sixteen. If somebody would dare to challenge the mother, she will drink the blood gushing from their breast. With the words of Mr. Krishnapada, she "closes the bodies of the 16" to make them unapproachable and unaffected by any *ban*. The rest of the evening is passed by listening to the mantras sung by the *baladar* who invoking the gods starts the "creation" of whatever is needed in the *puja* and not only in the *puja*! While invoking the gods, the *baladar* sings

22. See P. D. Rahul, "Some Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma: Its Cult and Study," op. cit., 678.

23. As a matter of speculation, the 16 disciples might refer to the 16 flowers decorating Dharma's chariot or the 16 attendants of Dharma spoken of in the *Dharma Puja Bidhan*. They attend to the Lord Dharma here identified with the sun, riding on his golden chariot. See N. Bandyopadhyay ed., *Dharmapuja Bidhan*, op. cit., 123–24. See also S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 337–38.

24. The term *gotro* indicates a group of families descending from a common ancestor. See *Bangla Academy, Bengali-English Dictionary*, op. cit. Possibly this shedding of one's own *gotro* to assume that of Shiva is part of the festival's internal logic which requires a degree of identification between devotees and Shiva to effect its purposes. Not only, it appears also that to shed one's own *gotro* is also to shed any social personality and relations to become something new.

of Adi-Niranjan (the Primordial Spotless/Luminous one), the god Dharma, the presiding deity, who is nonetheless identified by him with Shiva. It is this Niranjan the *Deul puja* is supposed to make present. What is more, Mr. Krishnapada, the *baladar*, explicitly adds an interesting particular. He derives the name Niranjan from *nil*, the colour blue and itself another name for Shiva. Eventually the *baladar* through his *balas* starts creation. Soil, milk, the *balas* themselves, grass, flowers, cows, trees, iron etc. are produced through mantras.

Towards 8 o'clock in the evening the 8 directions are generated. An invocation to the gods and goddesses is then once again repeated.²⁵ The *baladar* calls this "creation section" of the *puja* as *sristi potton* (the beginning of creation), a way to explain where from and how things came into being. In passing we should note that *sristi potton* is also the name of the very first section of the *Sunya Puran*.²⁶ The *baladar* explains that all this has to be done before awaking the *pat* while Mr. Bokul adds that a failure to create/produce/invite all these elements would result in an offence, a sort of lack of respect towards them.

At this point, during his description of the first day of the *Deul puja*, in the *sristi potton* he refers to *sunya*, to what *sunya* is and where *sunya* goes. Again we note, the *Sristi Potton* of the *Sunya Puran* speaks of Dharma as *sunya*, void, in this way:

There was no line, no form, no colour, and no sign. The sun and the moon were not, nor day, nor night. The earth was not, nor water, nor sky. The mounts Meru, Mandara and Kailasa were not. The creation was not, nor were there gods, nor men. Brahma was not, nor was Visnu, nor the ethereal regions. Heaven and earth were not, all was emptiness. The presiding gods of the ten directions were not, nor were there the clouds, nor the stars. Life was not, nor death, nor pangs of death. The Lord moved in the void, supporting Himself on the void.²⁷

The *sristi potton* culminates with an invocation to Shiva to the effect that he must descend the Kailasa Mountain where he is absorbed in yoga and be present at the *puja*. The invocation/mantra thus pronounced has the power to stop Shiva's yoga.

Afterwards a very important celebration for the internal economy of the *puja* takes place. This is called, *pat jagano*, literally, the awakening of the *pat*. The *pat* is a plank of plain and unrefined wood, usually of the Bell tree (*Aegle Marmelos*), less than 1 metre long, 3–5 centimetres thick and 12–14 centimetres wide which represents Shiva and is called *thakur*, the Lord. It may have drawings on it depicting a *Shaiva* symbology. The *pat* is preserved in a house where it has been lying for the whole year. The people, led by the *baladar*, go to that house dancing and singing, employing a particular kind of practice

25. As a matter of speculation, I may surmise that these invocations to gods and goddesses might actually be their creation *tout court!*

26. N. Bosu ed., *Sunya Puran* (Kolkata: Bongio Sahittya Parishad, 1907), 1.

27. D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, op. cit., 32–3.

called *khata-khatni*,²⁸ a sort of very rhythmic and syncopated dance, aided by the loud playing of drums, which may often lead to states of suspended or modified consciousness like trance. The *sanyasis* are those who practice this *khata-khatni*, often aided by other devotees who join in; they have to go on with this sort of inebriating dance until the *baladar* stops them. The *baladar* will do so when he thinks that Shiva has awakened. Once stopped, the *mul sanyasi* (the principal ascetic) enters the house, among the *uluddhoni*²⁹ of the women present, takes out the *pat* and hands it over to the *patshang* (the *pat* bearer). The latter will set it on his head and in a procession with the people, to the rhythm of drums with dances and songs, the *pat* is brought and positioned at the *ghot*. During the whole ceremony the *baladar* continues recounting stories related to Shiva. Among these, one in particular extols the wood (the *pat*) that has been fashioned by Biswakorma (the builder, the artisan, *mistri*, among the gods) to become the body of Shiva. The mantra is somehow devised to give the piece of wood the form of Shiva. The mantra is what perhaps Hindu priests would call *prana pratishtha*, a ceremony through which a statue of a god or goddess is infused with the life of that god or goddess.

The *pat*, wrapped up in a piece of clothing, is thus established where the *ghot* is. A place is prepared beforehand with a sort of small stool made of wood functioning as the throne of lord Shiva. Once laid on the throne, the *pat* is undressed, as it were, and starting with the sixteen *shangs* and followed by other devotees, is anointed with mustard (*sarisha*) oil and a raw paste of turmeric (*hollud*). Women devotees are allowed to pay this obeisance to the Lord as long as they are fasting. During the anointment of the *pat*, the *baladar* will go on singing the praises of Shiva explaining why he was on the Kailasa Mountain and how he stayed there for 11 months, before coming down to the *puja*.³⁰ The recounting of this specific story is called by Krishnapada *baladar*, *Kailas udyesho kora*, i.e., to attract the attention on the Kailasa Mountain, the abode of god Shiva.

Another interesting song sung at this time, is that which refers to how iron was created or was born. It is the story of *Lohasurer bodh*, the killing of the Iron Demon. The *baladar* once again relates that to perform the *puja* he needs iron implements i.e., *ban* (arrows), *borshi* (hooks), *trishur* (trident) etc. The story of *Lohasur* is a creation story of iron tools. The gist of the story is that to get iron, *Lohasur* must be killed. However he is so strong that neither Vishnu nor Brahma nor Shiva are able to do it. During the fight in which they are defeated, Shiva promises *Lohasur* that if he lets him go he will send Durga to him. In fact Shiva knows that *Lohasur* has a soft spot for her and exploits this to save himself.

28. I believe that what the Rishi of the area at study and Krishnapada *baladar* himself has called *kha-ta-khatni*, is the *Khatuni* referred to by R. C. Sen, a practice which involves "shaking and turning the head, rolling about the shrine of Shiva, beating the forehead and singing *Tarja*, or songs addressed to Shiva." R. C. Sen, "A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used," op. cit., 611.

29. *Uluddhoni* is the sound made by Hindu women produced by moving the tongue to express joy or a festive mood.

30. The mentioning of eleven months may be a reminder of the fact that once the *Deul* or *Carak puja* used to last one month, the whole of Chaitro.

Durga then leaves a distraught Shiva to join *Lohasur*. This latter wants to marry Durga. The goddess agrees only on condition that *Lohasur* must match her white complexion. She then goes on narrating to him that once she was black exactly like her would-be husband, and to become as she is now she had to burn in fire. *Lohasur*, for love of Durga, accepts thus to be put into fire. When this is done, of course, *Lohasur* starts liquefying and dies without anybody listening to his pleas for help. The liquid iron of the former body of *Lohasur* is eventually used to make the implements and weapons needed.

The celebration continues in a sort of creation afflatus. The *baladar* is born, and, interestingly, while recounting how during ten months and ten days³¹ he is formed in his mother's womb, in the end the *baladar* states that actually this is the story of the birth not only of the *baladar* himself but of man as such! While time passes, the *baladar* continues to create through his sung mantras. *Sindur* (a red powder used by married Hindu women to smear their forehead at the parting of their hair) and its container are brought into being and so is the comb. These implements are supposed to be used for Durga's marriage the following day. One after the other bells, brass, the *durba* grass (bent grass),³² the coconut tree etc. are rebirthed, as it were. Afterwards Vishnu's ten *avatars* (incarnations, forms) are sung while the *sanyasis* act out each and every one of them in a sort of carnivalesque fashion.³³ This is done while *khata-khatni* is at its height. Asked what this *khata-khatni* actually is, the *baladar* explained it away terming it a way to make physical exercise. Yet Mr. Bokul, who was present, referred the expression to *porisrom*, or toil: without toil and physical sacrifice nothing can be obtained. In fact the so called *khata-khatni* was the way by means of which Shiva was awakened and the toil through which creation in its various elements and things came into being. After the recounting of the ten *avatars* comes the turn of *Durga nobo rup*, i.e., the nine forms of goddess Durga. They are sung the usual way by the *baladar* and comprise: Indrani, Mohakali, Brahmoni, Boishnobi, Kaptayoni, Moheswari, Nirishingo, Chamunda, and Gongga. While these names are pronounced incense is burnt.

Before taking the *pat* to a water course, a river or a lake, ideally identified with the river Ganges, a bull is adorned and circumambulated. It is not clear from the *baladar's* explanation what the relationship between the bull and the *pat* is. In his narration, it

31. Rural people quite consistently believe that human gestation lasts 10 months and 10 days. I think this might be explained by the fact that the calculation of time is carried out considering lunar months, which are shorter than solar ones.

32. This is a kind of common grass to be found anywhere but which is used in religious ceremonies, both marriages and *pujas* in general.

33. The standard list of Vishnu *avatars* comprises Mach (the fish), Kurmo (the turtle), Boraho (the boar), Norosingo (the lion-man), Bamon (the dwarf), Poroshuram, Ram, Balaram, Krishna, and Kolki, the last and still to come *avatara*. However, Krishnapada *baladar* mentioned a few of them among which Mach (the fish), Kurmo (the turtle), Boraho (the boar), Bamon (the dwarf), Kumir (the crocodile), Norosingo (the lion-man), Poroshuram, and Kolki. Significantly he included Kumir (the crocodile) which does not enter the list while instead has a role in the present *puja*, as another symbol of Dharma.

appears that the bull is only an imaginary one and that the *pat* actually takes its place as an embodiment of Shiva. The *pat* is thus again wrapped into some pieces of clothing and prepared to be taken in procession to the “Ganges.” Ideologically the journey to the Ganges requires much strength to overcome the innumerable obstacles lying ahead. To lift these obstacles the *baladar* employs all the mantras at his disposal to subdue ghosts and spirits of all sorts which are eventually co-opted into the same procession towards the Ganges. Eventually the procession reaches the shore of the Ganges late at night (somewhere between 2 o’clock and 4 o’clock in the morning). In front of the people a man acts as if he were dead. He must be restored to life. The *baladar* through another mantra restores him to life. In the mantra used, there is a reference to the effect that the man lying dead did not perform the *puja* in the proper way and this was the cause of his death. Once brought back to life, the people in the procession together with the *sanyasis* and devotees have a refreshing bath.

If I understood properly the mantra, the *baladar* identifies the dead man with Sokha Sena, son of Rau Sena. Sokha died because he improperly offered the God stale grass, spoiling the *puja* altogether. It is tempting to see in this Rau Sena the Lau Sen of the *Dharma Mangal Kavya*. If the identification holds true, it would definitely mean that the *puja* now called *Siva’s gajon*, *Deul puja*, *Carak puja* etc. was indeed originally centred on god Dharma. In fact the story of Lau Sen is not *puranic* and can be found only in the stories centring on god Dharma, Lau Sen being Dharma’s staunch and unflinching devotee.³⁴ After offering *puja* to Gonga, the presiding goddess of the river Ganges, everybody goes back to the place where the *ghot* has been established. Once *puja* is offered to it, the sixteen *shangs* are given a piece of new clothing. Originally this was a white piece of seamless cloth very similar to the one worn by mourning people. Now they are given something more modern like short pants and a *gamcha* (a light piece of clothing to be used as a towel). Yet, something white must be worn. Afterwards 2–4 people, including the *baladar*, go to the *kejur gach*, the date tree, which will be the centre piece of the following day’s ceremonies, and give it an “invitation” to that effect. The same is done with *Hazra tola* (the place of presences). Once there, the *baladar* invites ghosts and spirits of all sorts, Shiva’s companions in the form of Mohakal, to participate in the following night’s ceremonies. After this, the day’s celebrations are concluded. *Sanyasis* can now have their vegetarian rice and all the others may go home to rest.

The second day of the *puja* starts with the people gathering at the temporary *Deul* (temple), where the *ghot* is. *Sanyasis* and the sixteen *shangs* together with the *baladar* take both the *pat* and the “stone” in a procession to all the houses of the village. People offer obeisance to the *thakur* and fruits, coconut water, money etc. to the *sanyasis*. All except the *mul sanyasi* (who is under the strict fast called *nirjola*) may eat or drink. The

34. See S. Sen, *Bangala Sahityer Itihash* (Kolkata: Anondo Publishers Private Limited, 1939), 123–27. D. Curley, “Battle and Self-Sacrifice in a Bengali Warrior’s Epic: Lausen’s Quest to be a Raja in Dharma Mangal” ch. six of *Rites of Spring* by N. Ralph (2008). *Liberal Studies*. Paper 7.

processional visiting of the houses of the village lasts nearly the whole second day of the *puja*. Significantly, I was informed that this going around is a sort of marriage procession. A place in the yard in front of the house is prepared beforehand or prepared instantly by smearing cow-dung and establishing a small *piri* (the throne) on which the *pat* will be installed. At this point a wife of the house, possibly without a child or, however, in reproductive age (an old lady would not usually perform this) goes to the *pukur* (a pond), bathes and with a completely wet sari sits just in front of the *pat*. She then takes the *pat* in her lap. The *mul sanyasi* helps unwrap the *thakur*, and then the woman anoints it with mustard oil and raw turmeric. Afterwards, she cleans the smeared part of the *thakur* with coconut water and dries it with either her long hair or the end of her *sari*. Then she takes the *durba* grass and *dhan* (uncooked rice) and offers it to the *thakur*. She then feeds sweets to the idol. Repositioning the *pat* on the *piri*, she shows her devotion by giving it a garland of flowers. She may also smear both the *pat* and the stone with *sindur*, vermilion powder. These acts are commonly done on the occasion of marriages. Oil and turmeric are still used today by all religious communities to purify the bodies of the would-be wife and husband previous to their marriage. So are the *durba* grass and the rice, which are used to bless the future couple with prosperity.³⁵ Indeed, Mr. Bokul identified this as the marriage between Horo and Gouri, alias, Shiva and Parboti.³⁶

In the late afternoon the procession goes back to the *Deul*, where the *pat* and the “stone” are ceremoniously repositioned. A repetition of the mantra of the ten *avatars* takes place once again among the *uluddhoni* of the women and the *khata-khatni* of the devotees in a growing frenzy. Afterwards, the *kejur bhanga* (the braking of the dates) ceremony takes place. Mr. Bokul objected to the fact that this ceremony must be performed during the day and not in the evening as the *baladar* alleged. Whatever the case, according to the *baladar* after the ten *avatars*’ song, all go to the foot of the *kejur gach* (date tree) already invited the previous night. Significantly, this celebration is proper to the Rishi people of the area and despite my searching for it, I have been able to find only a possible textual reference to the celebration.³⁷ *Sanyasis* in the number of 3, 4 or 5 go up the tree bare foot and nearly without clothing. The *baladar* stresses the fact that only *sanyasis* can go up the tree. If others do attempt it, they may get badly hurt. The feat consists in the fact that these *sanyasis* go up unhurt. Once up there, they take the dates and throw them to the people assembled underneath. Women in particular try to catch the dates. It is believed that infertile women or those without children may become pregnant thanks to

35. This and many other pieces of information have been related to me by Mrs. Dipali Das who untiringly helped me out by collecting information and contacting people with information useful to the research. To her my gratitude.

36. For the marriage which takes place during the *Carak puja* see B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, op. cit., 87; see also A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 107. Here the marriage of both Dharma with Mukti (but also Nila) and Shiva with Horokali are spoken of as the core of the *Carak puja*.

37. See R. C. Sen, “A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used,” op. cit., 610.

the dates caught! However, the *baladar* did not stress this particular, underlining instead the miraculous feat of the *sanyasis* who by the grace of Shiva are unhurt by the needles and spines of the date tree.

After the conclusion of this, which, to my understanding, is one of the most attractive moments of the whole *puja*, the people with the *baladar* go back to the *Deul* and again among the *khata-khatni* of the *sanyasis* the mantra of the 10 *avatars* is rehearsed once again.

After 12 o'clock in the night, *sanyasis*, the *baladar* and all who want go to the *Hazra tola*. *Hazra* means presence (from *hajira*) and of course it refers to the presence of ghosts and spirits. *Hazra tola* is a designated place outside of the inhabited area of the village, usually forested and somehow related to death. It could also be a cremation ground but since people are scared to enter such a place at the dead of night, the *Hazra tola* somehow takes its place. Indeed, to my understanding, *Hazra tola* symbolises the cremation ground as such. Within the economy of the *puja*, this is another very important moment, the moment in which those who had vows will fulfil them, usually offering the blood of their breast by slightly cutting themselves with a blade. This is the place where new vows are taken. If their vows are fulfilled, next year they will offer their blood in this same place to Mohakal, also called *Hazra thakur*, the deity of the *Hazra tola*. Since it is usually women who ask for a grace, they typically request the deity for a male child or the grace of healing for children. If a woman wants to take such a vow she will tell either a *sanyasi* or the *baladar* himself who will then proclaim it publically. A woman may also want a flower from Shiva as a pledge that her vow will be fulfilled. The flowers, usually *joba* (china-rose) flowers, are previously set in a container. At the request of the woman one of these must fall off the vase or the container through incessant *khata-khatni*. If this happens it means that the god has listened to that woman's request. This sort of ceremony occurs also at the *Deul*, in front of the *ghot*, during the *khata-khatni*, usually in the evening.³⁸

Eventually *bhog* will be given. *Bhog* is food for the spirits and ghosts. This includes cooked rice and burnt fish of the *bain* (a serpent like, black fish) and *shol* (a large tubular fish) species. The fish cannot be cooked but only burnt and wrapped up in leaves of banana. It is believed that ghosts and disembodied spirits eat this sort of food. Together with this food also *ganja* (marihuana) and alcohol are given. This is also the reason why,

38. The ceremony of the flower appears to be central in this *puja* even though performed in different ways and contexts. "The *Phul-kadhan*, or *Phul-chapan*, is one of the essential ceremonies that are observed daily. This ceremony is performed as follows. First, with a view to securing blessings for the king, a leaf of the *marmelos* tree, drenched in the waters of the Ganges, is placed on the head of the image of Shiva, and to the accompaniment of music from the long drums the names of Shiva are recited. If the leaf falls off itself from the head of Shiva, it is taken as a sign that the god has been pleased with the ceremony and has deigned to show his approval. Then the same ceremony is repeated several times to invoke the blessing of the deity on the Zamindar (landlord) and the Sannyasis. And, last of all, those who desire to be cured of their diseases, or who desire to have sons born to them through the favour of the god, come forward and repeat the ceremony." B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, op. cit., 78.

once back at the *Deul*, *sanyasis*, devotees and whoever wants to join in, smoke *ganja* and drink alcohol profusely. A certain degree of vulgarities in language and strongly sexually oriented behaviour which follow are explained away with reference to the intoxicating substances being consumed. It appears that what would be considered, to say the least, inappropriate in normal times, becomes acceptable in the context of the *puja*.³⁹ The harsh judgement of immorality and dissipation by Ram Cumul Sen quoted in the introduction above may find its reasons here. The end of the day sees the *sanyasis* go and have their portion of rice.

In the past, the night of *Hazra tola*, used to see the slaughter of animals as sacrifices. Even nowadays sacrifices of goats may take place if they are part of a vow. However, according to the *baladar*, they are now discouraged. Mr. Bokul, in a personal communication a couple of days after the interview, related to me that because of the fact that most Hindus are now *Vaisnava*, for this reason animal sacrifices are highly discouraged, if not prohibited altogether. Yet once, in a not so remote past, “animal sacrifices were an inseparable part of the Dharma *puja*.”⁴⁰

On the third and last day of the celebrations, if the *kejur bhanga* ceremony has not already been performed, it is now performed. Otherwise, the day goes by without any particular ceremony, with the exception of songs and music done by devotees. In the evening, once again, everybody gathers at the *Deul*. After the obeisance to the *thakur* in its different forms, the four directions are similarly honoured. After which the *khara sanyas* (the austerity of the sword) takes place. A blade is set in a pond and held in position by two *sanyasis*. Afterwards, other *sanyasis* jump over it, while *khata-khatni* is being performed. In addition another *sanyasi* might walk on blades fixed into the soil on his way to the *Deul*. The feat consists in coming out of these ordeals unharmed. Similar austerities are performed with vegetal needles and spines (*kata sanyas*) arranged to form a sort of bed on which *sanyasis* are supposed to lie and roll about apparently with no harm being suffered. The same happens with the *agun sanyas* (the austerity of fire). According to Mr. Bokul a hole is excavated and then filled with burning wood, coconut leaves and the like. The *sanyasis* are supposed to jump over it or, even, in it. The gist here is to go and play literally with fire without being hurt. Unlike other celebrations, it seems that in the area of Chuknagar and surroundings the *ban-borshi sanyas* (the austerity of arrows and hooks), although known, is no longer performed. Despite this omission, it may be said that this night is characterized by the display of courage and faith of *sanyasis*, something which the *baladar* also called *khela* (game, play).

39. Both Krishnapada *baladar* and Mr. Bokul were very reticent and prudent in talking about this, playing down its extent and restricting it to the unruly behaviour of a few unrefined and ignorant village people. At times these “small accidents,” as it were, were justified by mentioning that Shiva himself used *ganja* or intoxicating drinks. As I would expect, vulgarities and very charged sexual behaviour were basically denied by the *baladar* but confirmed instead by onlookers and devotees.

40. “Dhormo pujae poshuboli ekti obicchedya ongo” in A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 90.

More importantly, however, this third day is also called the day of *Nil*, or of *Nil puja*. It is unclear from my informants when exactly this *puja* takes place and what it consists of. Apparently this comes as the conclusive act of the festival and should be performed early in the morning of the fourth day. Indeed, this “non-clarity” is meaningful of a ritual which is losing its original import. Initially the *Nil puja* was called the *Nilaboti puja*, and was associated with the *ban-borshi sanyas*.⁴¹ Nila was a wife of Shiva/Dharma who on this day receives obeisance. What is more, Nila was also one among a number of goddesses⁴² who were supposed to marry either Shiva or Dharma. Instead Mr. Bokul described the *Nil puja* of modern day Chuknagar as a conspicuously different ritual. After or during the last *sanyas* (austerity), the *mul sanyasi* and two of his companions go to the pond. Once there the two companions will jump into the water with an earthen pot containing a hardened blue (i.e. *nil*) colour. While in the water one of the *sanyasis* breaks the lid of the container causing the water to enter and wet the *nil*. Afterwards, with the remainder of the earthen pot and the *nil* within, the *sanyasis* go back to the *Deul*. In the meantime the *sanyas* may have been accomplished. People may again take vows; the *baladar* and the village elders may ask forgiveness and give thanks to the god in an atmosphere of sacred confusion. The *mul sanyasi* eventually smears the forehead of *sanyasis* and devotees alike with the *nil*. With this the festival is officially concluded. Early on the fourth day, the first of Baisak, the *ghot*, the *pat*, the stone and the rest of the things there are taken around the village for the last time to singing songs related to the marriage of Shiva.⁴³ Eventually, towards noon, the procession goes to the pond where the *pat* is bathed, and the *ghot* emptied. Then the *pat* is wrapped in a new piece of cloth and with singing and drumming but in a more sombre mood, is taken in procession and repositioned where it was before. Mr. Bokul called that repositioning the putting of Shiva back on Kailas, his mountain abode.

The main ceremony of the *Carak puja*, that is, the swinging ritual, is known in Chuknagar but, as with the piercing rituals, is not actually performed. The Krishnapada *baladar*, however, stated that the *Carak puja* is performed in the Rishi village of Mahondi, some 15 kilometres away from Chuknagar close to Tala, a sub-district of Satkhira. When I asked if the *kejur bhanga* ceremony somehow replaced the *Carak* swinging ritual, both Mr. Bokul and Krishnapada could not answer. When I then asked them if the *Deul puja* was carried out only by so called low caste people, they disputed the claim, stating instead

41. See R. C. Sen, “A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used,” op. cit., 611.

42. The name of goddesses varies with the different texts. It is however important to remember that whatever the name of the goddess involved the *Carak puja* is also and importantly interpreted as a sort of hierogamy. See F Brighenti, “Hindu Devotional Ordeals and Their Shamanic Parallels” in *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 2012/19, 4: 112.

43. Indeed, the *Deul puja* is concluded with the imposition of the *Nil*. Yet, it must be remembered that *pohela* (the first) Baisak is the Bengali New Year and it marks the beginning of another festival in itself. More than a continuation of the *Carak puja*, the going around the village with the *pat* is a way of welcoming the New Year with the last blessing of the *thakur* before putting him to sleep for a year!

that all Hindus now celebrate it. However, the list of castes they mentioned (Pal, Nondin, Nomosudra, Dom, Ghosh, Tanti, Kapali, Rishi etc.) as a matter of fact refers to *sudra* castes at most, with a couple of them, the Dom and Rishi, classified among the unclean *sudra*, i.e., so called untouchable. Significantly, both Mr. Bokul of Chuknagar and Mr. Dillip of Mogolkot referred to the fact that the *Deul puja* originated with the Rishi, and then others joined in later. What is more, Mr. Bokul while mentioning the Dom (a caste of former untouchable people who are traditionally charged with the management of the burning ground, or *smosan*) commented that they are the main actors of this kind of *puja*. Of course he could not say why, nevertheless, he was aware that the Dom are particularly devoted to this celebration. In fact, he did not know or remember that the Dom appear as the main actors in the Lau Sen saga of the Dharma Mangal Kavya.

Indeed, the *Deul puja* along the years underwent lots of transformations in the sense already mentioned above.⁴⁴ Yet in its apparent heterogeneous character and development it maintains a relationship with the original *puja* of god Dharma who eventually became identified with Shiva. This confirms that the festival is a treasure-trove for the socio-cultural history particularly of Bengal's so-called low castes. Apparently the *puja* of Dharma was not restricted to Rarh⁴⁵ (also spelled Radha), the western part of Bengal, today included in the Indian state of West Bengal, but interested a much larger area of Bengal. At this point generalizations are not warranted but it is not at all impossible that the *Carak puja* concerned the whole of North East India.⁴⁶ It might be interesting to know why in the East it nearly disappeared by being identified with the *Gajon* of Shiva, while in the West it survived as a living cult, the cult of god Dharma.

GOD DHARMA, LOW CASTES AND THE PEASANTIZATION OF BENGAL

If in fact god Dharma is a folk deity of Bengal, as undoubtedly he appears to be, it is curious to think that because of either his reception and acknowledgment or his refusal and ostracism, Bengal's destiny was eventually sealed as one of partition and division, as happened in 1947. What is more, curiosity increases if we also consider that it was the so-called low caste people of Bengal, the staunch devotees of god Dharma, who were the much more instrumental but unconscious agents of such a destiny.

It was only with the introduction of the Censuses in undivided India, 1871–1941, that the demographic situation of Bengal was properly realized. A Hindu majority population was confined only to the districts to the west of the Baghirati River while to the east only

44. See the three trends mentioned at the very beginning of this section, i.e., simplification, conformation and commercialization.

45. See A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 107.

46. If it is true that the Dharma cult is documented basically in West Bengal only, it is also true that its elements are found all over the North East, including the present state of Orissa. See S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 298. See also P. D. Rahul, "More Remarks on the Bengali Deity Dharma, Its Cult and Study" in *Anthropos*, 1987, 82: 245.

the non-tribal districts of the 24 Parganas, Khulna and Faridpur had a Hindu majority population. The rest of East Bengal had an overwhelming Muslim majority which at places could reach and overcome 80% of the total.⁴⁷ The discovery of such a demographic imbalance, as it were, started off a huge debate. Henry Beverley, the compiler of the 1872 Census report, stated that “the existence of Muhammadans in Bengal is not due so much to the introduction of Mughal blood into the country as to the conversion of the former inhabitants for whom a rigid system of caste discipline rendered Hinduism intolerable.”⁴⁸ This of course sparked off angry responses from Muslim gentlemen who could hardly accept to trace their ancestry to untouchable or marginal aboriginal populations. A certain Abu A. Ghuznavi from Mymensingh, among others, opposing Beverley’s argument, strongly stated that “the majority of the modern Mahomedans are not the descendant of Chandals and Kaibartas but are of foreign extraction, though in many cases it may be of more or less remote degree.”⁴⁹ Indeed towards the end of the nineteenth century, at least in British circles, the position of Beverley became accepted even though the question of how it happened that large Bengali masses converted to Islam, remained basically unanswered.⁵⁰

In this respect, the most common theories contemplated usually two elements. The first referred to the violent conversion imposed on meek Bengali masses by invading Islamic armies. The second, instead, referred to the so called Social Liberation theory: accordingly, the Bengali masses voluntarily accepted the Islamic faith as a way to escape a very strict stratified social system which had condemned them to the lowest steps of the social ladder. Unfortunately the first theory was completely without evidence whatsoever, and the few sporadic and very circumscribed cases of violent imposition on record could not explain the existence of Muslim masses the like of those present in Bengal. The second theory, similarly unproved, presumed “the a priori presence of a highly stratified Hindu social order, an exploited class of menial outcasts, an oppressive class of Brahmins, and an understanding of Islam as an ideology of social egalitarianism that would be *joyfully* embraced by the masses.”⁵¹ But was it so? Before the arrival of Islam, Bengal had a little more than a hundred years of a kingdom dominated by the *Shaiva* Sena kings (1095–1204).⁵² Before them, Bengal and, at times, much of North Eastern India, was ruled for

47. These considerations have been worked out utilising the 1872 Census. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 121.

48. *Ibid.*, 120.

49. *Ivi.* While in the nineteenth century *chandal* came to indicate the caste of *namasudra*, in Hindu legal literature it usually means the untouchable population taken altogether. *Kaibarta* is instead a fisher caste of Bengal. Both terms however undoubtedly indicate low caste people.

50. Today it is without doubt that the ancestors of the modern Muslim masses of Bengal are indigenous to the delta from much earlier than the thirteenth century, that is, the time when Islam made its forceful irruption. See *ibid.*, 127.

51. *Ibid.*, 123–24. Original emphasis.

52. In this respect, J. Sircar writes. “It is difficult to believe that the abortive attempts of just a few decades of Sena-sponsored Brahmanism successfully managed to attract the mainly autochthonous masses of this

more than 400 years by the Buddhist dynasty of the Palas. Although the Palas patronized a Brahmanical system of government,⁵³ it is highly doubtful that their subjects had any degree of Brahmanical contamination, as it were. Besides, if one considers that Buddhism as such was mainly spread among urban and commercial elites it becomes rhetorical to ask to what degree the subjects of the Buddhist Pala kings were themselves Buddhist.

One way or the other it remains problematic to speak of Bengal masses before the arrival of Islam as either Hindu or Buddhist: these categories might have applied to urban elites but not to the rural masses dispersed on heavily forested land, with lines of communication always complicated by the deltaic environment and seasonal vagaries. Those people inhabited a country which was a frontier place both economically, politically but also religiously. An undefined and open folk religion enmeshed with both Hindu and Buddhist ideas, kept together by a sort of natural animism in which gods, demons and spirits of all sorts populated the world of Bengal. Gods and goddesses the like of Dharma, Sitala, Sosthi, Chandi and Manasa⁵⁴ rather local in outlook, were indeed the common possession of Bengal rural masses. They were called *chandals*, just because they were physically outside the social systems of one or the other urban centres of expanding polities, like the foreigner, the tribal, the other beyond. Significantly, these masses start being identified as Muslim peasantry only in Mughal times, that is, from the late sixteenth century onwards.⁵⁵ This is all the more interesting because one of the Mughals' policies was "the refusal to promote the conversion of Bengalis to Islam. Indeed given the Mughals' negative sentiments towards Bengal's *natives*, one should hardly expect otherwise,"⁵⁶ comments R. M. Eaton.

In fact, behind the conversion *en masse* of East Bengal's population there is no Mughal active or conscious religious policy but huge economic changes which took place between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Significantly Bengal masses not only came to be identified as Muslim but also and particularly as Muslim peasantry. Their religious conversion was in fact accompanied and aided by a socio-economic one, where mostly

province from their Buddhist or folk deities to its own brand to (*sic*) inegalitarian, caste-conscious Hinduism" in J. Sirkar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults* (Calcutta: Institute of Development Studies, Calcutta University, 2016), 3rd Draft, Unpublished Manuscript, 21.

53. See S. Targa, *The Pala Kingdom: Rethinking Lordship in Early Medieval North Eastern India* (Unpublished MPhil dissertation, London SOAS, 1999), ch. 3.

54. Manasa is the goddess of snakes, known all over North India but particularly feared and worshipped in Bengal. Similarly with Sitala, the goddess of smallpox and Sosthi, the goddess of vegetation and reproduction. These goddesses are also called village goddesses and have an ambivalent nature: they protect but also destroy. One common characteristic is that they need cooling through ritual worship. See D. R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 197–211. Goddess Sosthi used to devour the children she now protects. She is said to have evolved from a demon. See A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dhar-mathakur*, op. cit., 83. Chandi instead is another unruly folk goddess of Bengal originally a forest goddess worshipped by tribal hunters of Bengal, later identified with Kali.

55. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 133–34.

56. *Ibid.*, 178. Original emphasis.

fishermen groups and part-time agriculturists took up agriculture as a full-time profession, with the patronization of Mughal imperial officials, tirelessly bent on expanding the revenue basis of the sprouting empire. As a result, the economic frontier was pushed more and more eastwards, new lands were reclaimed and cleared of jungle so that wet rice cultivation grew exponentially. “Already by the late sixteenth century, southern and eastern Bengal were producing so much surplus grain that for the first time rice emerged as an important export crop.”⁵⁷ Islamization and peasantization of East Bengal actually went hand in hand thanks to charismatic Muslim pioneers who combined organizational skills, spiritual afflatus and leadership qualities. In fact these heroes called *pirs* are associated, in sixteenth and seventeenth century Bengali literature with forest clearing and land reclamation.

Even though such activities were well known before the Muslim irruption on the scene of Bengal, the novelty consisted in their association with *pirs* who, more often than not, became mythical figures, objects of devotion and worship. Indeed “in the eastern delta, where settled agrarian life was far less advanced than in the west, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Islam more than other culture systems became identified with a developing agrarian social order.”⁵⁸ And this was, I strongly contend, the root cause behind the conversion to Islam of most East Bengalis. Conversion here is to be considered as less of a simultaneous event and more as a process, diluted, as it were, over decades to say the least.⁵⁹ This point will be taken up again below.

Be that as it may, the point I wish to make is that in as much as in East Bengal Islam, as a culture system, identified with a developing agrarian social order so in West Bengal, where instead, the folk religion of god Dharma and companions was widespread, as a culture system, got identified with a developing agrarian order. The working hypothesis here is that the same kind of population found all over Bengal, consisting of pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and fishing folk went through a similar process of peasantization eventually giving birth to two distinct religio-cultural blocks: the Muslim East and the Hindu West. Significantly, peasantization for the masses of Bengal, traditionally considered marginal to the Brahmanical system, here means the possibility of social mobility, the possibility to better one’s social status. Why in the East it was Islam which afforded the would-be peasants this social mobility, in the West it was Hinduism which afforded instead.

The reasons for the Hinduization of west Bengal must be looked for in its folk religion, a folk religion which by no means was the exclusive possession of the west but which extended somewhat to the rest of Bengal as well. At the centre of this folk religion there is god Dharma, an aniconic god usually represented by a flat, roundish sort of stone.

57. Ibid., 200.

58. Ibid., 265.

59. In the 1911 Census of India, some Bengali communities are enumerated neither as Muslim nor as Hindu, being a bit of both. See J. N. Sarkar, *Islam in Bengal: Thirteenth to Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan, 1972), 28.

This god is certainly ancient and, as we already know, did not enter the Hindu pantheon, despite his highly Sanskritized name. It is likely that the name may be the result of the Sanskritization of a similarly sounding originally non Indo-European word.⁶⁰ Or it might indicate indeed the remnant of Buddhism, in which the god Dharma might be the deification of one of the three Buddhist jewels, i.e., Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or may designate indeed the deification of Gautama Buddha himself.⁶¹ But its folk character is better understood if we consider the kind of followers this cult had and still has: from the very beginning untouchables, outcaste and low caste people in general have been the devotees of Dharma, *ipso facto* constituting Dharma as not only the god of outcaste, marginal people, but an outcaste, untouchable god himself! To be involved with such a cult was, as we know already, to endanger one's own caste purity and belonging. Brahman priests even today refuse to officiate at the *Deul puja* of the Rishi in Bangladesh leaving the task to home-grown, non-Brahman priests like my informant Krishnapada *baladar*, and this despite a huge degree of Sanskritization and the losing of Dharma as the central godhead of their *puja*. Indeed, had it not been for Haraprasad Shastri who first put forward the controversial Buddhist idea of the Dharma cult as representing the remnant of Buddhism in Bengal, I doubt we would have noticed such an uninteresting and "low" kind of obscure religious experience. Nevertheless, it was this cult which provided the roots for the hinduization of West Bengal.

The point is that somehow this folk cult of the marginal but numerous population of Bengal was eventually received, acknowledged and hinduized by the Hindu elites of West Bengal, transforming it into a cultural system able to sustain and develop the birth of a renewed agrarian order.

We must consider, however, that what we are hinting at here does not refer to Sanskritization in the way M. N. Srinivas originally proposed it. In that context, Sanskritization involves the gradual adoption of Brahmanic beliefs, customs and rituals by the "lower" castes with the avowed purpose of rising up the ladder of social esteem and ultimately securing a higher position through the mechanics of "social mobility."⁶² But this is not what happened in West Bengal, in the heartland of the Dharma cult, Rarh. The movement which eventually incorporated Dharma and his devotees was not from below but from above. It was the result of a willed intention of Hindu Brahmanical elites which eventually absorbed the folk religion and standardized it according to Hindu canons. This, which we may call Sanskritization from above, was however carried out imperfectly, as it were, because once non-Brahmanical groups were eventually incorporated into the Hindu fold,

60. See A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 95.

61. S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 317. These, I believe, are mere speculations and I basically agree with the author (page 302) in dismissing them altogether. Dharma as a folk deity is already the resultant of several religious strands, among which even the Buddhist might be included.

62. J. Sirkar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 10. I am strongly indebted to this paper for the argument being made.

a reverse tidal wave would push against them by enforcing a process of marginalization which transformed them from external *antyajas* (the last in the caste system) to internal ones and by absorbing their deities within the realm of *puranic* ones. Significant in this respect is the last section of the *Sunya Puran*, called the *Sri Niranjaner Rushma*, the Anger of Lord Niranjan, considered as we know already the liturgical text of the Dharma cult. In this section anti-Brahmanical sentiments are vented in a most astonishing way, once again pointing to the imperfect incorporation of the Dharma cult, this time seen not from the end of the incorporators but from that of the incorporated.

In Jajpur and Maldah sixteen hundred families of Vedic Brahmins mustered strong. Being assembled in groups of ten or twelve, they killed the Sat-Dharmis who would not pay them religious fees, by uttering incantations and curses. They recited Mantras from the Vedas and fire came out from their mouths, as they did so. The followers of Sat-Dharma trembled with fear at the sight thereof, and prayed to Dharma, for who else could give them succour in that crisis? The Brahmins began to destroy the creation in the above manner, and acts of great violence were perpetrated on the earth. Dharma who resided in Baikuntha was grieved to see all this. He came to the world as a Muhammadan. On his head he wore a black cap, and in his hand he held a cross-bow. He mounted a horse and was called Khoda. Niranjana incarnated himself in Bhest (heaven). All the gods being of one mind, wore trousers. Brahma incarnated himself as Muhammad, Visnu as Paigamvar and Siva became Adamfa (Adam). Ganesa came as a Gazi, Kartika as a Kazi, Narada became a Sekha and Indra a Moulana. The Risis of heaven became Fakirs. The sun, the moon and the other gods came in the capacity of foot-soldiers, and began to beat drums. The goddess Chandi incarnated herself as Haya Bibi and Padmavati became Bibi Nur. The gods being all of one mind entered Jajpur. They broke the temples and Mathas and cried seize, seize. Falling at the feet of Dharma, Ramai Pandit sings, "O what a great confusion."⁶³

This text, which is supposed to be a later interpolation, possibly coming out of Muslim environs, is nevertheless suggestive of strained relationships between the *sat dharmis*, whom the translator identifies with the Buddhists, and the Brahmanical establishment. We may simply assume them to be the devotees of Dharma, Buddhist or not. We will return to this text at the end of this section.

What we have called Sanskritization from above was achieved because of the interrelation of three main factors or phenomena. The first refers to the kind of egalitarian enthusiasm triggered by Chaitanya Deb in the earlier part of the sixteenth century. The second has to do instead with the spread, from the late fifteenth century, of the Mangal Kavya

63. Translation in D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, op. cit., 36–7. For the original text in Bengali see N. Bosu ed., *Sunya Puran*, op. cit., 140–42.

literature which eventually resulted in the acceptance of folk deities within the Hindu pantheon. Last but not least, the third factor refers to the relative late peasantization of *antyaja* groups of the Rarh tract who eventually from Mughal times came to constitute the agriculturist castes of west Bengal and its distinctive Hindu identity thereafter.

The irruption of Chaitanya on the scene of Bengal and of the *Vaishnava* movement it originated created scope for the *antyajas* to join the new egalitarian afflatus. True, Chaitanya's revolutionary approach to the question of low caste people was soon reversed by his disciples, yet the door he opened remained as an attractive opportunity which later *Vaishnava* offshoots continuously maintained and reinforced.⁶⁴ Besides Chaitanya's movement became popular because somehow it managed to impinge on the illiterate, low status masses of Bengal, particularly of the west to where Chaitanya's main activity was confined. Chaitanya, a Brahman by birth, with his ecstatic devotion (*bhakti*) stood against the elitist Hindu rituals, his rapturous popular dances and songs (*kirtons*), and his use of Bengali rather than Sanskrit together with his egalitarian appeal, among other things, did manage to carve out a secure place in the religion of the people.⁶⁵ *Vaishnava* devotionism by the time of the Mughal conquest had become the major religious orientation of the "Hindus" of Bengal, particularly in its Western parts.⁶⁶

But it is the second phenomenon which, for the purpose of this paper, is particularly relevant. What J. Sircar calls the Mangal Kavya "campaign" started from the late fifteenth century and gained momentum between the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth.⁶⁷ The subject of this literature is, as we already know, the folk deities the likes of Dharma, Chandi, Manasa and Sosthi who are now presented in a Hindu, *puranic* and thus acceptable garb to win over their devotees and *pujaris*. The campaign to which Sircar referred above is in fact "the overt and covert persuasion of the Brahmanical composers, mainly from the villages of western Bengal, to win over the *antyaja*-caste mass base of Dharma and other popular cults."⁶⁸ In a way the Mangal Kavya literature was the attempt of village Brahmans to enter the *de facto* closed religious domain of a low caste cult to recover a constituency after the lost centrality of a Hindu high cult and ritual due to the displacement of Hindu *rajas* from the political centres now occupied by Muslim power. It may be useful perhaps to confront this literature with the *Puranas*. These latter texts saw the light of day to counteract the irruption of Buddhism on the one hand, and on the other, at least as far as the so-called *upapuranas* of Bengal are concerned, to recapture a lost centrality by incorporating and assimilating within a

64. See J. Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 30.

65. See R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 109–12.

66. *Ibid.*, 112.

67. See J. Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 32.

68. *Ibid.*, 41.

wider Brahmanical framework regional religious cults and deities.⁶⁹ The Kavyas eventually provided the scriptural and therefore ideological justification for the Hindu elites of west Bengal to accept and acknowledge the folk religion of Dharma and its followers. And they did this using the vernacular, leaving aside Sanskrit, the ritual language of the great tradition. In a way we may say that the Mangal Kavyas constitute the *trait d'union* linking the little, popular tradition of Bengali *antyajas* with the great and elitarian tradition of Brahmanical Hinduism. Once this linkage became established two things happened. The first, as a response to the belated acceptance of the Hindu establishment, practitioners of the folk religion of Dharma started mending their ways, as it were, performing the kind of Sanskritization Srinivas talked about. Secondly, Brahman priests who now could enter the hitherto forbidden religious spaces of *antyajas* could also now effectively intervene and modify the Dharma cult to suit Hindu standards.

Basically “the chief reason why these amorphous subaltern multitudes of the Rarh did not opt for Islam but veered towards official Hinduism instead was because a more accommodative Brahmanism accepted the economic and social mobility that resulted from the *antyajas* and other marginal castes of the region also taking to the plough.”⁷⁰ This process, which we have called peasantization, was indeed helped by the folk religion and its texts.⁷¹

The *Sunya Puran*, the liturgical text of the Dharma cult, for instance, does have a chapter called *Chas* (agriculture) where it manifests a considerable familiarity with farming. Here, the folk figure of Shiva as a joyful but indigent Bengali cultivator is introduced.⁷² He is far from the *puranic* all powerful god of the Kailas Mountain and is just a farmer. In the *Sunya Puran*'s companion text, the *Dharma Puja Bidhan*, there is similarly a section in which this figure of Shiva as a cultivator is farther detailed.⁷³ Here in particular the role of Shiva's wife Parvati is quite significant and telling. She, as a good Bengali wife, counsels Shiva, a reluctant husband, to take up cultivation to escape a life of hardship. Indeed if the folk deities in the Kavya literature were somehow standardized on *puranic* templates, it is

69. For the argument related to the *upapuranas* of Bengal see K. Chakrabarti, “Texts and Traditions: The Making of the Bengal Puranas” in Champakalaksmi and S. Gopal eds., *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology. Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

70. J. Sirkar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 62.

71. It must be recalled that both the *Sunya Puran*, and the *Dharma Puja Bidhan* (but also the Kavya literature) are the result of centuries of continuous additions, interpolations and modifications. Indeed, it is difficult if not altogether impossible to figure out how the original text looked. Besides, these texts, as I have already mentioned above, come in a second phase to explain much older practices and ideas. These explanations may also carry high vested interests. Because one thing is certain: it was not the *antyajas* themselves who wrote them in the first place.

72. See N. Bosu ed., *Sunya Puran*, op. cit., 107ff.

73. See the Sri Radha-Krishno section of N. Bandyopadhyay ed., *Dharmapuja Bidhan*, op. cit., 227ff. The Shiva cultivator although already mentioned in the texts just quoted, will receive greater importance in a much later kind of Mangal Kavyas called the Shivayans.

also true, that to a certain extent, even the opposite happened, so that *puranic* gods and goddesses had to come down from their high Hindu positions and adjust to the exigencies of more modest practitioners and devotees, as the members of nascent agriculturist castes⁷⁴ of West Bengal were. That Shiva the farmer was just an aspect of god Dharma, and that the latter is indeed the god of agriculture, is what may better illustrate and explain the phenomenon of peasantization. Be it Shiva or Dharma, the Lord of the Mangal Kavyas is definitely an agriculturist god.⁷⁵ The same self-torturing rituals performed during the celebration of the *gajon* of both Shiva and Dharma are thus said to be propitiatory, meant to magically manipulate the rain and the sun, the latter seen as its source.⁷⁶ Indeed, the whole of the *gajon* is a hymn to fertility, to life and to its regeneration.

If it is true that the Mangal Kavyas together with other folk literature such as the *bachans*⁷⁷ contributed to creating a farming ethos in Bengal, it is also true that it was not this literature which engendered the process of peasantization. This was already a reality and the Kavyas simply recognized and legitimized the upward social movements of hitherto *antyajas* which peasantization was already transforming. This recognition came about by recognising the folk religion and deities of *antyajas* who were already moving up the social ladder. As J. Sircar rightly points out, “by the middle and late phases of medieval Bengal, Brahmanism in the western region appears to have accepted the occupational shift of the ‘untouchables,’ and other ‘marginal’ castes to farming. In the process, it also seems to have acquiesced to (or regularized) the consequential upward social mobility.”⁷⁸

The Mangal Kavya literature in a way finished the unfinished task of the Bengal *Purnas*: that of bringing within a wider Brahmanical framework regional cults and deities. Gods and goddesses like Dharma, Manasa, Chandi, the peasant Shiva, Annada, Kalika, Sitala, Sosthi, Dakhin Ray and Panchananda, dressed in *puranic* respectability, could now enter the Hindu pantheon. Their new found respectability, however, continued to be somewhat contested so that “the shift in nineteenth century Bengal towards more Sanskritized high Hindu forms of devotion grounded in Brahmanical texts”⁷⁹ revealed all the fragility of their incorporation. Their devotees themselves, even today, continue in the main to be the *antyajas* of old.

Before concluding this section we must take up again the question of conversion

74. Among these new agriculturalist castes, J. Sircar lists the Mahishyas, the Sadgops, the Aguris, the Raju and the Kandaits. See J. Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 64.

75. *Ibid.*, 76.

76. See for instance A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 53; 88–9; *passim*. See also F. Brighenti, “Hindu Devotional Ordeals and Their Shamanic Parallels,” op. cit., 112.

77. *Dakar Bachan* and *Khanar Bachan*, respectively, the sayings of Dak and the sayings of Khana, are collections of rhyming aphorisms on agriculture and related subjects, early specimen of Bengali language and literature (fourteenth century?). Behind the *Dakar Bachan* there is the *Dak Tantra*, a Buddhist tantric work.

78. J. Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 77.

79. *Ibid.*, 105.

which has already been mentioned *in passim* above. Conversion, it was stated, is less something of a sudden event and more of a process. The question here is to see how, in practice, hitherto adepts of folk religion eventually emerged, after possibly decades from the beginning of a potential religious change, as either Hindu or Muslim. The following table⁸⁰ may simplify the argument.

A MODEL FOR A PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

LEGENDA	A = Folk High God, i.e., Dharma	B = Hindu High God, i.e., Shiva
	a ¹ = Folk lesser agency	b ¹ = Hindu lesser agency
	a ² = Folk lesser agency	b ² = Hindu lesser agency
	a ³ = Folk lesser agency	b ³ = Hindu lesser agency

FOLK COSMOLOGY	INCLUSION		IDENTIFICATION	DISPLACEMENT
A	A	B	A = B	B
a ¹	a ¹	b ¹	a ¹ = b ¹	b ¹
a ²	a ²	b ²	a ² = b ²	b ²
a ³	a ³	b ³	a ³ = b ³	b ³

The table specifically attempts to detail the conversion process which might have occurred in the Rarh region of West Bengal, between the fourteenth and the late seventeenth centuries. According to the scheme proposed, the Mangal Kavya literature may reflect a stage in-between inclusion and identification. The last section of the *Sunya Puran*, dedicated to the anger of god Niranjana (Dharma), may already instead reflect a farther stage in the process, somewhere between identification and displacement. If we then consider the nearly universal identification of Shiva and Dharma in the modern consciousness of the people, we may well conclude that the displacement of the original folk god Dharma has been fully accomplished. This certainly did happen in the *Deul puja* of the Rishi of the Chuknagar area.

To conclude the argument we may try to answer why this process of Hinduization did not work in the East of Bengal as well. It appears that both the *Vaishnava* movement and the Mangal Kavya literature have a Western bias, as it were. This means that it is not actually known how much of this new *Vaishnava* devotionality got through the swamps and the intricate river network of East Bengal. Eaton seems to characterise the folk religion of the West with *Vaishnavism* and the folk religion of the East with *Saktism*, or the worship

80. The table is a modification of a similar one found in R. M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204–1760*, op. cit., 302. This table was employed by Eaton to elucidate the Islamization of East Bengal. I believe that the same scheme may be fruitfully applied to the Hinduization of West Bengal.

of the goddess.⁸¹ Secondly, the Mangal Kavyas seem to be mostly a heritage of the West, and particularly of the Rarh tract. The Kavyas' characters, places, rivers and situations seem to be located nearly exclusively in this area.⁸² This of course does not mean that the Dharma cult was confined to the West of Bengal only. It actually means, and this is also the third reason why only the Rarh became Hinduized, that the Brahmanical elites of East Bengal could not go beyond their own *sastric* injunctions and, unlike their counterparts in the West, could not adjust or accommodate the folk cults of *antyajas* within the respectable fold of Hinduism. It must, in all fairness, also be added that the Rarh tract both in pre-Islamic times as well as for the first three centuries of Muslim domination, the sultanate period, continued to be considered unimportant by the then elites.⁸³ This means that particularly before the Mughals (from 1576), the Rarh was not considered an economic frontier as was instead the East of the country, where all possible means were deployed to enlarge the agrarian base of the empire. In a way, the ideological confrontation between two culture-systems both sustaining a developing agrarian expansion, did not take place in the west of Bengal but in its eastern parts. The short-sightedness of the then Brahmanical elites did the rest: rather than acknowledge the social mobility of *antyajas*, they preferred shaking hands with the new Muslim masters, reaping whatever economic, political or social advantages there were to reap.

BETWEEN ASSIMILATION AND MARGINALIZATION

While accepting the general statement according to which “Hindu tradition is a continuum rather than a polarity,”⁸⁴ to distinguish between a little tradition and a great tradition, between a popular religion and a textual, Sanskritic one may however help to understand historical dynamics with their practices and agents. The campaign of assimilation, as it were, carried out by the Mangal Kavyas in order to include and eventually displace folk deities and their *pujaris* may thus not only be understood, from a synchronic perspective, as a continuous process of conversion but also, from a diachronic view point, as a radical, polarised transformation. In this sense, the Bakhtinian definition of popular religion as “a counter-system that constantly opposes and demystifies the established order and the established religion”⁸⁵ may better characterise the *sitz im leben* of the *gajon* of Dharma and of its *antyaja* practitioners.

While the *gajon* or *Deul puja* undoubtedly shows its ancient and non-Hindu character

81. Ibid., 112.

82. See J. Sirkar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults*, op. cit., 80.

83. Ibid., 28.

84. J. McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

85. Quoted in M. Bandyopadhyay, “Gajan: Fertility, Femininity, Freud and Futility” in *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 2012/5, 1: 222.

it also manifests quite clearly the multifarious manipulations it had been subjected to all along its hoary past. If the *Sunya Puran* is the oldest extant liturgical text of the Dharma cult, then the latter's literary history starts from the fourteenth century. However, we cannot forget that this text is already a first great attempt to standardise the Dharma liturgy on Hindu canons. A liturgy which must have been going on for some time before the *Sunya Puran* attempted a first appropriation. As a matter of speculation, I would not be surprised if the Dharma cult had originated in Pala times (c. 730–1162),⁸⁶ that is, when from late Gupta times (sixth–seventh centuries) the dwindling of international trade, a dearth of coinage and a consequent process of urban decay, forced the then polities to look for new resources in the peripheries of their backyards.⁸⁷ It is then that political elites come into contact with the “wild other,” the *antyajas* beyond and outside the system and the pale of civilization. My contention is that the *Gajon* of Dharma, and its watered down version, the *Deul puja*, may indeed hide within its complicated practices the story of Bengal's *antyajas* shift from being the “wild other of beyond” to becoming the “domesticated, marginalized other of within.” The story of *antyajas*' domestication may be envisioned by identifying the taming, as it were, of god Dharma himself to becoming Shiva in the *Sunya Puran* and eventually to being identified *tout court* with Vishnu in the numerous Dharma Mangal Kavyas.⁸⁸ Significantly even S. Dasgupta notices that goddesses in the godly assemblies in which Dharmaraj is the presiding deity, are “conspicuous for their absence.”⁸⁹

As a matter of further speculation, I dare to think that Dharma might not be the original deity of *antyajas* but already the first fruit of Brahmanical manipulation. Obviously this is all to be demonstrated, but it would be more sensible and logical to the internal development of the *gajon* to have at its centre a goddess, the *Adi Sakti* (the original force), instead of a “male” god the like of Dharma. Indeed the latter remains a bit of a mystery. He is said to be formless; he is mostly defined negatively and what is more, according to S. Dasgupta, he is neither male nor female.⁹⁰ Perhaps it was this ambiguity which might have helped him to take over an original “female force.” Or perhaps it is exactly this indeterminacy and ambiguity which characterise both his aniconic nature and that of his *pujaris*. It is true, however, that in a sister celebration of the *gajon* called *gambhira* (which by the way means the same as *deul*, i.e., temple) it is said that *Adya* is the presiding deity of the *puja*.⁹¹ *Adya* does appear in the *Sunya Puran* as well. She is the daughter

86. This is only a hypothesis and does not rely on the sort of evidence produced by the editor of the *Sunya Puran* in his introduction, rather, the idea originates from the simple realization that the Pala kingdom itself has been characterized by a deeper hold on the land it ruled. That is, it relied on peasantization. See S. Targa, *The Pala Kingdom: Rethinking Lordship in Early Medieval North Eastern India*, op. cit., 148ff.

87. Ivi.

88. See S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 339.

89. Ibid., 340–41.

90. Ibid., 330–34.

91. See H. Palit, *Adyer Gambhira* (Maldaho: Jatio Shikkha Somiti, 1913).

of Dharma, the instrument of creation, the mother of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva who, in one account, she will then incestuously marry to continue the process of creation. In another account Adya, the daughter of Dharma, will be married by her father himself, another incestuous relationship, to give birth to the great gods of Hinduism.⁹² Perhaps it was this marriage that actually displaced her from the centre of the *gajon* giving her husband, be it Shiva or Dharma, centre stage.⁹³

This hypothesis, admittedly, is founded on circumstantial evidence; however, there is a possibility to interpret the *gajon* as “a psychological drama in which the male devotees of god Dharma attempt to perceive the female essence at the basis of all reproductive processes by becoming ritual women.”⁹⁴ Or at least this may possibly have been one original meaning of the original untampered with *gajon*. Dharma despite its maleness, ambiguous as it may be, shows in fact the characteristics of a *gramya devata*, a village deity, nearly always a female, whose essential traits are a regional association, a pragmatic outlook, an ambiguous and ambivalent nature and the capacity to vary one’s form even though basically aniconic.⁹⁵ What is more, the *gramya devatas* require animal sacrifices but lack altogether a priestly class. In such a context, Dharma is thus an anomalous presence. But the anomalies do not stop here. Significantly, Ferrari has noticed that both the *Sunya Puran* and the *Dharma Puja Bidhan*, supposedly the liturgical texts of the cult, do not mention whatsoever the rites which have from the beginning attracted the attention of students of anthropology, that is, the swinging ceremony of the *Carak* tree together with the self-inflicting harm of impaling oneself with needles and other metallic implements.⁹⁶ I imagine this might be part of a wider project of defeminization of the *gajon* which we are going to address below.

Apparently the change of male devotees into ritual women is accomplished through transformative rites which involve blood and self-torture. It is basically through impalement that a male becomes penetrable and thus a woman. From a psychoanalytic perspective, in so doing, a male comes to expiate the violence he inflicts on a woman by penetrating her and the violence he inflicts on earth, the *Adi Sakti*, with the plough. The *gajon*, which is an ensemble of fertility rites, has the task, therefore, to redress this violence by expiating the guilt incurred by agriculturist populations. The yearly festival becomes in

92. See S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 359ff.

93. J. McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*, op. cit., 245–47.

94. F. M. Ferrari, “Modificazioni sessuali nei culti popolari del Bengala: il maschio colpevole e la donna rituale.” PhD Student, soAs, London. At <<http://www.psychomedia.it/pm/grpind/magscia/1.htm>>. My translation.

95. J. McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*, op. cit., 27–8.

96. These self-torturing practices are called among other names, *ban-phora*, the piercing with arrows. See for instance R. C. Sen, “A Short Account of the *Carak Puja* Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used,” op. cit., 611. Besides, to add to the circumstantial evidence, it may be remembered that in other parts of India, particularly in the South, swinging rituals with perforation of one’s skin/muscles are exclusively offered to female deities. See F. Brighenti, “Hindu Devotional Ordeals and Their Shamanic Parallels,” op. cit., 115; 118.

this way an occasion to make amend for one's "agricultural sins" which, in turn propitiates the goddess and ensures her protection with future abundant crops.⁹⁷ The *gajon* in fact is celebrated at two particular junctures. On the one hand it falls at the end of a year and on the other, the *gajon* is a spring festival, a fallow time for the earth. In both cases, however, it is a time for regeneration.

From a different, perhaps more Indian perspective, the identification of male devotees with the goddess requires bodily transformations. According to the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*

Kali's heaven is only open to women. During earthly worship, the devotee should give offerings to brahmins, young girls and boys, the public, and the poor, seeing all of them as forms of the goddess. When the worshiper dies, and he goes to Kali's heaven of Manidvipa, he must take on the form of a woman, to echo the form of the goddess.⁹⁸

Somehow the *gajon* anticipates the entrance to the goddess's paradise proposing a higher form of worship which is the identification of devotee and object of devotion. In a way to worship the goddess is to become like her or to have a share in her nature and power. This is realized through the *ban phora* ceremonies and other allied ones, what the *baladar* in Chuknagar called *kara sanyas*, *kata sanyas* and *agun sanyas*. These ceremonies which involve some sort of self-harming bear a number of meanings: firstly they constitute *sanyasis* into ritual women by making them penetrable; secondly perforation of one's own body is to undertake penance for the violence exerted as males; and thirdly, to be penetrated is to experience the same violence female bodies experience.⁹⁹ This psychoanalytical interpretation may be further reinforced if we also consider that in the *gajon* a certain "tendency to transvestitism" has been noticed.¹⁰⁰ The same author has also noted that while "female devotees are fully entitled to take part in fire ordeals, they are not entitled to enact hanging and piercing rites."¹⁰¹ In fact as women they do not need to go through ritual transformation to identify with the goddess.

The psychological drama that the *gajon* depicts is nothing but a sacred marriage or hierogamy between the goddess, earth, the primitive force of creation, the *Adya* of the *Sunya Puran*, and the sacred male. This male in the *puja*'s internal development is either Dharma or Shiva, while in a psychoanalytical reading he is represented as either

97. I owe this psychoanalytical interpretation to F. M. Ferrari, "Modificazioni sessuali nei culti popolari del Bengala: il maschio colpevole e la donna rituale," op. cit., passim.

98. Quoted in J. McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*, op. cit., 245.

99. See F. M. Ferrari, "Modificazioni sessuali nei culti popolari del Bengala: il maschio colpevole e la donna rituale," op. cit., passim.

100. See F. Brighenti, "Hindu Devotional Ordeals and Their Shamanic Parallels," op. cit., 115.

101. *Ibid.*, 150.

Baneswar, the Lord of arrows, with direct reference to the piercing ceremonies, the sacrificial male, or the *sanyasis* themselves who live the paradoxical situation of gender dissociation.¹⁰² In this respect it may be mentioned that the *hobishshanno* regime undertaken by *sanyasis* before and all through the festival and the white cloth formerly given them can be explained referring to the mourning for the sacrificial male, once represented by the sacrificial animal, the male godhead, who pays for the violence inflicted on goddess earth, the *Adi Sakti*. Significantly, this interpretation was inadvertently supported by Krishnapada *baladar* himself, when above he compared the mourning for a dead father and that played out by the *sanyasis* for “their father” Shiva, implying his death without actually mentioning it.

Be that as it may, it is my contention that the domestication of the wild other, the *antyajas* beyond the pale, starts with the defeminization of their sacred ritual. It is in fact in the ritual where this wild other manifests its subversive potential. The clearing of the female element from its sacred space means to clear *antyajas* from their fierce association with the fierce goddess, one of the sources of their liminality but also of their non-completely powerless social marginality. To defeminise the *gajon* in a way means to eliminate the residual powerfulness of *antyajas* while maintaining their marginalization, now deprived of its subversive potential. It is somehow to reduce the already socially constrained, autonomous space of subaltern people. To explain this, which I think is an important point, I can compare the relationship between *antyajas* and greater, mainstream society otherwise called *agryajas* (those who are ahead in a caste society), with the relationship between Kali and Shiva. Kali, as much as the *antyaja*, is she who threatens social stability and order. True, in her role of slaying demons she eventually serves order yet she is so unstable that in her frenzy she herself threatens the existence of the world she is meant to save. She is in fact often depicted as blood thirsty and as becoming drunk on the blood of her victims, getting thus out of control. Shiva is then called in to calm her. There are two ways in which Shiva manages to calm her. In one myth he appears to her as a dead body, the sight of which has the power to calm her down, while in another, Shiva appears in the cremation ground in the form of a child.¹⁰³ While these myths are explained away mentioning Kali’s wifely devotion in one case or her motherly instinct in the other, they fail to see that Kali is calmed down only because both the corpse and the child are liminal objects, outside of social rules, beyond established order. “Kali is at home outside the moral order and seems to be unbounded by that order.”¹⁰⁴ *Antyajas* like Kali are liminal in nature. While they serve society by removing its disorder/impurity they always

102. A complete psychoanalytical interpretation of the *gajon* can be found in the article of Ferrari already quoted. Of the same author see F. M. Ferrari, *Guilty Males and Proud Females: Negotiating Genders in a Bengali Festival* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011). A review of this book by Sunayani Bhattacharya can be found at <<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/jfrr/article/view/3371/3138>>.

103. This short description of the goddess Kali relies on D. R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, op. cit., 121; 131.

104. *Ibid.*, 122.

run the risk of threatening it with the disorder they represent as outcasts. They must be controlled, limited, restricted but not eliminated, because eventually society needs them. Like Kali they are useful but their existence remains dangerous and polluting, threatening the chaos they are meant to ward off with their humble service to society. Ritually speaking, this is accomplished in the *gajon* by eliminating its feminine dimension.

The *Deul puja* we described above and which I have called a watered-down version of the *gajon*, has nearly forgotten its hierogamy. While the *Nila puja* is maintained as one of the elements of the festival, the people, but also the *baladar*, have forgotten what it was all about. Nila was a goddess whose marriage with either Dharma or Shiva was being celebrated. Instead it has been reduced to the spreading of blue-coloured powder on the water of a pond, without anybody being able to explain its meaning. A friend I have already mentioned, Mr. Bikash Das, has instead referred to Nila as *nil*, the colour of the poison Shiva got from his churning of the ocean and so referring the whole ceremony to a *puranic* story which actually has nothing to do with the development of the festival. Indeed, Krishnapada *baladar* referred to a marriage being performed when on the second day of the festival people went around with the *pat* as in a marriage procession. Yet, apart from this, nothing was done or said to justify the celebration of the hierogamy. The *thakur* was indeed clearly identified as the groom but his bride was completely absent. Only twice did the *baladar* refer explicitly to a goddess. On the first day, at the beginning of the festival he invoked Bhadrakali to come and drink the blood of those who would dare to interfere in the celebration. The second time, instead, was when the *baladar* mentioned the nine forms of the goddess Durga. Apart from this, the goddess, in the words of the *baladar*, was conspicuous by her absence. Indeed, if Ferrari's interpretation of the *gajon* as a way for male devotees to become ritual women is accepted, then it clearly appears that the reason why the goddess disappeared from the *Deul puja* is that in that *puja* no piercing and no swinging are performed. If the *ban-phora* ceremonies are eliminated from the festival, the connection with the goddess is eliminated, the *sanyasis* cannot become ritual women and the *antyajas* are tamed.

The control of society and of the order it represents, we may say, started when the *Sunya Puran* and the *Dharma Puja Bidhan* omitted the *ban-phora* ceremonies as part of the festival. But things did not stop there. In British times because of the association the latter upheld between rebellion and human sacrifice and because the *Carak puja* did involve some self-harming ceremonies, despite the fear of upsetting Indian sentiments particularly after the great *sepoy* mutiny of 1857–1858, hook-swinging in British Bengal was prohibited from 1865.¹⁰⁵ In all fairness, it was not just the British who were behind this prohibition, as Oddie clearly points out, “it was Indians themselves, not foreign mission-

105. See C. Bates, “Human Sacrifice in Colonial Central India: Myth, Agency and Representation” in C. Bates ed., *Beyond Representation: Constructions of Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20.

aries or officials, who made the most adamant pleas for total abolition.”¹⁰⁶ I doubt British authorities could see the *gajon* with the eyes of Ferrari, yet they could perceive that the *gajon* maintained an autonomous space for subaltern people which could hide a potential for rebellion. What is more, the *gajon* was a space which sacralized disorder and chaos, and this was certainly threatening for both the British and allied Indian elite.

The *Deul puja* despite having lost many of its more gruesome aspects does give an idea of what this sacralized disorder and chaos were.¹⁰⁷ Beyond the *ban-phora* and swinging ceremonies, in the second night of the *Deul puja*, the night of the *Hazra tola* and Mahakal, a fierce form of Shiva, the *antyajas* manifest their dangerous and disrupting potential by mingling with the most threatening, liminal chaotic and polluting reality of all: death.

Originally this part of the festival was called *mora-khela* (the game with death), *mashana* (cemetery) dance¹⁰⁸ and *smosan khela* (the play at the cremation ground).¹⁰⁹ It consisted in exhuming a corpse which would then be made to dance. Alternatively, the corpse would be decapitated and the dance would be carried out only with the head. Another form of dance in which the corpse would be that of a child is also known.¹¹⁰ The attentive reader may have already noticed the possible relationship between Shiva's myths mentioned above where the latter manages to calm down the fierce goddess Kali by appearing either as a corpse or as a child. I do not think that the two practices actually refer to one and the same tradition. Instead, they may refer to a same cultural sensitivity which sees corpses and children as liminal objects, outside the reach of societal order and dictates, and thus more conducive to a propitiatory relationship with the goddess and her violent, liminal power. Whatever the case, today's *Hazra tola* ceremonies have lost much of their ghastly import yet they continue their often mysterious relationship with the cremation ground and death. *Hazra tola*, as we know, is the place of presences: ghosts, spirits, demons and the like are summoned by explicit invitation, they are then fed and somehow propitiated. This was also the moment and the place in which animal sacrifices were offered, something which nowadays, because of *Vaishnava* influence, has almost dwindled to a complete stop.

This association between *antyajas* and spirits of various sorts besides being dangerous is also highly polluting and thus a source of chaos, a sort of anti-society, which, though

106. R. E. Frykenberg, “Book Review of Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800–1894* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995)” in *South Asia*, 1997/20, 2: 158.

107. Generally speaking, in India the categories of chaos associated with impurity and order associated with purity are possibly more meaningful than the categories of sacred and profane. See M. Naidu, “Ritual Space and Ritual Dominance” in *Nidan: International Journal of Indian Studies*, 2002/14, 12: 3.

108. See B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, op. cit., 81; 90.

109. See A. Mitra, *Rarher Sanskriti o Dharmathakur*, op. cit., 55ff.

110. See F. M. Ferrari, “Modificazioni sessuali nei culti popolari del Bengala: il maschio colpevole e la donna rituale,” op. cit., 5–6. This author says that despite the prohibition of such acts, in some places of the Birbhum district of West Bengal, the dance is still secretly performed.

recognized, must however be managed, circumscribed and controlled. *Antyajas* thus on the one hand serve society by managing the chaos of death and ghosts by keeping them at bay, exorcizing their presences and somehow renewing and regenerating life; on the other hand, *antyajas*, because of their intrinsic power of being able to communicate with chaos and pollution, must themselves be kept at bay and controlled. Significantly, it appears that in the past the *Carak puja* was financed and patronized by *zamindars* (big landholders) and *bhodrolok* (urban gentlemen) who in so doing would earn religious merit.¹¹¹ The same elite, however, would be quite vocal in disparaging *antyajas* and their non-Hindu worship¹¹² exactly for the same reason: their enmeshment with the anti-society. “The *Bhagavad Gita* (17. 5–6), indeed, resolutely denies the religious value of any act of penance carried out through bodily torments, which are, on the contrary, held by its author(s) to be inspired by demons.”¹¹³

Undeniably, together with the association of *antyajas* with the dangerous, chaotic netherworld, the harsh judgement of Hindu elites on *antyajas* and their cult had to do also with other things. Particularly during the *Hazra tola* night, practitioners and devotees make great use of *ganja* (marihuana) and alcohol. This use which is today justified by referring to the use of these substances by god Shiva himself, is also accompanied by licentious sexual innuendos and behaviour. Normally self-controlled men and women on this night lose their social restraints and behave by giving vent to possibly sexually repressed behaviour. Very likely, in the general structure of the festival in which there is a continuous alternating between the human feminine and the earth's feminine, *Adi Sakti*, even this sexual dalliance, as it were, may be linked once again to the renewal of fertility to which the *gajon* as such is geared. Indeed, these sorts of things happen during the night and are conspicuously played down by Krishnapada *baladar* who refers both vulgar language and behaviour to the effects of intoxicating substances. However, if we consider that in the past during the *Carak puja*, usually during the marriage procession, a *boro tamasa* (great fun) took place in which participants would wear masks and make fun of anything in a sort of carnivalesque spirit,¹¹⁴ we may interpret the events of the *Hazra tola*, which come at the end of the marriage procession, as the remnants of a carnival, in which everything was levelled, roles were reversed and a general relaxation of rules and regulations took place. A moment in which the female element on which life

111. R. E. Frykenberg, “Book Review of Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800–1894*, op. cit., 158. The religious merit being referred to here cannot but be the pacification of the goddess's power, her propitiation, and the management of the anti-society always threatening to overcome the constituted social order.

112. “From the remotest past the Brahmans have considered ritual self-torture acts to be suited for the Sudras, Untouchables and tribals only, and have abstained from performing them, or even from legitimizing them with Brahman approval.” F. Brighenti, “Hindu Devotional Ordeals and Their Shamanic Parallels,” op. cit., 158.

113. Ivi.

114. See B. K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, op. cit., 55–6.

itself depends, could have its own ways, above and beyond society's regulations. In this respect, a quick mention must also be made to the Dharma Mangal Kavyas and the Lau Sen saga central to it.¹¹⁵ In this literature, which is already an attempt at domesticating "the wild other beyond," there are however interesting narrations in which particularly female characters like Lakhe, the wife of Kalu, the *dom* chief warrior of Lau Sen, Kalinga and Kanara, respectively the older and younger wives of Lau Sen etc. are deconstructed in their gender roles so that from wives and mothers they easily become warriors and ascetics, ministers and councillors, taking over and nearly ridiculing male roles as unable to protect, to rule, to fight.¹¹⁶ In a way, the Dharma Mangal Kavyas operate on a literary dimension what the *gajon* actually performs ritually.

Truly, the *gajon* itself has been interpreted as "a social leveller, a carnival of subaltern masses,"¹¹⁷ where patriarchy and whatever this word stands for are somehow deconstructed.¹¹⁸ If we have hinted above at a Bakhtinian definition of carnival, now perhaps we should point to a Foucauldian concept of power to attempt to grasp the structural complexity of the *gajon*. Power, accordingly, is everywhere and flows in any direction, so that even the *antyajas* are not completely powerless, although subordinated. Their stand is the stand of a resistant subaltern group whose power is not different from the one they oppose but shares with it the same origin. Indeed we cannot expect to find *antyajas* venting their resistance on the barricades; but we do have to take into consideration the religious dimension of their resistance which surfaces in the *gajon*. In this festival women and *antyajas*, the two most marginalized groups in the Indian subcontinent, enact their own liberation, free from social constraints. Women find their own worth as the sources of life and incarnations of the goddess against a patriarchy which has confined them to being only tools and implements of life, enslaved by an all-powerful, domineering male. The *gajon* is thus the festival of the feminine worshipped both in its mysterious and dangerous import. Similarly, the potter, the cobbler, the sweeper, the oil presser, the fisherman etc. during the festival dismiss their subaltern clothes and for the time of the festival identify with both the goddess, as ritual women, or Shiva and Dharma as *sanyasis*. Sadly, this happens only in the ritual, so that once the lights of the feast go out, both women and *antyajas* go back to being the powerless, marginal, subaltern elements of orderly society. Unfortunately, the process of domestication of the *gajon* which started with the composition of its liturgical texts ends here with the nearly complete domestication of the other which is now more and more similar to the self it used to oppose and confront. Today's *antyajas* of the area around Chuknagar do not even dream of the sort of meanings I have

115. Among others see the summary of the main story in S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults. As a Background of Bengali Literature*, op. cit., 47off.

116. See M. Bandyopadhyay, "Gajan: Fertility, Femininity, Freud and Futility" in *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, op. cit., 229.

117. *Ibid.*, 222.

118. The reader may just think, as an example, to the *hobishanno* for the dead Shiva implied by the *baladar* and the implications deriving from the expiatory death of such a sacrificial male.

attempted to extract from their very ancient ritual tradition. What I have tried to propose here is completely extraneous to their modern consciousness, and the *ban-phora* which I have interpreted as the way in which devotees become ritual women is interpreted by them as a show of courage to put on to please neighbours and tourists. Indeed, today's *antyajas*, forgetting god Dharma and all he stood for, have certainly become more Hindu than their ancestors. I wonder whether they have become more powerful and less marginalized. If subaltern independence is synonymous with rebellion, as it appears to be in the Dharma Mangal Kavyas,¹¹⁹ the more the ritual, autonomous space of *antyajas* is reduced the less rebellious they will be, since, apparently, the religious domain has been the only ambit left to embody their resistant otherness. I believe the best domestication one may think of is not that imposed by others on the self but that originating from the self itself which consents to its own taming.

The *antyajas* of today seem to be lying in this phase. While Krishnapada *baladar* was narrating the ways and the modes of the *Deul puja* he could not refrain from commenting that the people during the *puja* do not actually listen to his *balas*, or sung religious rhymes being happy only to listen to the sound of his words. In this regard, Ferrari comments about the "uselessness of translation," implying that to the people the actual meaning of the words has now shifted to that of their sound, which is sufficient to emotionally arouse the sort of devotion more than enough to satisfy religious needs. I cannot help thinking that the domestication of *antyajas* which eventually ended up constituting them as the outcastes within could not have succeeded without the cooperation of *antyaja* elite and leadership. As Krishnapada *baladar* clearly explained, supported also by Mr. Bokul, the sexual innuendo of devotees during particular moments of the festival have become the immoral intemperance of few devotees acting under the effect of intoxicating substances. What used to be the harsh judgement of both British and Indian elites has now become the judgement of *antyajas* imposed on themselves.

CONCLUSION

The paper has sought to study the intriguing celebration of the *Carak puja*, known also under different names, particularly in the way it is celebrated today in the area of Chuknagar and surroundings. Focusing on the socio-political aspects involved, the paper has underlined the significance and import of the festival for its principal practitioners, the low caste people variously named *antyajas*, subaltern or outcaste. In the first section of the paper I have attempted to reconstruct the festival as it is celebrated today in Chuknagar. In the ensuing phenomenological description, I pointed out elements which have helped identify the *Deul puja* of today with the *Dharmer Deul* of yesterday. Simpli-

119. See C. David, "Battle and Self-Sacrifice in a Bengali Warrior's Epic: Lausen's Quest to be a Raja in Dharma Mangal," op. cit., 147.

fication, accommodation and commercialization have been identified as the processes investing the *puja* today.

In the second section I argued that it was the reception or refusal of the cult of Dharma which in the long run determined the partition of Bengal in 1947. The hypothesis which I have put forward is that in the way in which in the East of Bengal it was Islam that was identified as the cultural system able to support the agrarian expansion in hitherto non-cultivated land, in the same way it was the cult of god Dharma who supported the peasantization of the Rarh division of the West, eventually determining its clear Hindu identity as opposed to the Islamic East. Significant here has been the contention that those who eventually became either Hindu or Muslim belonged to the same *antyaja* stock of people. In the West a more accommodating Brahmanical elite, supported by the Dharma Mangal Kavya literature, was able to accomplish the Hinduization of the Rarh tract. Instead, Muslim holy men called *pir* and a less accommodating Brahmanical elite in the East eventually helped the emergence of a distinctly Muslim East Bengal.

The third and last section starting out from the recognition that assimilation, as it was carried out in the West, but not only, meant also marginalization, I delved into the *puja* searching for its meanings. Continuously confronting the *puja* as it was celebrated in the past particularly in the West, where it still maintains an autonomous space within the Hindu fold, and the *Deul puja* as it emerged from the description related in the previous section, I highlighted hidden psychoanalytical meanings able to engender further socio-political interpretations. Illustrating the domestication of the *puja*, I showed how the *Deul puja* has been purged of its dangerous, feminine elements. A festival which very likely centred on a female force at the centre of earth's fertility processes has eventually turned out to be a festival celebrating Shiva, the most masculine of all the Hindu gods. The psychological drama that the *gajon* may outline actually hides the socio-political drama of *antyajas* and women who in the festival enact their temporary liberation. The continuous restriction of *antyajas'* autonomous religious space has actually signalled their complete domestication from the "other from outside" to the other which now looks more and more like the self it once opposed.

The section concluded with the sad realization that the last step of the domestication of the dangerous other was performed by *antyajas* themselves who interiorized the judgement of a domineering self. Obviously, the paper is far from proposing conclusions. Much of which is here proposed relies only on circumstantial evidence and is in need of further research.

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INDONESIA

MATTEO REBECCHI

As it remained mostly uncontaminated by alien cultural influences until the beginning of the twelfth century, the Mentawaian culture represents one of the best examples of archaic traditions in the Indonesian Archipelago. It probably finds its origins in the first migrations that populated the Archipelago around 2.500 BC.¹ One of the earlier written accounts of the Mentawaian culture comes from the British explorer John Crisp, who travelled to South Mentawai (Sikap) in 1792.² Mentawaian cultural richness and particularities have attracted the interest of anthropologists ever since.

Celebrations (*puliaijat*) are of primary importance in the Mentawaian tradition for marking different stages of life and particular events. These festive occasions summon the whole clan to the communal house (*uma*) where the *puliaijat* takes place.

1. See. C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*. Doctoral dissertation in Antropology (Southern California: Faculty of the usc Graduate School University of Southern California, 2010), 101.

2. *Ibid.*, 111–17.

In this paper, I will try to analyze the different stages of the *puliaisjat*, with particular emphasis on the ritual words pronounced by the *rimata*, who is the leader of the celebration. I will also explore the meaning of the *puliaisjat* for the Mentawaian soul.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who helped me to deepen my understanding of this subject: Mr. Lomoi Samalinggai and Mr. Marius Saurei, whom I had the chance to interview and who gave me access to extensive information on the *puliaisjat*; Mr. Juliasman Satoko and Mr. Marinus Satoleuru for their precious support in transliterating, translating, and interpreting the ritual phrases uttered by the *rimata*, as well as for providing many insights on the Mentawaian culture. Finally, I am grateful to Fr. Sandro Peccati who was keen to share his missionary experience in Mentawai.

THE PULIAIJAT

The celebration of *puliaisjat* embodies a fundamental function within the Mentawaian culture. According to Stefano Coronese, “the whole Mentawaian life system, not only the part that refers to religious life, depends on the system of *punen*, that is, the religious feast.”³ Loeb states that two words can translate the concept of “feast” in the Mentawaian language: *punen* and *lia* (or its derivate *puliaisjat*). According to the author, *punen* refers to big celebrations led by the *rimata* (the clan’s chief), while *lia* refers to the smaller ones, those that are performed in the *lalep* (the familial house) and that are celebrated by the head of the household himself.⁴ This differentiation between the more sumptuous *punen* and the simpler *lia* is in contrast to the opinion of Caissutti, who believes that only *lia* (and its derivate *puliaisjat*) is original, and that *punen* would be a neologism deriving from the word *sipunenan* that means “holy,” and that probably is of Christian influence.⁵ In any case, in the context of Siberut Island, both words are currently in use and are practically synonymous, even if the words *lia/puliaisjat* seem to be more frequently used than *punen*.⁶

During his field work in Sikakap Islands in 1926, Edwin Loeb was able to give an account of a number of celebrations that were commonly held in the area. In his book *Mentawai Religious Cult*, he lists the following *punen*: *punen* for the founding of a village; *punen* for the founding of a new *uma* (the communal house belonging to the clan); *punen* to choose a priest; *punen* at the death of a priest; *punen* for a burnt *uma*; *punen* held when

3. S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore. La cultura delle Isole Mentawai nell’impatto con il mondo moderno* (Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 1980), 156. My translation.

4. See E. M. Loeb, *Mentawai Religious Cult* (California: University of California Press, 1929), 190. See also S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 157.

5. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana* (Izumisano: Asian Study Centre, 2015), 147. The conclusion drawn by Caissutti apparently ignores the fact that the word *punen* was already in common use when Loeb travelled to Mentawai in 1926, only some twenty years after the beginning of the Protestant evangelization.

6. Tullius Juniator seems to hold the same idea: see T. Juniator, *Family Stories. Oral Tradition, memoirs of the Past, and Contemporary Conflicts over Land in Mentawai-Indonesia*. Doctoral dissertation in Anthropology (Leiden: Leiden University, 2012), 68.

a coconut tree falls; *punen* for refuse which has drifted off (during the process of making *sagu*⁷ flour); *punen* for a ghost which comes back; *punen* for a drowned person; *punen lepa*: after a death from crocodiles or murder; *punen pasirokdrang*: to straighten the village (to put the village in order); *punen laggai*: for the village; *punen masiaro sikatai*: to chase away evil; *punen paliti*: for tattooing; *punen totopoi*: for windmills; *punen kukuret*: to hunt monkeys; *punen abak rau lepa*: to wash boats.

Other important occasions for the *puliaijat* are actually missing from the above list, e.g. the wedding ceremony called *pangurei*; the celebration for a newborn child, the *rajat*; the tribal initiation of children who receive their first loincloth and skirt, the *eneget*; the celebration for the end of the mourning period for a dead person, the *panunggru*; and the *punen paabanan* (or simply *paabanan*) for the reconciliation of two clans in conflict.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, it is not possible to give a comprehensive phenomenological description of each kind of celebration, which can differ significantly in specific actions and ritual words. Furthermore, an additional difficulty is the fact that the same kind of *puliaijat* may be performed differently, with peculiar arrangements and ritual words, by leaders of different clans. Specific rituals are performed before and after the core phases of *puliaijat* and in some cases, such as the foundation of a new *uma*, several *puliaijat* are celebrated in sequence and distanced by intervals during the whole process of construction of the building (which can last one year and a half overall).⁸ Nevertheless, despite these peculiarities that depend on the specific purpose of the feast and also on discrepancies between different *uma*,⁹ each *puliaijat* has a core session that never changes substantially. This part, which in fact is what can be properly called *puliaijat*, is mainly performed in the communal house (*uma*), in the inner sanctum (*batuma*) in the back of the *uma*, where the main heirloom protector of the clan (*katsaila*) is preserved. Some other actions are performed outside the *batuma*, that is, in the *tengauma* (a space in the middle of the *uma*), and in the veranda, where all the clan members are involved. The last phase of the *puliaijat* consists in the ritual hunt, which takes place in the surrounding forest.

I will try to describe the segments that compose the core of *puliaijat*, mainly referring to the testimony given by Marius Saurei,¹⁰ a *sikebbukat uma* or *rimata* (clan head) who

7. *Sagu*, *Metroxylon sagu* is a palm from which the Mentawaians get flour rich in starch that is usually cooked inside bamboo sticks (*obbuk*) or roasted inside its own leaves (*kapurut*). *Sagu* is the main dish for the Mentawaians, especially in Siberut. On the characteristics of *sagu* and its use in Siberut, see Whitten, Anthony J. and Whitten, Jane E. J., "The Sago Palm and its Exploitation on Siberut Island, Indonesia" in *Principes*, 1981, 25/3, 91–100.

8. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 159 ff.

9. The knowledge and skill to lead *puliaijat* are passed down from a *rimata* to one of his sons by means of aural tradition, so it cannot be expected that the celebration of the latter will be performed exactly the same as it was led by the former. Moreover, the ritual words uttered during the *puliaijat* in the inner part of the *uma* are kept secret, especially from members of other clans so that small discrepancies among *puliaijat* performed by different clans must be taken into account.

10. I personally had the opportunity to record the testimony of Marius Saurei in Maileppet village, Sibe-

usually leads the celebration of *puliaijat* for his *uma*. In this paper I will give an account of the transcription of all the ritual words (except for some omissions due to unclear pronunciation) to provide a rather complete documentation of the phrases uttered during the *puliaijat*. I apologize if this report may seem overly detailed, but I do hope that it will be useful in providing material for further investigations, as well as for comparisons with *puliaijat* performed in other clans.

The Preparation of Puliaijat

Before performing the *puliaijat* a preparatory session must be accomplished. First, all the participants enter into a time of rest, and then almost all daily work is suspended.¹¹ Resting during the celebration is compulsory for everybody, and therefore most necessary work has to be carried out before the beginning of the *puliaijat*. The required quantities of chickens and pigs are brought by the members of the clan and then collected near the communal house, the *uma*. Each family brings one chicken. The suitable number of pigs depends on the sumptuousness of the celebration. In the event of a big *puliaijat*, the number of slaughtered pigs can be rather high: during the *paabanan* (ratification of peace) among the Sabola' and Sakulo' clans in the 1960s, forty pigs were provided by each side.¹² Chicken and pigs play important roles throughout the celebration, both as food for the attendants and also as offerings for the ancestors and the *katsaila* (the main protector fetish of the communal house). In the case of the building of a new *uma*, several small *puliaijat* can occur in between the different stages of the building work. Nevertheless, the main *puliaijat* will take place in the new *uma*, enriched with beautiful ornaments, once the new *tuddukat* (tam-tam) and other required accessories are ready.¹³

Then men go to the bush in order to collect enough wood for the fireplaces, since food needs to be cooked for all the attendants during the celebration that can last several days. Women go to the fields to bring back *taro*, which is also an important element for the preparation of dumplings for the session of the celebration called *irik*. Finally, the ubiquitous *sagu* must be available for every meal.

Before starting the celebration, everyone bathes as a sign of purification, which is particularly underlined by the act of washing hair. This operation is called *magirit*.¹⁴ The needed accessories are prepared carefully. In the case of the *eneget* celebration, that is, the initiation of children who officially become members of the clan by being given the first loincloth (if male) and the first skirt (if female), the attendant will be wearing new

rut, on 19 March, 2017. He also gave the opportunity to attend a *puliaijat* (*pangurei*) led by him in the Saurei's *uma* on 21–22 June, 2017.

11. T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 147–48.

12. Sandro Peccati, personal communication, Jakarta, December 10, 2016.

13. T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 155–57.

14. In Muara Siberut, it seems that currently the *magirit* segment of the *puliaijat* has already fallen into disuse.

clothes.¹⁵ At the beginning of *puliaijat*, everyone will be wearing their *luat* (a crown made of little colourful beads) adorned with flowers. Women embellish their heads with magnificent crowns made of flowers and feathers.

When everybody has finished the preparatory operations, the *rimata*, the head of the clan, summons the *uma* members by hitting the gong. This sound signals the beginning of the celebration. Everyone is now in the status of *mulia*, meaning that they are involved in the *puliaijat*.

To be in status of *mulia* means to also carefully observe several taboos (*keikei*), including the suspension of all daily work, as we have said above.¹⁶ Basically, restrictions apply to everybody, with some extra prohibitions for the *rimata* and his wife, who can finally eat once all the other *uma* members have finished eating in the communal meal that concludes the *puliaijat*.¹⁷ Sexual intercourse is strictly forbidden during the rituals.¹⁸ The men usually sleep in the communal house, the *uma*, whereas women stay overnight in the familial houses, the *sapou*, which are located near the *uma* within the boundaries of the village. People may not get angry or break things. Anger may upset or scare the ancestors' souls, and this can endanger the members of the *uma*. Shefold reports about the accident which occurred to Tengtati during the ritual hunt at the end of a *puliaijat*. The explanation given by the members of the *uma* was that the man had infringed this rule and that for this reason he was injured.¹⁹ Eating acidic food also exposes the person to possible accidents during the celebration.²⁰

As it is the most sacred and intimate moment for the members of the clan, only clan members should be allowed to take part in the *puliaijat*.²¹ All the mantras pronounced as well as the ritual acts performed in the inner sanctum of the *uma* (*batuma*) should be

15. See F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell'ambito dell'iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*. Unpublished dissertation in Liturgy (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Liturgico, 1978), 30, 33.

16. On taboos in the Mentawaiian Culture see E. M., Loebs, *Mentawai Religius Cult*, (California: University of California Press, 1929), 234–41. See also T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 37–41.

17. See G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure." At <<http://www.mentawai.org/anthropology-92-93/puliaijat-for-the-prevention-pabete-for-the-cure/>>, 7. As far as I know, this extensive and very well detailed article on the *Puliaijat*—the author has studied the Mentawaiian culture in the Rereket area, and claims to have attended sixteen different *puliaijat* during his fieldwork—is only published online with a layout that does not show page numbers. It is not possible, therefore, to provide any page number for references and quotations. For this reason, just to give a clue about the location of references within the article, I will provide "imaginary" page numbers according to its printout with A5 layout and font Garamond 12.

18. Due to frequent *puliaijat* in the Mentawaiian tradition, especially in past times, some argue that this kind of regulation had the side effect of efficient birth control.

19. See R. Shefold, *Aku dan Orang Sakuddei. Menjaga Jiwa di Rimba Mentawai* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas and KITLV-Jakarta, 2014), 148.

20. Correlation between acidic food and possible danger is due to the fact that one of the components of the poison used in arrow tips comes from the juice of acidic fruits (Mateus Tateburuk, personal communication, Batam, 1 June, 2017). See also R. Shefold, *Aku dan Orang Sakuddei. Menjaga Jiwa di Rimba Mentawai*, op. cit., 147.

21. See R. Schefold, *Mainan bagi Roh. Kebudayaan Mentawai* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1991), 136.

kept secret especially from the members of other clans.²² Furthermore, the core events of the *puliaijat* take place in the *batuma* in front of the *bakkat katsaila*, that is, the preeminent heirloom life-giver of the clan. The rituals are performed and guided by the *rimata*, who is an elder member of the *uma* on whom the role of guardian of the heirloom has been bestowed and who is, to a certain extent, the head of the clan.²³ In normal times, outside the time of celebrations, the communal house is usually inhabited only by the *rimata's* family.

Another important ritual, which is often done before the beginning of the core sessions of the *puliaijat*, is the purification of the communal house and of the participants from any maleficent influence. This ritual is performed by the *kerei* (the Mentawaiian medicine man)²⁴ and it consists basically of two steps. The first is the use of dances, offerings and ritual phrases to call the ancestors' souls and other spiritual entities. These are benevolent spirits who provide protection and strength to the *uma* members. This session is called *panakiat*. The second step is the liberation of the environment to be used for the celebration from the evil spirits. This ritual is performed by the *kerei*, who makes a sort of exorcism by sweeping the evil spirits out of the *uma's* veranda. The *kerei* holds a bunch of leaves in his right hand and a smoking wrap of coconut palm sprout in the other hand. Besides casting away evil influences from the *uma*, the *bajou*²⁵ of the attendants, if it is too intense, needs to be cooled down, to prevent people from being affected by diseases, especially if members of other clans attend the celebration.

Masisogi Katsaila

The beginning of the *puliaijat*²⁶ is announced by the gong, which is struck by the *rimata*

22. See G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 9. With regard to the secrecy of the *puliaijat*, *de facto* there is not a strict observance of such a rule. Several detailed accounts on *puliaijat* were already available from the time of the first anthropological studies in Mentawai (see footnote 26). I myself had the chance to interview Mr. Marius Saurei, who allowed me to record the ritual phrases that he commonly pronounces during the celebrations.

23. As the traditional Mentawaiian society has an egalitarian structure without caste stratification and peculiar roles, the *rimata* does not have many other specific functions within the clan besides the function of leading the ceremony of *puliaijat*. The *rimata*, therefore, although functioning as head of the clan, cannot be considered a king in the way that is commonly conceived in other cultural contexts. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 24–6.

24. *Ibid.*, 156.

25. The *bajou* is a kind of radiation that emanates from any object, spirit, or person. Everything has a *bajou*. It has a basically neutral value, but it can be of different intensities. An object with a strong *bajou* can badly affect another with a weaker one. It is for this reason that strong *bajou* must be "cooled down" (by use of *aileppet* leaves) to prevent possible damage to weaker entities. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 29–30 and R. Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh. Kebudayaan Mentawai*, op. cit., 125–26.

26. Several descriptions of *puliaijat* are available: G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit.; S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 155–92; F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell'ambito dell'iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*, op. cit., 28–58; T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 147–66; R., Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh. Kebudayaan Mentawai* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1998) 136–38; C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition*

early in the morning. The first ritual step is the preparation of the *katsaila*, the main fetish, which will be placed in the sacred part of the *uma*. The *katsaila* (or *bakkat katsaila*, where *bakkat* means “foundation” and so it embodies the function of foundation of the clan) represents the main guardian fetish of the *uma*. It grants protection and provides life and wellbeing to the clan. According to Shefold, its role is as important as that of the ancestors. The *rimata* is the one in charge of honouring, taking care, and preserving the *katsaila* in the *uma*.²⁷ Moreover, the *rimata* is the only person allowed to manipulate the *katsaila* during the ritual events.²⁸ The *katsaila* is basically composed of different kinds of leaves which are put in a bamboo container. According to Marius Saurei, its main components are the *ailleppet*, *mumunen*, *duru*, *gori-gori*, and *taibeleki* leaves.²⁹ Some other testimonies attest that the cylinder also contains small stones, a bell and other small objects. The *katsaila* is believed to embody the function of “repository of life”³⁰ because it is composed of leaves whose properties positively influence and support the life of the

in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia, op. cit., 45–70. With regard to the ritual words pronounced by the *rimata*, in this paper I will essentially follow the description of *puliaijat* provided to me by Marius Saurei, a *sikebbukat uma* of Maileppet village in Siberut Island, who kindly answered my questions when I interviewed him in his *uma* on 19 March, 2017.

27. See R. Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh. Kebudayaan Mentawai*, op. cit., 130–31. According to Loeb, Coronese, and other testimonies from the South of the Archipelago (Sikakap and Sipora), the main fetish in the *uma* is the *batukerebau* (or *toraija lumia*, or *punen*) which in fact is often confused with the less important *katsaila*. See E. M. Loeb, *Mentawai Religious Cult*, op. cit., 205, especially the footnote n. 28; S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 165–66; 174–77. A description of *batukerebau* is given by Pius Beriuku Samangilailai. See P. Beriuku Samangilailai, *Ukum-Suru' ka Aarat Laggai Aman Taoi (18)* (Sipora: *pro manuscripto*, 1995). According to the description given by Pius Beriuku Samangilailai, the *batukerebau* is a complex object made of carved wood, depicted with eyes and ears, with deer horns protruding from its base. This sophisticated and permanent artifact differs radically from the simpler *bakkat katsaila* still visible in every *uma* in Siberut island, which basically consists of a bamboo container filled with leaves, that is renewed on the occasion of every *puliaijat*. I personally noticed that people in Siberut do not even know the word *batukerebau*. As a provisional conclusion, we can infer two alternative explanations for this inconsistency: 1) the *batukerebau* was the main fetish in Siberut too, but currently this tradition has disappeared almost everywhere, so that its function has been replaced by the simpler *katsaila*; or 2) the Southern part of the Mentawai Archipelago (Sipora and Sikakap) and the Northern one (Siberut) may have developed two partially parallel traditions, creating their own peculiar rituals and shaping different fetishes, so that the *batukerebau* has never been in use in Siberut. Mateus Tateburuk is of a different opinion. He affirms that in South Siberut the *batukerebau* is a precious small river stone that is preserved in the bamboo container of *bakkat katsaila*. The *batukerebau*, therefore, would not be the *uma* fetish but only a component of it (Mateus Tateburuk, personal communication, Batam, 2 May, 2017).

28. See G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 2–3.

29. As everything has a vital spirit, these leaves also have theirs. For this reason, these leaves possess inner powers that suit the meaning of their names: *ailleppet*, it cools down (fever, diseases and the excessive radiation of the *bajou* belonging to people or things); *mumunen*, it gives praise; *duru/ruru*, it summons and unites; *taibeleki*, it protects from harm; *gori-gori*, it gives enthusiasm, happiness.

30. *Ibid.*, 3. In this regard, it is interesting to note the frequency of the use of the word “life” (*purimanual purimanuaijat*) in the ritual phrases uttered by the *rimata* during the *puliaijat*.

clan members.³¹ The *katsaila* is always kept in the inner room of the communal house, hanging on its main pillar at the right side of the building.³²

The ritual starts when the *rimata* enters the *batuma* (the inner sanctum) with the doors shut.³³ It is always the *rimata* who leads the main celebrations. In the case of smaller *pulaiijat*, the head of the household leads the ritual.³⁴ All the attendants take their positions. The *rimata* squats in front of the *bakkat katsaila* place,³⁵ his back facing it. There are other main actors in this stage. The *sikamuri* who takes his position at the back of the *batuma*, facing the entrance of the communal house is the one who “receives the words pronounced by the *rimata*” and is also the gong player. Another elder son, the *sikaipo*, squats in front of the *rimata*. There is also another (or others) who sit at the back of the *batuma* to play drums (*kateuba*). All of them are carefully chosen; no other people are allowed to take active part in this stage. Other attendants will receive the *aggaret* or *irik* (offerings), in the following steps, but, at this point, they wait, sitting down outside the *batuma*, in the *uma*’s veranda.

The *rimata* starts stretching/caressing the new *katsaila*, whose contents are *aileppet*, *mumunen*, *gori-gori*, *duru*, and *taibeleki* leaves. The manipulation of the *katsaila* signifies saluting the ritual leaves and ask for their intercession while creating a new *katsaila*. Ritual words are pronounced by the *rimata* while stretching the bunch of leaves from the bottom to its top. The movement is done precisely, by pulling the bunch delicately backwards through the closed left hand. While stretching the leaves, the *rimata* calls the leaves by their names, asking them to deliver their specific powers so as to grant their blessings and protect the *uma* members. He utters the following words:

Porot peile’ katsailamai satogaku / doro simuine’ peinga’ / kai le’ mapeinga’ mata purimanua / duru’, kai le’ maruru’ бага purimanuaijat satogaku; / taibeleki, kai le’ ta’ ibeleki rusat manua; / buluk gori-gori, kai le’ magori бага purimanuaijat tatogakku / ta’ masala бага.

31. See. F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell’ambito dell’iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*, op. cit., 34–9.

32. It is interesting to notice that the *uma* has two main orientations: the front-back symmetry, where the most sacred part is located on the back of the *uma*, in correspondence with the *katsaila*, and also the right-left symmetry, where the right is considered to be the most sacred section. The *katsaila*, other heirlooms, the tools of the *kerei*, as well as the place where the men sit during the ritual meals, are always on the right side of the building (personal communication with several people in Buttui, and Salappa, Siberut, November 2016). A description of *uma* is available in Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh. Kebudayaan Mentawai*, op. cit., 36–41.

33. See G. Reeves, “Pulaiijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 14. Nevertheless, during the *pulaiijat* of the Saurei clan that I attended in Maileppet on 21 June, 2017, the main door was widely open. Marius Sauriel told me that the door is closed only when the *rimata* and his wife finally eat, once the communal meal has come to an end (Marius Saurei, personal communication, 21 June, 2017).

34. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 148–50.

35. The *bakkat katsaila* is positioned hanging on main pillar of the *uma* in the room called *batuma*, which is located in the back of the communal house.

I stretch the katsaila of my children [the uma members] /, shoot of the round leaf of peinga [Aren Palm, Arenga saccharifera leaf] / open up our lives / duru' [a kind of leaf], may my children be united / Taibleki [a kind of leaf], may the wind from the sky not hurt us / leaf of gori-gori, may my children be happy / do not get disappointed [because I'm going to use you for this ritual].

These words, as well as those pronounced during the other segments of the *puliaijat*, are spoken very rapidly, in a high pitch. The *rimata* talks to the leaves, asking them to be keen to help according to their individual capabilities. He asks them to take care of the members of the *uma* whom he calls “my children” (*tatogakku*) and to protect them from evil, which is depicted as the wind that carries diseases. He also apologizes for being about to use and manipulate them during the ritual in a manner that may upset them.

Then the *rimata* elevates the leaves in the direction of *bakkat katsaila*, the main protector of the *uma*.

Following this, the *rimata* hits the floor with the bunch of leaves of the new *katsaila*, acting as to provoke the split of the *poula* leaf's top end. Then he separates (*masisogi*) the fibres of the *poula* leaf and hands out the resulting strips to the attendants, who in their turn put the split leaf through their colourful crowns (*luat*) as their personal *katsaila*.

Then, the *rimata* calls on the vital spirits of his clan's members, that is, the *simagere*, by saying:

Konan peile' kaini' / simageremai satogaku, / ba' ei ka rusat manua, / ba' ei ka oringen, / ba' ei ka sanitu, / anai peile' kaini' simagredda satogaku, / konan, konan, konan, / guru', guru', guru', / rio' kai le mario' бага purimanua, / kai le' tuurau purimanua tatogaku, / kai le' mananta бага purimanua tatogaku.

Come here / simagere [vital spirits] of my children, / do not go to the wind from the sky, / do not go close to diseases, / do not go close to sanitu [evil spirits],³⁶ / the simagere of my children are already here, / come here, come here, come here, / come in, come in, come in, / give us strength in life / May my children grow up well, / may my children live to old age.

36. According to Caissutti, the *sanitu* are not necessarily evil: *sanitu* are simply the souls of the departed. Then, *sanitu sikatai* (bad) means “evil spirits,” while *sanitu simaeru* (good)—also called *saukkui* (fathers)—can be translated as “spirit of the ancestors.” See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, 30–2. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that in common use the word *sanitu* applies to evil spirits (as it is meant in these ritual words). On the other hand, I have found no confirmation in any part of Southern Siberut of the idea of Reeves and Hammons, who say that one's ancestors are seen as benevolent forefathers (*saukkui*), while the ancestors of other clans are all regarded as *sanitu* (in the sense of evil spirits). Reeves states: “*Sanitu* are the dead members of other *suku* and must be distanced unlike the *saukkui* [the clan ancestors] whose active assistance and protection is solicited” in G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 28. See also C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 17.

The *simagere* of the *uma* members are summoned. The *simagere* is the spiritual part of the individual that provides life and health. It is believed that if the *simagere* separates for too long from its body, then the person gets ill. If this happens, the assistance of the medicine-man (*kerei*) becomes necessary in order to call back and to invite the *simagere* to stay close to the ill body.³⁷ Therefore, summoning the *simagere* of the participants is a necessary operation to assure the benefits of the ritual and to guarantee safety and health to each *uma* member.

Then, the time has come to create the new place for the offerings, the *katsaila*. The *rimata* stands up and goes to the main right pillar of the house where the bamboo container is hanging. While inserting (*masiuremmake*, which means “planting”) the bamboo with new leaves, he pronounces the following words:

Urepmake peile' katsailara tatogaku; / Taipotsala: kai le' ta' masala бага puri-manua tatogaku; / Duru': kai le' maduru' бага purimanua; / Gori-gori: kai le' magori бага purimanua; / Taibleki: kai le' ta' ibeleki бага purimanua.

I insert the katsaila of my children; / Taiposala [a kind of leaf]: may my children not get disappointed in life; / Duru' [a kind of leaf]: may my children be united / Gori-gori [a kind of leaf]: may there be happiness in life; / Taibleki [a kind of leaf]: may there not be disappointment in life.

The *rimata* inserts the *poula/katsaila* leaf (*Arenga saccharifera*) into the bamboo container while saying:

Urepmake peile katsaila mai tatogaku, / simuine', doro simuine' peinga': / kai le' mapeinga' mata purimanua, / kai le' ta' ipageugeu rusat manua, / ka bakkat arigi ta'ipageugebet / kai le' ta' ipageu-geu rusat manua, / kai le' ta' ipageu-geu bolot laggai.

I insert the katsaila of my children; / the round, the round shoot of peinga [synonym of poula/katsaila] / may our lives be protected / may the wind from the sky not hurt us / you are hanging on the pole that does not shake / may the wind from the sky not hurt us, / may epidemics not affect us.

Then the *rimata* squats down and he begins splitting (*masisogi*) *poula*'s fibers to make the personal *katsaila* for the *puliaijat* participants. He puts his personal *katsaila* through his *luat* (crown) while saying:

Gorosot bib simeru.

37. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 118–22.

I Insert you [in the luat] well.

Then the *sikebbukat uma/rimata* hands out the personal *katsaila* created by splitting the *poula*'s leave fibers to the participants to be inserted in their own *luat* (crown).

Aggaret Toiten

The second stage of the *puliaijat* begins in the *batuma* when the *sikebbukat uma* cuts some small pieces of coconut flesh pronouncing the following ritual words:

Aipakurukat rusat manua. / Konan, ketcat purimanua, / ketcat ka babaja', / konan, konan, konan, guru'; / konan peile' kaini' lauru simaeru, / ekeu kusosogai, / laurut puiba, / laurut purimanua, / konan, konan, konan, guru'; / konan peile' kaini' ketcat matei ketcat³⁸, / ketcat sipurere, ketcat sipuubat paluga, / konan, konan, konan, guru'.

The wind from the sky has been diverted. / Come here, spirit of life, / spirit of long life till old age, / come here, come here, come here, come in; / come here favourable lauru³⁹ [intestine of the chicken used for reading omens] / I am calling you, / lauru that provides food, / lauru of life, / come here, come here, come here, come in; / come here, spirits of the forest meat, / spirit of the deer, spirit of the big turtle, / come here, come here, come here, come in.

Then the *rimata* takes one small piece of coconut flesh and offers it to the ancestors, who are also called *saukkui* (fathers). This action is done by moving his left hand backwards letting the coconut piece fall behind him between two floor boards, so that the coconut pinch falls on the ground under the house. While doing that he says:

38. "Ketcat matei ketcat" literally means "spirit of the dead spirit;" it is a delicate expression aimed at calling and asking the spirits of the animals (deer, turtles, wild boars, monkeys) to hand themselves over in the ritual hunt at the end of the *puliaijat*. Reeves translates it as "forest meat." See G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for Preventing. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 35. Saurei *uma* is located close to the seashore in Maileppet village, and it is for this reason that the ritual hunt includes also the catch of turtles.

39. *Lauru*: the transparent membrane of the chicken intestine. The conformation of its spots (*salo*) is observed in order to know whether the omens are favorable or not. The examination of the chicken intestine, as well as the reading of the vein of pig's heart (*teinung*), aims at knowing if the *puliaijat* encounters the favours of the spirits. If omens are favourable, then the celebration can carry on. Otherwise, another victim is slaughtered hoping to get new positive auspices. The spirits of the intestines of chickens and hearts of pigs are requested to be keen in delivering their positive response. In fact, chickens and pigs are not just passive elements whose entrails and heart conformation depend totally on fate. On the contrary, they are believed to actively mediate in determining good fortune. See S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 127–32; F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell'ambito dell'iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*, op. cit., 48–9; G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 44–6.

Teteumai simalolose,⁴⁰... kap ka tubunia, / kap ka toilania. / Kekeu subuknu kuake, kina umangku ekeu, / ekeu sipakekera, / sikera rusat manua. / Toitet pakere бага, / kai le' pakere bagamai pagurukat purimanua, / pagurukat ketcat purimanua, / ketcat ka babaja', ka kukuilu, ka leleubat.

Our ancestors,... for you, / you that are in a visible place. / Here is your meal, spirit of the uma, / spirit that diverts, / that diverts the wind from the sky. / Coconut of communion, / grant us unity and communion of life, / communion of spirit of life, / spirit of long life / till old age, till we are stooped over, till we become white-haired.

While offering the coconut to the *katsaila* the *rimata* says:

Aggaretnu⁴¹ kuake' kina katsaila mai, / toitet pakere бага, / sibalu labat, / kai le' pabalu labat purimanua, / kere pakere бага pagurukat purimanua, / konan peile' kaini' simageremai satogaku / anai aggaretmai, konan, konan, konan... guru'.

Receive your aggaret, spirit of our katsaila, / coconut of communion, / [aggaret] of the eight defences, / may our life be defended eight times, / may we have unity of thoughts and happiness in life, / come here simagere of my children, / here is our aggaret, / come here, come here, come here, come in.

The piece of coconut is put in the ritual tray (*lulag*) and the *rimata* says:

Simageremai maruru' satogaku. / Bara ekeu rusat manua atusabauat ekeu... / Pulu kabeiku, pulu sikeraake rusat manua, / sikeraake oringen, / sikeraake singu, / buka kabeiku, / buka matamai purimanua, / pulunangan leleggu...

Our simagere of my children. / Wind from the sky, you have already been diverted... / I have ten hands, ten hands that protect from the wind from the sky, / that protect from diseases, / that prevent from flu, / [he raises his open hands] / open my hands, / open our eyes to life, / [he moves his hands down over the lulag] the noise of thunder is terrifying...

40. *Teteumai simalose/simalolose*: it is a gentle and polite expression used to call the ancestors. Literally it means “our dead grand-fathers/mothers.” They are also called *saukkui* (fathers). Caissutti states that the ancestors are also called *sabulungan*, which can be translated as “those who receive the offerings.” This term gives its name to the traditional religion in Mentawai: *arat sabulungan*. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 28, 30.

41. *Aggaret* is the offering made of a small piece of coconut flesh.

The *rimata* takes the *aggaret* in his hands and he elevates it towards the sun, while saying:

*Ia leu kusaksake nia aggaret mai satogakku ka matat sulu / sipabailiu tubuna.⁴²
/ Kai le' ipabailiu tubuna purimanua, / kai le' ipabailiu tubuna ka babaja', ka
kukuilu. / Ai le' ka leleu elagat situlolok; / kai le' tulolok purimanua, / ai leu
kara'ra'na / bebeget sigora bagana: / kai le' pagora baga sirimanua, / kai le' magora
baga ka kukuilu, ka leleubat. / Gorosot ka buluk gori-gori: / kai le' magori baga
purimanua. / Konan peile' kaini' simageremai satogaku, / ba' ei ka rusat manua, /
ba' ei ka ngangat singu, kokoklo. / Konan, konan, konan, guru'... / ia nen kuparu-
ruake aggaretmai satogaku ka kupkupna purimanua... konan peile' kaini', konan,
konan... doroi kap!*

*Now I elevate this aggaret of my children to the sun / which does not see an end.
/ May we be given perpetual life [hope of perpetual posterity], / let us get to old
age / till we are stooped over. / There are the tall elagat trees; / may we live long [as
long as they are tall], / growing together / the rattan are happy: / may we be happy
in life, / may we be happy till we are stooped over, till we are white-haired. / Go
down to the gori-gori leaves⁴³: / may we be happy in life. / Come here, simagere of
my children, / do not go to the wind from the sky / [acting as though indicating
some far places] do not go to the spirit of flu and cough. / Come here, come here,
come here, come in... / here I gather the aggaret of my children in the embrace of
life... / come here, come here, come here... / receive it!*

Then the *lulag* (ritual tray) is reversed by the *rimata*, resulting in his head being positioned towards the *sikamuri*, who sits in the back of the room (*batuma*). Then the *sikamuri* answers:

*Ngemet! / Baja' ta' borotta... ta' borotta ka aggaretta, / murimanua le' sita ka
babaja', ka kukuilu...*

*I receive it. Father, we are pure... we are pure in front of our aggaret, / may we live
until old age, until we are stooped over...*

The *sikebbukat uma* says:

Iangan sule', / anan ka tubum purimanua ka babaja', ka kukuilu, ka kalabai.

42. *Ibailiu tubuna*: means “eternal;” literally means “it recreates itself” (by rising every day). It is the symbol of eternal life, and so it gives hope of perpetual posterity.

43. *Gori-gori* leaves are believed to provide a good mood, happiness.

So be it, my child, / to you is granted life to old age, till you are stooped over, till your wives become old.

Before sharing the *aggaret* with people attending the ceremony, the *sikebbukat uma* “plants” (*urepmake*) a little piece of coconut flesh by elevating it close to the bamboo container of the *bakkat katsaila*,⁴⁴ while saying:

Urepamake peile’ aggaretmai satogaku / ka bakkat arigi ta’ipageugebet, / kai le ta’ ipageugeu rusat manua satogaku. / Gau’ ngangamai satogaku sipuuma, / kai le’ ta’ ipageugeu rusat manua, / kai le’ ta’ ipageugeu bolot laggai, / kai le’ ta’ ipageugeu singu.

I insert the aggaret of my children / on the pole that does not shake, / my children are not shaken by the wind of the sky. / Although the voices of the uma’s children are so noisy, / may the wind from the sky not harm us, / may epidemics not hurt us, / may we not be disturbed by flu.

Then, the *sikamuri* hits the gong four times, marking the end of the *aggaret* stage. The *aggaret* is then distributed to all the attendants. The *rimata* and the *sikamuri* share it with their wives who, in turn, give it to their children and the other participants.⁴⁵ It is worth noticing that, according to Reeves, the characteristic of the *aggaret toiten* is that this stage is based on the use of the ritual *lulag* (tray). He also notes that the coconut is offered both to the *katsaila* and to the ancestors (*teteumai simalose*).⁴⁶

Lia Gou’gou’

At this point, a new segment of the *puliaijat* begins. A young member of the *uma* hands over a chicken (*gou’gou’*). The man says to the *rimata*, “*doroi pei lauru simaeru*” which means “receive the favourable entrails” (for reading the omens). At his words, the *rimata* answers “*ngemet!*” (I receive it!). Then the drums are played. The *sikebbukat uma* goes to the *bakkat katsaila* and elevates the chicken towards it several times, caressing it with the chicken’s tail. The *rimata* pronounces the following ritual phrases:

Baja’ sateteuta sene’, / sipumone sene’... / sipuoni pumaijat patadde kap / tubumui

44. According to Reeves the small piece of coconut offered to the *katsaila* is put in a bamboo container hanging close by the *bakkat katsaila*. See G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 39.

45. According to the testimony of Lomoi Samalinggai of Muara Siberut, the *aggaret toiten* is considered sacred—like the Eucharist for the Catholics, he says. If a piece of coconut falls on the floor people are not allowed to pick it up with their hands. Instead, it must be taken and eaten directly with one’s mouth while kneeling down on the floor (Lomoi Samalinggai, personal communication, Muara Siberut, 5 February, 2017).

46. See Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 38.

*saimatei noiga*⁴⁷ *anai ita mulilia...* / *Saukkuimai, sapunuteteumai / kap ka sita sipuoni Saurei, / anai ita mulilia, / anai tarotnake tubutta goiso.*

Ancestors of this place, / you who have your fields here [who dwelt here before us] / all of you departed, gather here, / we are celebrating lia... / Our fathers, our ancestors / come to us, you who are called Saurei [Saurei is the name of the clan] / we are celebrating lia, / we are strengthening ourselves.

This segment is peculiar because the *rimata* does not only summon his own ancestors, but also those departed who had dwelt in the current location of the *uma* before the Saurei moved there and built their communal house—those who, in fact, are other clans' forefathers but despite that, are keen to join the *puliaijat* and deliver their blessing to the *uma*.⁴⁸

While elevating the chicken towards to the *bakkat katsaila* and caressing with the chicken's tail the pole on which the *katsaila* is hanging, the *sikebbukat uma* says:

Liap kuake, kina bakkat katsaila mai, / gou'gou' sipakekera sikeraake rusat manua, / siagai patok siagai ulau. / Teitei gou'gou', ateiteiat rusat manua,⁴⁹ / atukurukat simakatai tiboat, / atukurukat simakatai nganga. / Liap kuake' kekeu, / ekeu ta ipageugeu rusa manua, / ekeu ta' ipageugeu bolo laggai.

We are performing lia, spirit of our bakkat katsaila, / the chicken that diverts, / that diverts the wind from the sky, / the chicken that knows the dawn and the light [of the morning]. / Tail of the chicken, the wind from the sky is cast back [as is the tail of the chicken], / the foul-mouthed are no more, / malicious words⁵⁰ are no more. / I offer the lia to you, / you that are not hurt by the wind from the sky, / you that are not hurt by the epidemics.

Then the *rimata* begins turning counter clockwise, still keeping the chicken in his hands. In this way, he begins caressing the bodies of the attendants with the chicken tail, while saying:

47. *Saimatei noiga*: another polite expression for calling the ancestors.

48. It seems to me that this is a clear indication that the ancestors of other clans are not necessarily regarded as evil spirits (*sanitu*), unlike what is argued by Reeves and Hammons. On the contrary, they are summoned as benevolent actors, keen to deliver their blessing in the *puliaijat*. See footnote 36.

49. Likewise the leaves operate according to the meaning of their names (e.g. *aileppet* cools down), also the tail of the chicken operates according to its characteristic: as it is positioned in the back of the chicken, the tail has the power of casting back evil.

50. "*Simakatai tiboat*" and "*simakatai nganga*" may be translated as "foul mouthed" and "malicious words," that could refer to other people's malevolence. Nevertheless, these expressions mainly refer to bad deeds done by evil spirits (Juliasman Satoko, personal communication, Muara Siberut, 23 May, 2017).

*Liara*⁵¹ satogaku, / teitei gou'gou' ateiteiat rusat manua, / ateiteiat simagolu baga
/ ateiteiat simakatai bat nganga / ...liamai satogakku, saukkuimai, sasarainamai.

*It is the lia of my children, / the tail of the chicken has sent back the wind from the
sky, / has sent back anger, / has sent back the bad words / ...the lia of my children,
of fathers and brothers.*

Addressing the sun and elevating the chicken towards it on the veranda the *rimata* says:

*Ia ne' kubelake ne' liamai satogakku / ka matat sulu sipabailiu tubuna, / kai leu
ipabailiu tubuna purimanua, / kai leu ipabailiu tubuna ka babaja' / ka nangka'
tubu, masura' ekeu. / Siagai ulau.*

*I expose the lia of my children / to the sun that does not see end / may our lives
have no end, / may we regenerate ourselves till old age / with a light body [free
from burdens, illnesses], thank you. / You who know the light.*

While caressing his own chest with the feathers of the chicken's tail, he says:

*Guru' purimanua. / Liaku ne' ka kinandekatnia, / ai pa kinandekat purimanua,
ka nangka' tubu, / ka kukuilu, ka babaja'. / Konan, konan, konan. Gorosot!*

*Life, come in! / This lia is also for me, / may I live a long life, as the last one [on
the list of the blessed], with a light body, / until I am stooped over, till I get to old
age. / Come here, come here, come here. Go down!*

Then the *rimata* squats down and says:

*Ekeu purimanu' masura' ekeu, / amulia kai akurotnake kai tubumai / akugalai
kai sosokmai masura' ekeu, / reuga'ake sanitu, / reuga'ake pagouluat / reuga'ake
agak, / reuga'ake rusat manua. / Lepana le' nureuga'ake oringen, / nureuga'ake
aga' ka tubumai satogaku masura ekeu satogaku, / nukut peile' lauru simaeru
sikeraake rusat manua, / sikeraake bolot laggai.*

*We thank you chicken, / we are celebrating lia, we are already strong / we have
already been sprinkled with water, we thank you / keep away sanitu [evil spirits],
/ keep away anger, / keep away threats, / keep away the wind of the sky. / Then,
keep away illnesses, / keep away threats from my children, we thank you, / make*

51. *Liara*: literally "their *lia*." The *rimata* means to solicit blessing also for those members who are not attending the ceremony.

a favourable lauru that may protect from the wind of the sky, / that may protect from epidemics.

At this point, the chicken is suddenly pushed downward, its beak positioned so as to pierce something.⁵² This action may symbolize that the chicken is attacking all diseases and threats.

The *rimata* hands over the chicken to an unmarried member of the *uma* who breaks its neck (it is in fact forbidden for married men to kill during the *puliaijat*.) The chicken's intestinal membrane (*lauru*) is examined to see the configuration of its spots (*salo*) for the omens.⁵³

Then, another chicken is handed over to the *rimata*, who offers it, hoping to obtain benevolence from the spirits of the animals of the forest. He says:

Lia nene' kuteleiake ne', / liara satogaku, gou'gou' sipakekera, / sikeraake oringen, / sikeraake bolot laggai, singu, koklo. / Lepa nuareuake oringen, singu, koklo, bolo laggai, masura' ekeu, / nuala' peile' matat ibamai simatei ketcat, / sipurere, sibakbak sagai, sipuubat paluga ka keru... / Nuala' le matania boro... boro pat.

I reserve this offering [for you], / the lia of my children, chicken that protects, / that protects from diseases, / that protects from epidemics, flu, and cough. / We thank you for having distanced illnesses, flu, cough, epidemics, / and then receive the offering of forest meat, / the deer, the big wild boar, the big turtle of the deep [sea] / Receive them...

This chicken also is suddenly moved downwards as if to pierce something.

Irik and the Communal Meal

After this, a new segment of the *puliaijat* takes place. All the *uma* members go out to prepare the animals to be slaughtered. Before the slaughter, the pigs are “cooled” by being caressed with *aileppet* leaves, while ritual phrases are uttered to convince the spirits of the animals that they are going to be sacrificed for a good reason, that is, for the celebration of the *puliaijat*. Furthermore, they are requested to deliver good omens and to protect the clan from diseases. They are also asked to grant new pigs to the clan so that it will not be lacking meat in the future.⁵⁴

The pork is divided in exactly equal portions for each family, the *otcai*. The division of

52. See S. Coronese, *Una religione che muore*, op. cit., 132–33.

53. See G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for Preventing. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 40. As well as the chicken in the former segment, pigs are also slaughtered by unmarried men, since to kill animals is taboo for married men during the *puliaijat*. See F. Abis, *Studio sulla benedizione liturgica nell'ambito dell'iniziazione tribale presso il popolo delle Mentawai (Indonesia)*, op. cit., 45.

54. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 160.

the meat, therefore, is done very carefully under the control of several people. Then the meat is cooked for the common meal. When the process of cooking has come to an end, the *irik* (eating) segment begins.

One important element in this stage is the *subbet*, that is, dumplings made of mashed *taro* and grated coconuts. These dumplings are a common dish in Mentawai, and they are usually spherical. The *subbet* used for the *irik* segment are in fact spherical, whilst those prepared for the communal meal at the end of the celebration of *pulijajat* must be elongated. Moreover, the amount of the spherical *subbet* for the *irik* corresponds exactly to the number of the families within the clan.⁵⁵ The *rimata* opens the bamboo container and puts a pinch of liver already cooked in bamboo on top of each dumpling of *taro* and coconuts. Then he pronounces the following phrases in order to ask blessing on the members of the *uma*, while both gong and drums begin sounding:

Ai... ko ka kap irikmui sateteu./ Iriknu kuake', / subuknu kuake' kina katsailamai ekeu. / Niniknia,... iringan, kai le' iriringi, / kai le' iniknik rusat manua, / kai le' iniknik bolo. / Kekeu kuake' subuknu kina umangku ekeu, / gau' ngangamai satogakku sipuuma, / gau' nganga mai sarainangku sipuuma, / kai le' iniknik rusat manua, / kai le' iniknik, / kai le' maangka baga. / Konan peile' kaini'... Konan... konan... konan... Guru'. Amaruruat simageremai satogaku, / irik mai satogaku, ia ne' kusaksakake. Satogaku panabau... / kai Muenung... rusat manua, paorak-orak, singu, oringen, atusabuat ekeu. / Bara kap sanitu, bara kap sipuailoggou / atuituiat kap bara kap, / bara kap simatutu baga amusabuat kap. Kai le' satogaku maruru' sené. / Ia ne' kusasakake, irik mai satogaku / ne' ka matat sulu sipabailiu tubuna, / kai le' mabailiu tubuna purimanua. / Anai leu ka ottoinia ka leleu elagat situlolok; / kai le' tulolok purimanua. / Anai leu kararana bebeget sigora bagana: / kai leu magora baga purimanua. / Gorosot ka bakkatnu, / gori-gori kai le' magori baga purimanua. / Konan peile' kaini' simageremai satogaku, anai kaini' irikta, subukta, konan... konan... konan... guru'... guru'.

Ai... Here is your irik, ancestors. / This irik of yours I give, / I feed you, spirit of our katsaila. / This liver, I offer, / may it keep away the wind from the sky, / may it keep away epidemics. / I feed you, spirit of my uma, / let the noisy voices of my children of the uma be heard, / the noise of the voices of the members of the uma, / may it keep away the wind from the sky, / may it keep it away. / Come here... come here... come here... come here... come here... come in. After the simagere of my children have already gathered, / I elevate the irik of my children. / [moving his hands onwards, acting as he is inviting to leave] my children go beyond... / walk away... wind from the sky, everything that hurts, flu, diseases, all of you have been overtaken. / [opening his arms in the act of sending away] You [my children] have diverted

55. Marius Saurei, personal communication, 20 June, 2017. See also G. Reeves, "Pulijajat for Preventing. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 46–7.

sanitu, / have diverted scary things [the evil spirits], / you have sent them away, you have diverted them / you have diverted the envious, you have overtaken them. [the rimata acts as if to summon] May my children gather here. / [Act of offering upwards] I elevate the irik of my children to the sun, that does not see end, / may we be granted perpetual progeny. / There are the tall elagat trees on the top of the hills, / may we be granted long life [long as the trees are tall]. / There are the rattan growing all together in happiness, / may our life be happy. / Down to bottom, / leaves of gori-gori, may life be full of happiness. / Come here, simagere of my children, here is our irik, our meal, come here... come here... come in, come in.

The *sikamuri*, the son sitting at the back of the *batuma*, says:

Baja', ta' borotta, / ta' borotta ka irikta, purimanua le' ka sita, / ka babaja', ka kukuilu, ka leleubat.

Father, we are pure, / we are pure in front of our irik, / may we live / till we get old, till we are stooped over, till we become white-haired.

Then the *sikebbukat uma* answers:

Iangan sule', / purimanua le' ka sita kababaja', ka kukuilu, ka leleubat.

So be it, my child, / may we live to old age, till we are stooped over, till we become white-haired.

The gong and drums are played while the *sikebbukat uma* says: “*doroi pei kap irik ta ale*,” which means “receive all of you, my younger brothers, our *irik*.” They answer: “*ngemet!*” “we receive it.”

After receiving *irik*, people are sprinkled with water in the *nenenei* segment. While so doing, the *sikebbukat uma* says:

Rau'nu kuake' kekeu kina irik, / rau' mai satogaku simanene, tai malau'lau', / siparegeina, kai le' iparegei tubuna purimanua, / kai le' manene tubu, / kai le' maangka бага.

I sprinkle water over you, spirit of the irik / our fresh sprinkling of my children, may you not be weak, / siparegei [a kind of leaf], may it strengthen life, may it refresh, / may it give happiness.

The *rimata* elevates a pinch of *irik* taken from the *subbet* close to the bamboo container of the *bakkat katsaila*.⁵⁶ Then he continues, saying:

Ia le' kuurepmake irikmai satogaku ka bakkat arigi ta'ipageugebet, / kai le ta' ipageugeu rusat manua satogaku sipugau'gau'. / Gau' ngangamai sipuuma satogaku, / kai le' ta' ipageugeu rusat manua. / Irik, silimennia kai le' isilimen, / kai le' manene tubu, / kai le' maleppet tubu, purimanua satogakku / kai le' maangka бага sipuuma. / Kai sipuuma / kai sipuoni Saurei / kai sene. / Kuurepmake irikmai satogakku. / Ta' igeugeu kai rusat manua teret buru-buru / kai le' maangka бага.

I put the irik of my children on the main pole that does not shake, / may my noisy children not be shaken by the wind from the sky. / The noisy voices of my children of the uma, / may they not be disturbed by the wind from the sky. / Irik, may this portion refresh us, / may it give freshness, / may it give fresh bodies, and life to my children / may it give happiness to the members of the uma. / The members of this uma / those who are called Saurei / us here. / I insert the irik of my children. / The wind from the sky will never hurt us anymore, / may we be happy.

Then the *rimata* goes out of the *batuma* and gives the *irik* to each head of family; they will give it to their wives who, in turn, will share it with their children.

After that, the whole clan joins in the communal meal. Every family eats its portion of meat. At last, after the communal meal has come to an end, the *sikebbukat* and his wife can also eat meat, dumplings, and *sagu* in the *batuma*. The meal of the *rimata* and his wife is called *kokoman sikebbukat*.⁵⁷

Finally, all the *uma* members receive the blessing of the *rimata* through the sprinkling of water (*nenenei*). The *rimata* says:

Kai le' satogakku, mamuine purimanua.

May my children be united.

56. According to Reeves, the pinch of *irik* is put inside a bamboo container positioned next to the *bakkat katsaila*. See G. Reeves, "Pulijajat for Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 48.

57. According to Reeves, in several clans in the Rereket area, another segment occurs between the communal meal and the meal of the *rimata*. This stage, called *pusikebbukat*, is meant to create a substitute for the *rimata*. The *rimata* offers pinches of meat to the *katsaila*. The *simagere* of the clan members are summoned and the *rimata* utters ritual phrases. The event focuses on the relationship between the *rimata* and his elder son, the one who will take over the *rimata*'s function in the future, aiming at perpetuating the clan. Reeves states: "This event is the most private and perhaps, therefore, the most important in relation to the existential perpetuation of the *suku* or *uma* faction and its reproduction as distinct from all other *suku*." This segment may be incorporated within the *irik* in the Saurei version of the *pulijajat*. See G. Reeves, "Pulijajat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 50–3.

Ritual Hunt

The following morning, the *rimata*, the *sikamuri* and other men leave the *uma* heading into the forest after having had a meal in the *tengauma* (the room in the middle of the *uma*). They go to the woods for the ritual hunt (*murourou*)⁵⁸ which closes the *puliaijat*.

As we have seen above, some ritual words asking the favour of the spirits of the forest meat (*ketcat matei ketcat*) were already uttered during the previous phases of *puliaijat*, but some additional rituals are performed the night before leaving, in order to receive the benevolence of the spirits dwelling in the woods. It is believed that the “forest meat” are the spirits’ domesticated animals, so that deer are their pigs and monkeys their chickens. These words are pronounced not in front of the *katsaila*, but on the veranda, where the skulls of former prey are preserved, hanging on a beam or a wall:⁵⁹ “The *simagere* of these animals are asked to appeal to the *simagere* of their living relatives to allow themselves to be killed in the hunt.”⁶⁰ Hence, good game is a gift due to the benevolence of the spirits keen to share their meat with humans. At the same time, it evidences the fact that the *taikaleleu* (spirits of the woods) have appreciated how the *puliaijat* has been performed.⁶¹ It is for this reason that the Mentawaians are certain about the results of the hunt: if the rituals are properly done, it is beyond doubt that the hunt will be successful.

The hunted prey are deer, wild-boars, or big turtles (for those *uma* that are close to the sea). If the hunt is successful, then the men go back to the *uma* the same day; otherwise they return the following day. Once the prey has been shot, the hunters cut and leave behind its left ear to be offered to the spirits of the woods (*taikaleleu*). Shefold reports a mythological narrative that explains the reason for this offering.

After having shot a magnificent deer provided by a spirit, the man asks:

“What shall we do, grandfather [the spirit]? Shall we share the meat?” “So be it.” They now singed the deer... and then... cut up the meat. The head they laid in a wooden trough. And now the spirit put his foot against the deer’s ear. His left ear. “Come now, divide the meat into two halves, my grandson [the man].” And he divided up the meat... into exactly equal pieces. But the spirit said: “What is this, my grandson? That is not very much meat for us, for your grandparents. You have given us only a little, we have come off worse.” “No grandfather, the shares are exactly equal,” answered the man. [Then] the spirit tapped his foot against the deer’s left ear... Now the man noticed the spirit’s foot on the deer’s ear, and said to himself: “What ever is he trying to convey? Maybe he’s trying to

58. “*Murourou*” means “using bow (and arrows).” Reeves calls the ritual hunt *uroro*. See “*Puliaijat* for Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 54.

59. On the veranda of each *uma*, the hanging skulls facing the back of the house are those of the domesticated pigs, whilst those facing the entrance of the house are those of the animals hunted in the forest.

60. C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 70.

61. See R. Shefold, “Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies,” op. cit., 366.

indicate that he would like to have the meat of the ear for himself?” He tried this out, and... cut off the deer’s ear. “Yes indeed, my grandson, that is the meat we want! If you ever again shoot a deer, or a wild-boar, or a Simakobu monkey, or indeed any kind of game, then give us, your grandparents, its ear as our meat.”⁶²

This mythological narrative explains that, through offering the left ear of the prey, the humans share food with the spirits who have allowed their animal to be shot. Since the spiritual world is considered to be the reversal of the material one, then the ear of the deer represents a large amount of meat in the spirits’ eyes: from their point of view, the small ear equals half of the whole body of the prey.

If the hunt turns out to be unsuccessful, then “substitute meat,” that is, raised pigs belonging to *uma* members, are slaughtered and cooked. The meat has to be offered to the *katsaila* in a way similar to that of the *irik* stage. “The important thing is for the *bakkat katsaila* to have ‘eaten’ meat. This brings the *puliaijat* to an end.”⁶³ Then, after having been assured of the benevolence of the whole spiritual world, both within the clan and outside in the wilderness, the *puliaijat* can be considered completed.

The closure of the ritual consists of offering new forest meat to the spirits of *katsaila* and the offering of the *juritet* (a drink made of coconut milk). The final ritual is the request for a blessing on daily work, symbolized by the blessing of grass.

While offering the new forest meat, which is called *iba sibau* (new meat), the *rimata* utters the following words:

*Buluat kuake’ kekeu kina punen mai kina lalep mai / kina umamai, sege’ nuan
mai / amupunen kai sege’ nuan, / nukop kai iba, simasoilo, / mukop kai ka lalep
sirimanua bagei... / Sege’ nuan.*

*Here is my offering, spirit of our punen [feast], / spirits of our houses, / spirit of
our uma, it is over / our punen has come to an end, / we eat new meat [forest
meat] that must be consumed in one day / we eat in other people’s houses⁶⁴... /
[The punen] is over.*

Then, while offering the drink called *juritet*, the *rimata* says:

62. Reported by C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 41–2. See also R. Shefold, “Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies,” op. cit., 371.

63. G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 55.

64. We eat in other people’s houses: the *rimata* asks blessings for when one pays a visit to other people and becomes their guest. According to Martinus Satoleuru the expression could also mean that since the *puliaijat* is over, then people will have meals in their own houses (“other people’s houses”) and not anymore in the communal *uma* (Marinus Satoleuru, personal communication, Muara Siberut, 9 May, 2017). In any case, these words aim at informing the spirits of the *uma* that its members are about to leave and go back to normal life with all the related daily activities.

Buluat kuake' kekeu kina uma, / kina punen mai, / kina lalep mai... / amupunen kai sege' nuan... / Mujurutet kai... / mukop kai ka umat sirimanua... / mukop kai roti... / Sege' nuan.

Here is my offering, spirit of the uma, / spirit of our punen, / spirits of our houses... / our punen is over... / We drink jurutet... / we eat in other people's houses... / we eat our food [bread]... / It is over.

Some grass and withered flowers are put in a plate. Water is poured on it. The *rimata* utters the following words:

Rau' mai satogaku / mukarajo kai / mei kai ka mone... / mei kai pasigaba bulagat / sege' nuan kina punen / ta' anai sisaila kai.

I sprinkle my children / our daily work / our work in our fields / our quest for livelihood [money].⁶⁵ / It is over, spirit of the punen / may we be free from any obstacle.

Then the *puliaijat* has come to an end.

SEEKING RECIPROCITY

After having described the *puliaijat*, and in particular the ritual words pronounced during the celebration, let us inquire about its meaning and purpose. First, it must be made clear that the idea of feast in the traditional Mentawaiian context differs radically from the meaning which could be perceived in the modern—and particularly in the Western—world. In fact, the *puliaijat* can be considered a festival, but its ludic and entertaining dimensions, which are concretized in the joyful meeting of the *uma* members, the communal meal, dances, festive ornaments etc., has other spiritual purposes that must be not overlooked. Celebration in the Mentawaiian cultural context, is not merely the quest for happiness and amusement.

On the contrary, *puliaijat* always has a spiritual goal related to the spirits that inhabit the surrounding environment. For this reason the *uma's* embellishments, colourful clothes, flowers and beautiful accessories, as well as the ubiquitous *туру' laggai* (the traditional dance) performed at night, are more supportive rather than main elements of the *puliaijat*. At the same time, it would be wrong to consider the communal meals to be an expression of mere conviviality or culinary enjoyment. Likewise, the meaning of the ritual hunt goes far beyond the sportive performance or the demonstration of one's capability in capturing prey. In this regard, Reeves rightly disagrees with the translation of *puliaijat* by the Indonesian word "*pesta*," which means "party," "because it emphasizes too

65. Eating "bread" and quest for "money:" these expressions are obviously due to the influence of modernity.

much the festive, ‘party’-like aspects, obscuring the more vital dimensions of producing a harmonious and finally habitable cosmos.”⁶⁶

Hence, taking advantage, with some adjustments, of the interpretative framework offered by Shefold,⁶⁷ we can depict the *puliaijat* as a tool for restoring and stabilizing reciprocal relationships between three main actors, that is, human beings (the *uma* members or, in some cases, even members of different *uma*), the local spirits (ancestors and spirits locally present in the *uma* compound), and the autochthonous spirits of the surrounding forest.

Harmony among Human Beings

The first actors who receive benefits and blessings within the *puliaijat* are human beings. The *puliaijat* is a closed ceremony where only the *uma* members are normally admitted. This means that *puliaijat* has the meaning of strengthening the solidarity within the *uma*.⁶⁸ Through different kinds of *puliaijat* bride and groom are presented to the *katsaila*, a child becomes member of the *uma*, the mourning period for a departed person comes to an end, and so forth. Moreover, the *rimata* seeks the intercession of spiritual entities, be it the ancestors or positive energies belonging to ritual objects (leaves, food...), in order to strengthen life and receive protection for the clan’s members. The *rimata* acts as the communal father, who embodies the function of mediator between the protectors of the *uma* and his children, that is, the clan members. According to Reeves, the *bakkat katsaila*, as the main fetish of the *uma*, can be considered the main source from which the clan receives its own life. The clan lives, therefore, because of the blessing that flows down from the *katsaila*, which can be seen as an “embodiment of ‘life’” as well as the foundation (*bakkat*) of the whole *uma*.⁶⁹

Moreover, in his petitions, the *rimata* repeatedly asks the protectors of the *uma* to distance the members from all diseases and misfortunes. Protectors are solicited to divert the negative influences of *sanitu* (evil spirits), of the wind from the sky (seen as the source of illnesses), of harmful elements (sharp objects, lightning...). Besides asking for a spiritual shield against evil, however, the *rimata* also requests the intervention of all those other positive elements that can strengthen life. For this reason, during the *sogi katsaila*, leaves are asked to deliver their helpful powers to the *uma* members. Furthermore, the *rimata*

66. See G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., p. 58, footnote n. 5. Mircea Eliade says that in general archaic cultures do not acknowledge merely profane activities. All of them, whether it be hunting, fishing, agriculture, games, conflicts, sexuality, etc. have a sacred side.” M. Eliade, *Il Mito dell’Eterno Ritorno* (Bologna: Edizioni Borla, 1975), 47. My translation.

67. Shefold explains that the sacrifice within *puliaijat* reciprocates the blessings received from the ancestors. On the other hand, alliance with other clans is obtained through marriage, whilst reciprocation with autochthonous spirits of the wilderness is worked out by the ritual hunt. See R. Shefold, “Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies,” op. cit., 361–72.

68. See R. Shefold, *Mainan bagi Roh: Kebudayaan Mentawai*, op. cit., 136.

69. See G. Reeves, “Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure,” op. cit., 35.

also has the ability to call and gather all the vital spirits (*simagere*) of his members.⁷⁰ This is very important because it is the *simagere* that guarantees the life and health of each *uma* member. The *rimata* begs for many blessings, but the rather obsessive quest for health and long life seems to be a priority among other petitions. This is understandable in the Mentawaiian context, in which there is the total absence of modern health care, and so, becoming ill could easily result in death. The *puliaijat* also has the power to reinforce the fraternal ties within the clan. First of all, this dimension is concretized by the fact that all members of the clan gather together during the entire celebration. This was especially important in the past, as there were not real villages in Mentawai. Thus, nuclear families used to live isolated from each other, their houses scattered along the rivers, where they could cultivate the fields and raise pigs. *Puliaijat*, therefore, was the occasion for meeting with the other clan members, and so it was an important element of socialization within the Mentawaiian society. Moreover, in the *puliaijat* itself, the *rimata* utters ritual words in order to strengthen the communion of the clan. This is the case, for example, in the *aggaret toiten*, where the coconut is addressed as a communion giver.

Reeves points out that we can see different stages of the *puliaijat* where these bonds are specifically addressed, and through which the blessings are bestowed on those in concentric levels of proximity within the kinship, starting from the more intimate relationships and reaching out to all the clan members.⁷¹ The first stage is the *aggaret toiten*, in which the relationship between the *rimata* and his elder son, the *sikamuri*, who sits in front of him, becomes dominant. According to him, it seems that the *aggaret toiten* is meant to strengthen the bonds between different generations, between the generation of the *rimata* and his son, who in the future, will take over his function as the father of the entire clan. Also the *irik* and *pusikebbukat* focus on the relationships between the *rimata* and his closest children.⁷² Other segments, however, involve the entire clan, such as the *sogi katsaila*, where all the members are able to participate equally in the celebration because of the shared individual *katsaila* crafted by the *rimata*. Through the delivering of *taro* dumplings to every household head during the *irik*, the blessing is passed down from the *rimata* to all members of the families composing the clan. Other communal actions are the blessings sought by means of the chicken as well as the final meal.

Puliaijat may also have the function of tightening relationships among different clans. According to Shefold, especially in the past, relationships within Mentawaiian society were rather conflictual and unstable. Shefold argues that until the beginning of the

70. The rituals within the *puliaijat* have a reiterated pattern, namely the alternation between the *sikatai* (evil) phase, that is, casting away evil influences, and the *simaeru* (good) one, that is, attracting positive influences and soliciting their protection for the *uma*. This pattern is also visible in the ritual phrases' structure. See C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 61.

71. See G. Reeves, "Puliaijat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 56–7.

72. See footnote 57.

twentieth century even headhunting was a common tradition in Siberut.⁷³ It was aimed at showing personal bravery, but it could also become a means of revenge in the case of responding to the killing of one's sibling. In this regard, I myself heard the testimony of several elders who confirmed that in the past the relationships among different *uma* were clearly unfriendly and that people used to distrust and fear members of other clans.⁷⁴

Furthermore, envy and rivalry among different factions are also very common among the clans. If an *uma* succeeds in hunting extraordinary game, they communicate the news by use of tam-tam (*tuddukat*) with the peculiar *pako'* (rivalry) melody, in order to mock other clans. The *puliaijat*, therefore, also embodies the function of overcoming infighting and rivalry. One of the main tools for guaranteeing peace is the alliance between two clans produced by marriage,⁷⁵ which in fact is celebrated in the ritual context of the *puliaijat*. Another important example of conflict resolution through the *puliaijat* is the *paabanan*, that is, the ratification of peace between two conflicting clans.

This celebration, which follows complex negotiations between the two factions in order to determine the amount of sanctions to be payed (usually because of killings), can yield a stable and peaceful solution. After the celebration of *puliaijat*, the two clans consider themselves to be members of the same extended family, so that even marriages between their members are forbidden. The two counterparts have already forgiven each other, so that no one will be allowed to demand any further compensation for former delicts. Thus, peace has been definitively consolidated.⁷⁶

Harmony with the Uma's Spiritual Entities and with the Ancestors

The *rimata* addresses ritual phrases during the *puliaijat* to spiritual entities, which are

73. See R. Shefold, "Ambivalent Blessings: Head-Hunting on Siberut (Mentawai) in a Comparative Southeast Asian Perspective," *Anthropos*, Bd. 102/2: 479–94. Article available at <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389736>>. According to the author, headhunting was strongly forbidden by the police at the beginning of the twentieth century, but sporadic head-taking episodes may have occurred until recently. See C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut*, op. cit., 55, 78–89.

74. According to several people, infighting among clans is now much more attenuated because of the positive contribution of the Christian faith, especially with regard to its teaching on universal brotherhood.

75. As in other cultural *milieux*, marriages in Mentawai are always exogamous and therefore they represent a common way to establish alliances among different clans. See R. Shefold, "Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies," op. cit., 361.

76. One example of *paabanan* is the one that took place in Tiop and Rogdok, in the 1960s. Two clans, the Sabola' and Sakulo' were in conflict because of the killing of some of their members. As they were persuaded by Fr. Sandro Peccati, the two factions negotiated the peace and celebrated it with a magnificent *punen*. Some 40 pigs were sacrificed by each faction for the *puliaijat* that was successively celebrated both in Tiop and in Rogdok, bringing to an end the infighting that had lasted for generations. (Sandro Peccati, personal communication, 10 December, 2016.) In this regard, I have not found confirmation for Hammons's idea that after the *paabanan* the two clans commit themselves to continue exchanging gifts for generations in order to maintain peace. On the contrary, several testimonies say that once the *paabanan* has come to an end, then peace is definitively and unconditionally restored. If mutual help occurs, it is because the other *uma* is already considered to be part of the same extended family. See C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 45.

believed to be present in the *uma* during the celebration. They are of different kinds. Some are the so called “*kina*,” the inner spiritual energy pertaining to everything, both material and non-material. According to traditional beliefs, every object has its own *kina*.⁷⁷ The *rimata*, therefore, asks the various *kina* for their intercession in protecting from evil (*sikatai*) and granting their benefits (*simaeru*) for the good of the clan members: he summons and asks blessings from the *kina punen* (*kina* of the *puliaijat*), the *kina katsaila*, the *kina* of the communal house/clan (*uma*), the *kina* of the *irik*, etc. In other cases, although the word *kina* is not pronounced, the *rimata* begs several mediators to grant their specific help for the *uma*. This is the case with the leaves used during the *sogi katsaila* segment of the *puliaijat*, or the coconut in the *aggaret toiten*. Elsewhere, spiritual entities are called on using the word “*ketcat*” as is the case for the animals that will be hunted during the last segment of *puliaijat* (*ketcat sipurere*, the spirit of the deer; *ketcat simatei ketcat*, the spirits of the forest meat) or when the *rimata* prays to obtain longevity (*ketcat ka babaja*’), or life for his children (*ketcat purimanua*).

At the same time, the support of the ancestors, who are summoned up in the *uma* and who are called *teteumai simalose/simalolose* (our departed grandfathers and grandmothers) is also of vital importance. Their help is an indispensable condition for the good outcome of the *puliaijat*. Those who are appealed to are the genealogical forebearers.⁷⁸ They are the foundation of the identity and unity of the clan. Thus, they are asked to grant their blessing to the clan, by providing their protection. Shefold says: “There is no specific word for this ancestral protection; the image used by the people is that of the ancestors helping in attracting and strengthening the souls [*simagere*] of the living in order to prevent the souls from straying too far away and [to] keep them firmly bound to life.”⁷⁹

The ancestors are believed to listen to and to satisfy the *rimata*’s petitions, which are supposed to reciprocate their blessings. The inadequacy of the gift in return, nevertheless, cannot be avoided because, in fact, everything is owed to the ancestors. Hence, the bigger the blessing asked of them, the bigger should be the sacrifice given back. Shefold thinks that this asymmetry between the sacrifice of the living and the blessing of the dead is “often disguised by verbal eulogies exaggerating the value of the offering or by statements stressing the desire of the ancestors to receive them.”⁸⁰ Another explanation, however, can help to overcome the asymmetry. As we have seen above in the hunt stage, the proportion and the size of sacrificed food in the spiritual world are a reverse of those in the material world. Likewise, the pinches of food offered during the *aggaret toiten* and *irik* may probably be very valuable in the ancestors’ eyes, just as at the end of the hunt the offering of the left ear of the prey equals half of the prey in the eyes of the giver spirit.

In this regard, I would argue therefore that the sharing of food and the common

77. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiiana*, op. cit., 28.

78. See R. Shefold, “Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies,” op. cit., 363.

79. Ivi.

80. Ibid., 370.

meal embodies peculiar significance within the *puliaijat*. As is the case of the small ear offered in the hunt segment, the small pinches of coconut in the *aggaret toiten* and the ones offered during the *irik* can be seen as food shared by the human beings with both the ancestors and the *katsaila*: through these offerings, the ancestors and also the other spiritual entities in the *uma* receive their portion of food (*otcai*), and so they are invited to join—and enjoy—the common meal together with the living. Therefore, by means of food shared between the *uma* members and also with the spirits in the shape of offerings, the *puliaijat* embodies the function of summoning the living, their ancestors and all the other positive spiritual presences within the *uma*. All are finally gathered together in the communal meal to celebrate their alliance and to strengthen the unity of the whole (human and spiritual) *uma*.⁸¹

Harmony with the Surrounding Environment

The last element in the picture is the relationship between humankind and the spirits of the surrounding natural environment, that is, the forest (and the sea, for the clans living close to it). These spirits are called the *taikaleleu*, which means “those who dwell in the hills.” Mentawaiian people are well acquainted with the jungle where they go to hunt, and from which they get wood, fruit, leaves, and other needs. Creating a safe environment in the forest therefore becomes a must, as it is also a must within the communal house, the *uma*.

The clan restores the harmony with the spirits that inhabit the forest by means of the ritual hunt that occurs at the end of the *puliaijat*. Hence, this kind of hunt cannot be considered a merely profane activity, such as the demonstration of one’s ability to shoot the prey or the simple quest for forest meat. In fact, it becomes evident that, within the context of *puliaijat*, the hunt is meant to ask for and reciprocate the blessing bestowed by the spirits of the forest upon humans. This blessing concretely means the opportunity to continue doing work in the jungle with the permission and support of its spiritual inhabitants.

The killing of the prey is the tangible proof of the spirits’ benevolence, as they are believed to have handed it over as a gift to humans. Then, as we have seen above, once the prey has been killed, the hunters leave behind their offering (the left ear of the prey) to the *taikaleleu*. This offering has the meaning of sharing meat with them, and it symbolizes the communal meal between humans and the spirits that consolidates the harmonious relationship between the two.⁸² Thus, the ritual hunt is able to solicit and also to recipro-

81. As we have seen above, the former inhabitants of the current location of the *uma* are also involved in the celebration. They are called in the *irik* segment of the *puliaijat* ‘*baja’ sateteuta sipumone sene*, “our forefathers who have their fields here” (the current location of the *uma*). Thus, although they belong to other clans, the *rimata* expects them to grant their blessing to his *uma*.

82. Shefold argues that in the past headhunting was an extreme way for securing the blessing of the spirits of the forest along with hunting animals. See R. Shefold, “Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies,” op. cit., 370–71 and “Ambivalent Blessings: Head-Hunting on Siberut (Mentawai) in a

cate the blessing of the forest spirits, the (*taikaleleu*), once the blessing of the ancestors has already been obtained in the previous segments of the *puliaijat*.

Finally, Shefold highlights a peculiar affinity that occurs between the ancestors, who are so important in the former phases of *puliaijat*, and the spirits of the woods (*sakaleleu* or *taikaleleu*) that dominate the scenes of the last segment, the hunt. To explain this connection, Shefold gives an account of a myth that depicts the primordial separation between the spiritual and material worlds.

In primeval times, before there was any death, the present spirits of the forest and humans were one. The earth was in danger of becoming overcrowded, and so the people split up into two parties; one party became today's mortals, the other withdrew into the forest and created its own, other-worldly, "culture of the beyond" behind the apparent wilderness. These latter spirits are feared, being more remote from people, who avoid explicitly addressing them by their proper name[s] in ritual invocations. However... we have reason to believe that it is specifically the forest spirits who are the agents people want to reach at the end of the *puliaijat*.⁸³

The ancestors and the spirits of the woods used to live in the same world in primordial times and then they separated, the spirits hid themselves in the spiritual world. As this mythological narrative shows that ancestors and spirits were living together before their separation, this provides indications of the existence of a tight continuity between the rituals performed within the *uma* that involve the ancestors, and the hunt that is related to the autochthonous spirits of the forest. For this reason, the hunt accomplishes the purpose of securing the benevolence of the spirits altogether, extending the safe habitable environment for the members of the clan beyond the boundaries of the *uma* up to the surrounding wilderness.

RESTORING THE HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

Several scholars have tried to offer interpretative frameworks for the *puliaijat*. Reimar Shefold, who has studied in depth the culture of the Sakuddei clan since the 1960s, considers three streams of blessing granted to humans: the blessing that originates in the wife-giver, the one from the ancestors and the one from the autochthonous spirits of the forest. As he acknowledges the difficulty in overcoming rivalry and infighting between different *uma*, Shefold⁸⁴ argues that marriage is the main means for building durable alliances between clans. He also sees the *puliaijat* and its final segment, that is, the ritual

Comparative Southeast Asian Perspective," op. cit., 491.

83. R. Shefold, "Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies," op. cit., 364.

84. Ibid., 360-71.

hunt, to be spiritual tools that enable humans to reciprocate the benefits delivered by the ancestors and the spirits of the forest. According to him, the *puliiijat* represents a way to respond to the beneficial flow of blessing granted by the ancestors, and, the ritual hunt represents a way to respond to the blessings from the autochthonous spirits dwelling in the jungle.

Hammons starts from the concept of mimetic rivalry that is rooted in René Girard's theory presented in his book *Violence and the Sacred*,⁸⁵ arguing that the rivalry among people due to the desire for the same object (mimesis) becomes the basic relational pattern among human beings and also between them and the spiritual world. Therefore, rivalry commonly occurs between clans, but also between human beings and the spirits. According to the author, gift exchange—which in Girard's theory is embodied by the scapegoat—is able to mitigate rivalry and shape a balanced reciprocity that may prevent violence among the clans. This is concretely achieved through reciprocal gifts exchanged between two *uma* that were previously in conflict.⁸⁶ At the same time, sacrificing to the spirits in the context of *puliiijat* can re-establish a balanced reciprocity among humans and spirits.⁸⁷ The *puliiijat*, therefore, embodies the significance of regenerating a balanced harmony among humans and spirits that cures the asymmetric relationship between the two.

Finally, Reeves, who conducted his fieldwork in the Rereket area in 1992–93, emphasizes the fact that *puliiijat* is capable of producing habitable spaces where people can live. The *puliiijat* yields a habitable space within the clan by consolidating the relationship between the *rimata* and his successor (*sikamuri*), as well as with the members of the entire clan, starting from the adults and including the children. Furthermore, the *puliiijat* provides the “activation” of the positive spiritual powers within the *uma* by means of the

85. R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. by P. Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

86. I disagree with Hammons' idea that after the ratification of peace between two clans, the two counterparts are obliged to perpetuate the gift exchange for generations in order to maintain harmony. On the contrary, the *paabanan* has the power of definitively stopping infighting for the time being. See C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., 45.

87. Hammons explains the mimetic rivalry and the exchange of gifts as follows: “Drawing on Rene [sic] Girard's theory of violence and the sacred, reciprocity is reconceptualized as a mimetic practice in which self is defined in relation to other through the exchange of an object that has no value outside of the relation it defines. By way of the object, reciprocity creates or recognizes a similarity between self and other that can mitigate mimetic rivalry or generate it, depending on the exchange. If mimetic rivalry can result in violence, then exchange can be seen as the deferral of violence, the exchange of objects instead of bodies or heads. This view of exchange is more or less explicit in the myth, ritual, and taboo of the indigenous religion, a blend of animism, ancestor worship, and shamanism, but it is so fundamental to Sakaliou's [the clan that hosted Hammons during his two years fieldwork in Siberut] perspective that it not only shapes their relations with other clans, it also shapes their relations with non-indigenous people.” C. S. Hammons, *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia*, op. cit., ix. A synthetic explanation of Girard's theory on the mitigation of violence achieved by religious sacrifices can be found in J. Sacks, *Not in God's Name. Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), 74–6.

ritual phrases and gestures during the celebration. Consequently, the *puliaisjat* reaches its goal, that is, the recreation of a habitable cosmos, both material and spiritual, where human beings can live safely and healthily.⁸⁸

Although with different emphasis, all these insights help us to better understand the meaning of the *puliaisjat*. All of them agree in seeing the *puliaisjat* as the main tool for recreating positive and balanced relationships with the ancestors by means of rituals, offerings, and ritual phrases. The ritual hunt achieves the same goal with the spirits dwelling in the forest surrounding the *uma*. This gives to humans a habitable cosmos in which they can live safely. Nevertheless, it seems to me, that both Shefold and Hammons tend to somewhat minimize the role of *puliaisjat* in regenerating relationships among human beings (within the clan and among different clans). For Shefold this capability is entrusted to marriage as an alliance between clans, and for Hammons, to gift exchange in order to mitigate rivalry, but in both cases there is no explicit reference to *puliaisjat*. Reeves, on the other hand, highlights the fact that *puliaisjat* is also an efficient means for regenerating communion among humans, in particular within the clan's members. Furthermore, the *puliaisjat* is also able to create positive bonds among different clans. This is the case of marriage (*pangurei*) and also the case of the ratification of peace between two conflicting clans (*paabanan*), both of which occur in the context of *puliaisjat*. So we can draw the conclusion that *puliaisjat* is able to regenerate the harmony with the world of beyond (the spirits), but it is also an important tool for consolidating solidarity among people.

Furthermore, it is also interesting to note some other characteristics of the *puliaisjat*, the first of which is a kind of deterministic belief about the effectiveness of the sacrifice. Mentawaians believe that if the *puliaisjat* is done properly, then the blessing of the spirits is assured. On the other hand, if the rituals are not well performed or not performed at all, then the spirits will not be willing to help, or they will even act malevolently. The offerings given to the spirits, thus have the power to secure their benevolence. The people can acknowledge the favour of the spirits through the omens resulting from the examination of chicken entrails (*lauru*) and the hearts of pigs (*teinung*). Likewise, they are convinced that if the *puliaisjat* is performed correctly, then the ritual hunt will definitely be successful. Hence, we can draw the conclusion that Mentawain people think that *puliaisjat* has, to a certain extent, the power of controlling the benefits of the spirits in a sort of spiritual trading—that is very close to a magical understanding of sacrifice—⁸⁹ in which the rituals, if correctly performed, will surely be reciprocated with the needed blessings. For the same reason, if misfortune occurs, then the people immediately understand that they did something wrong during the celebration or that they have violated some taboos.

Furthermore, I would argue that the idea of the communal meal is of vital importance as a medium for ratifying the restored harmony between the counterparts in the context

88. See G. Reeves, "Puliaisjat for the Prevention. Pabete for the Cure," op. cit., 56–7.

89. Offering to the spirits are often called "*panakiat*" that means "buying." See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 131, 133, 156.

of the celebration. The communal meal can take different shapes. People eat together during the *pulijajat* as a sign of solidarity. The portions of pork (*otcai*) for each family are carefully and equally shared to symbolize the communion among those who attend.

At the same time, the *rimata* “gives food” (the offerings) to the *katsaila*, as well as to the ancestors, and also the hunters leave behind the left ear of the hunted prey, which signifies sharing meat with the spirits dwelling in the jungle. As we have seen above in the myth of the left ear of the deer, the small portion of food offered to the spirits and to the ancestors is extremely valuable in the eyes of the spirits. This means, therefore, that we may consider the offerings to the spirits not only as a mere representative gesture through which the humans hand over a symbolic portion of food to reciprocate the received blessing. On the contrary, we can reasonably infer that the small portion of meat offered to the spirits and ancestors equals the portion of meat eaten by people, exactly as people do when they equally partake of their *otcai* when eating together. Giving offerings to the spirits, as well as sharing a meal with other humans, may embody therefore the same meaning, that is, celebrating the solidarity among people, ancestors, local spiritual entities, and the spirits of the forest, celebrating thereby the creation—or restoration—of a habitable cosmos, in which human beings and the spirits of the departed live together in the same communal house in reconstructed harmony.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in the *pulijajat*, God (*Ulaumanua*) is not mentioned at all in the ritual phrases uttered by the *rimata*.⁹⁰ The rituals do not have any gesture that explicitly addresses *Ulaumanua*. This is interesting, because in fact, the Mentawaian cosmology does acknowledge the existence of the highest spirit whose position is over all the other spiritual entities. Today it is possible that, in particular cases, the *rimata* pronounces some short prayers to God, probably as a consequence of Christian influence. On the other hand, Tulus Juniator argues that Mentawaian people believe that through the intercession of the ancestors, all the petitions uttered by the *rimata* finally reach *Ulaumanua*, who is the one who eventually grants the requested blessings.⁹¹ Nevertheless, there is no clue that the words of the *rimata* are addressed to *Ulaumanua*, at least not explicitly. This appears rather odd, because in the end as *Ulaumanua* is the highest spirit, then his blessing would be the most valuable and helpful.

Most probably, as Caissutti notes,⁹² the concept of God in the Mentawaian cosmological system is that of the cosmic God typical of ancient cultures, who does not have a close relationship with men and women. He is almighty and all powerful, but also too distant, almost unreachable by human beings. He intervenes in “worldly” matters almost exclusively when humans commit severe violations of taboos or in the case of false tes-

90. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 33.

91. T. Juniator, *Family Stories. Oral Tradition, Memoires of the Past, and Contemporary Conflicts over Land in Mentawai-Indonesia*, op. cit., 71. The idea that *Ulaumanua* is not involved in the *pulijajat*'s petitions is also confirmed by the *sikebbukat uma* Marius Saurei (Marius Saurei, personal communication, 19 March, 2017).

92. See T. Caissutti, *La cultura mentawaiana*, op. cit., 32–3.

timony in the ritual of *tippu sasa*, the oath which *Ulaumanua* is called to witness. Then, his intervention mostly results in a deadly outcome for the guilty party. On the other hand, it is only in the case of an extraordinary successful hunt that some grateful words are addressed to him to reciprocate his benevolence. *Ulaumanua* is therefore felt to be too distant to hope that he will grant the needed blessing, and it is for the same reason that the *rimata* does not demand anything of him during the *puliaijat*. Indeed, the ancestors and the *katsaila* are the real guardians of the *uma*, the givers who are nearby and who assist and protect the *uma* members in their daily life.

CONCLUSION

Mircea Eliade thinks that in the cyclical concept of time within ancient cultures, rituals have the meaning of periodically pulling humankind out of the historical reality, and re-actualizing the mythical original cosmogonic time. This helps people to re-establish the former equilibrium that has been lost in contingent reality, moving back from the chaotic reality of history to the harmony of the original cosmos.⁹³ It seems to me that *puliaijat* embodies this precise function. It helps people to rebuild harmonious relationships with all the entities that populate the Mentawaian cosmos: that is, other people—with particular emphasis on the members of the same clan,— the spirit of *katsaila*, the ancestors and the spirits of the surrounding forest. *Puliaijat* is able to bring back the Mentawaians to the cosmogonic time in which both spirits and humankind were living together in the same world and in which there was no fear of death. As the archetypal time has been restored, then ancestors and other spirits can deliver their benefits to the *uma* members who have been summoned to enjoy together the feast and the common meal in the *puliaijat*.

Furthermore, in the Mentawaian mentality, there is not a clear separation between the material world and the spiritual one; in fact they are strictly interconnected. Humans are in permanent relationships with spiritual energies, with the souls of the departed forefathers, as well as with the ubiquitous spirits of the forest. This integrated vision of the world (which in the past was labelled as “animism”), reflects the human inner desire to be in connection with the Transcendent. The real world is not only confined within the boundaries of the physical universe, but it also encompasses the spiritual one. *Puliaijat* has the power to re-establish the positive connection between the two. This can be a reminder for foreign people, in particular those who belong to secularized cultures, of the human need to interact with the “world of beyond.”

Another positive value emphasized by the *puliaijat* is that its celebration is able to efficiently strengthen the bonds of solidarity between human beings. It is in fact an occasion for strengthening the unity of the clan and, by means of particular *puliaijat*, also between

93. M. Eliade, *Il Mito dell'Eterno Ritorno*, op. cit., 38.

different clans. Albeit in some cases the need to mitigate infighting is the reason for which the Mentawaians turn to *puliaijat*, in particular the *paabanan*, it seems to me that a more profound motivation for celebrating goes beyond the mere resolution of conflicts. We can infer, on the contrary, that the need to perform *puliaijat* is rooted in the profound yearning to build and celebrate harmony and peace among humans, and that the need to perform *puliaijat* represents an inner desire of the Mentawaiian soul. This reflects the quest for fraternity which dwells in the heart of every man and woman, and which also exists in Mentawai.

From a missionary point of view, I think that the endeavour of evangelization can help—and indeed has helped so far—the Mentawaians to reach the goals which since time immemorial have been pursued by means of *puliaijat*. With no need to erase the good values present within the Mentawaiian traditions—and also with no need to forbid the celebration of *puliaijat*—I think that an inculturating endeavour should travel over two main rails. The first of them is the emphasis on the cult of the departed and the saints—not excluding Jesus and Mary, who can be seen as ancestors who have passed down to us the Christian faith. All of them are our forefathers and foremothers, and therefore we can involve them, together with the “saints of the *uma*,” that is, the ancestors, to intercede for and grant their blessing to humankind. Furthermore, a vision of the communion of saints as it is expressed by the Apostles’ Creed can also help to correct an excessive deterministic approach to the effectiveness of the sacrifice, moving from the traditional “spiritual trading”-like attitude to a new vision of reciprocal love among the living and the dead. Moreover, I would argue that the awareness of having Adam as a common ancestor can help the Mentawaians to overcome the primordial tendency to confine solidarity within the narrow boundaries of one’s clan, and, this awareness can help Mentawaians to reach a broader fraternity with other *uma*, as well as with other ethnicities and cultures, enabling them to live in the globalized world of today.

Second, our enquiry has also shown that the explicit reference to the highest spirit, *Ulaumanua*, seems to be absent or at least hidden. The real references for the *rimata*’s petitions are the closer and more helpful spiritual entities, in particular the ancestors. On this point, the contribution of Christian idea of God as Father, can be complementary to traditional Mentawaiian beliefs. It seems to me that Christian teachings can make people more aware of the closeness and the paternity of *Ulaumanua*. This is of vital importance for moving from the vision of the stranger and dormant God towards the experience of God the Father who is close to all His children and loves them. This new understanding can help the Mentawaians to fulfil their profound need for the protection and care which is longed for and sought through the mediation of the ancestors and other spirits within the *puliaijat*.

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JAPAN

TIZIANO TOSOLINI

To reflect on the concept of festival, or simply on the duration of a ritual or a celebration, inevitably leads one to consider the role of time not only for the festival itself, but also in relation to the distinction between the time of the celebration and the regular flow of ordinary time. For during certain periods of the year, in particular circumstances (for example, the rites of passage), and on specific occasions and anniversaries, ordinary time is suspended or interrupted, as it were, in order to make room for a different kind of time which is its mirror image and complement: the time of the festival, of the rite, and of the sacred.

This temporal arrhythmia, in which time quivers and is shaken out of its anonymous flow, has been analyzed from different perspectives and in different fields of study by such renowned authors as Mircea Eliade, Arnold van Gennep, and Victor Turner. Each of them suggests his own interpretation of the way in which time is transfigured during the festival and comes to acquire a new meaning that transforms human existence by giving it a share in the sacred world of the divine, as well as by marking the

most important stages of growth in the life of the person. The first part of this study will focus on these authors.

In the second part I will turn to the times of the festivals in Japan and consider what criteria were adopted in its history to establish the days of the various Japanese rites and celebrations and the liturgical structure of the year. One of the main conclusions of the second chapter is that, in Japan, the idea that time establishes the precise moment of the celebration of a given rite was replaced by the obverse idea that it is rather the rite that gives meaning to time. The annual flow of time is thus transformed into a tangled web where every segment of time is no longer part of a linear chronological succession but is itself transformed by the occurrence of the rite, that is, by that celebration which puts human time in contact with divine time. Therefore, the purpose of the Japanese ritual calendar is not so much to measure time as to describe it.

In the third part I will analyze the meaning, structure, and typology of the various Japanese festivals, while in the last chapter I will focus on the description of the time of praise, that is, the time when the officiant himself directs prayers to the divinities in order to promote the perfect harmony between the will of the *kami* and the will of human beings.¹

FESTIVE TIME

Eliade and the Timeless Time of the Sacred

In his famous 1957 book, *The Sacred and the Profane*,² Eliade argues that there are two kinds of time for the religious person: sacred time, or the time of (mostly cyclical) festivals, and profane time, or the time of ordinary duration. Religious festivals, by reactualizing and reliving the sacred events that took place in the beginning, give time the character of reversibility, circularity, and recurrence, while profane time, which measures events that do not have religious meaning, represents the mere temporal flow which is by nature impermanent, fleeting, and linear, that is, the time that vanishes and passes away, devoid of all memory. Sacred time, therefore, is *illud tempus*, which reconnects us to cosmogonic

1. In Shintō, the term *kami* (神) literally means “divinity,” but Bocking advises us that it is “a term best left untranslated. In Japanese it usually qualifies a name or object rather than standing alone, indicating that the object or entity has *kami*-quality. *Kami* may refer to the divine, sacred, spiritual and numinous quality or energy of places and things, deities of imperial and local mythology, spirits of nature and place, divinized heroes, ancestors, rulers and statesmen” in “*Kami*”, B. Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997). The Shintō pantheon is traditionally designated with the expression “Eight Million Gods” (*yaoyorozu no kami* 八百万神), an expression that is not intended to indicate the total number of sacred beings, but rather the universal presence of the divinities, at whose head we will eventually find the goddess Amaterasu ō mi kami (天照大御神 “great goddess who shines in the heaven,” or “sun-goddess”).

2. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*. Trad. W. R. Trask (New York: A Harvest Book, 1959). Here we will focus mainly on the second chapter of the book, “Sacred Times and Myths”, op. cit., 68–113.

time, when the divinities fashioned the world. And the festival, by celebrating and sharing in that mythical event, reactualizes it. Put differently, sacred time is made present by and in the festival; it is the time that has been the same from the beginning, hence a time that could be conceived of as a succession of eternities.

The religious man, according to Eliade, feels the need to have periodic access to *illud tempus* because sacred time is the condition of possibility (or the source) of ordinary and historical time. In fact, the events of the origins become paradigmatic (or exemplary) for the way in which human beings are supposed to behave during the ordinary time. Thus, for example, the sexual unions that occur during profane time have their *raison d'être* in the sexual unions of the divinities which took place in the timeless time of origin, the timelessness of the eternal present. Eliade rejects the idea that the religious person's desire to return to the time of origin should be viewed as an escape or evasion from reality. On the contrary, what the religious person accomplishes through the rites is a positive participation in the life of the divinity, the superabundance of being that creates the world and is narrated in the myth.

The myth records the events of the origins and reveals how the cosmos (or part of it) came into existence. As Eliade explains:

The myth reveals absolute sacrality, because it relates the creative activity of the gods, unveils the sacredness of their work. In other words, the myth describes the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred into the world... To tell how things came into existence is to explain them and at the same time indirectly to answer another question: *Why* did they come into existence? The *why* is always implied in the *how*—for the simple reason that to tell how a thing was born is to reveal an irruption of the sacred into the world, and the sacred is the ultimate cause of all real existence. Moreover, since every creation is a divine work and hence an irruption of the sacred, it at the same time represents an irruption of creative energy into the world. Every creation springs from an abundance. The gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accomplished by a surplus of ontological substance. This is why the myth, which narrates this sacred ontophany, this victorious manifestation of a plenitude of being, becomes the paradigmatic model for all human activities. For it alone reveals the *real*, the superabundant, the effectual.³

The most important role of the myth, therefore, is to produce divine models through which human beings, by imitating the gods, remain within the sphere of the sacred, and

3. Ibid., 96–7. Italic in the original. This idea of “creation” (though perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of “emanation”) of reality from a superabundance or excess of energy can be used to explain the myth of Japan's origins as it is narrated in the *Kojiki* (古事記 *Records of Ancient Matters*) and in the *Nihongi* (日本紀 *Chronicles of Japan*, also known as *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀). See T. Tosolini, *Shintoismo*, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Bologna 2015, 23–36.

by reactualizing the divine gestures, they sanctify the world. Indeed, according to Eliade, the religious person becomes truly human only by imitating the gods and heroes found in the myth. In this sense, the religious person is not self-made but, rather, becomes itself by approximating the divine models and by conforming to the teaching of the myth.

The religious person, concludes Eliade, knows two kinds of time: profane time, or the time that pertains to all non-religious acts (the time *before* and *after* the festival), and sacred time, or the primordial time which is sanctified by the gods and becomes present in virtue of the liturgy of the feast.⁴ Time and religious festival, therefore, are closely related to each other:

The religious festival is the reactualization of a primordial event, of a sacred history in which the actors are the gods or semidivine beings... Hence the participants in the festival become contemporaries of the gods and the semidivine beings. They live in the primordial time that is sanctified by the presence and activity of the gods. The sacred calendar periodically regenerates time, because it makes it coincide with the *time of origin*, the strong, pure time. The religious experience of the festival—that is, participation in the sacred—enables man periodically to live in the presence of the gods... In so far as he imitates his gods, religious man lives in the *time of origin*, the time of the myths. In other words, he emerges from profane duration to recover an unmoving time, eternity⁵.

Van Gennep and the Rites of Passage

The Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep used the expression *rites of passage* to indicate all those rituals whose purpose is to guide the individual from one stage of life (or social status) to another.⁶ Unlike biological changes (which are genetically programmed, unidirectional, and normally unimpeded), changes concerning psychological and socio-cultural growth must be controlled, guided, verified, and certified by the society to which the individual belongs. The rite of passage, therefore, is the transformation device that helps the subject to move through the various stages of life within a given social context.

The role of these rites is twofold. First, they support the individual in the transition, thus preventing him or her from getting lost or falling during the various phases of transformation. In this sense, the rites provide direction for the subject in a process that will

4. Obviously, according to Eliade, there is another kind of time, which does not belong to the religious person and in which there is no interval between sacred time and profane time. “For him [viz., non-religious person], time can present neither break nor mystery; for him, time constitutes man’s deepest existential dimension; it is linked to his own life, hence it has a beginning and an end, which is death, the annihilation of his life” in *Ibid.*, 71.

5. *Ibid.*, 105–6. Italic in the original.

6. A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

lead to the creation of a new individual, thus guaranteeing at the same time the continuity and stability of the subject during the transition.

The second role of these rites concerns some factors that are external to the individual, namely the activation of social ties. Indeed, the main function of these rites of passage is to establish and dissolve relationships: the rites bring together (or separate) two or more formerly unrelated individuals (or an individual and a given social context), or else they separate formerly related individuals and contexts.

According to van Gennep, rites of passage (or of transition) are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation. The first phase (separation) consists of some symbolic behavior that separates the subject (or the group) from a previously established situation within the social structure, a certain status (or a set of culturally established conditions) or both. During this phase, the subject leaves the group and is introduced to the rite of passage, which thus also establishes a separation between sacred space-time (in which the rites takes place) and profane space-time.

During the next phase, the liminal phase, the subject goes through a cultural situation that has very little in common with either his or her past or his or her future. The forces at work in this liminal space, where the subject undergoes an existential transformation or metamorphosis, are for the most part external to the individual. For this reason, the liminal space is compared to death, invisibility, obscurity, being in the womb, the desert, an eclipse—that is, all those ambiguous, undetermined, and intermediate states that defy all social classifications and roles established by law, custom, or convention.⁷ In this phase some features that belonged to one's previous status are abandoned, or eliminated, to make room for some completely new features which will result in the birth a new individual.

Finally, it is in the third phase, the phase of aggregation or reincorporation, that the actual passage occurs. The ritual subject (whether individual or collective) is reintroduced into a relatively stable status by virtue of which it now holds rights and duties in relation to others, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain ethical norms and criteria that bind it to its particular social condition.

Victor Turner and Liminality

Based on van Gennep's theory on the rites of passage, social anthropologist Victor Turner

7. Turner, whose studies focus on this second phase of the rite of passage, remarks: "Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system... Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" in V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 95.

identifies four phases in social dramas (i.e., moments of intense tension that characterize conflict situations), namely: 1) breach (in which the traditional norms that regulate relationships between different parties are openly or implicitly violated); 2) crisis (in which the subject or group that violated the norms is isolated from the system; this phase is characterized by liminality because it constitutes the transition zone between two different moments of stability in the social process); 3) reparatory action (performed by the group's influential authorities through the liminal rite); 4) reintegration (in which the subject or group is reintegrated into society—either through a more advanced synthesis or through the legitimation of a schism between the parties).

Turner's studies later focused on the liminal phase, which corresponds to the introduction of an anti-structure (*communitas* or *liminality*) that upsets the previously established social hierarchies. In classical anthropology, the term "social structure" used to indicate both the systematization of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and of the individuals who were active in it. However, Turner thinks that this definition is too static and reductive because the structure, whose proper work is to distinguish individuals by assigning them to relatively rigid social positions, fails to account for the development and transformation that necessarily take place in social life and in the collectivity. For this reason, Turner analyzes society by adopting a processual model that allows him to observe the dynamics of groups and social relations over time. Processual analysis brings Turner to view structure as an element that is dialectically related to anti-structure, which in turn suspends, destabilizes, and radically transforms the previous structure, thus creating a new social structure.⁸ In this way, the concepts of liminality and anti-structure account for the possibility of *communitas*, that is, the transient community made up by all the individuals who participate in the rite and in which all subjects are on an equal footing as none of the criteria of status, rank, or role that regulate ordinary life apply to them. Thus, liminality and *communitas* allow the subjects to free those affective, cognitive, and creative abilities that are usually inhibited by the fact that they occupy a precise social position. In a situation of liminality, a person, as well as an entire social group, has great potential for change.

This state of liminal transition signified by the term *communitas* also assumes temporal significance. As Turner states:

What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship.

8. In his introduction to the Italian edition of Turner's *The Ritual Process*, D. Zadra rightly remarks: "Liminality is a radically a-structured social situation, but one which leads back to structure: it is liminal because it is between two structured social situations; the condition of its emergence is the suspension of previous structures, but once it emerges it redefines successive structures... On the one hand, therefore, anti-structure suspends various social structures, but on the other it reaffirms certain symbolic structures in which the meaning of individual and collective existence is constituted" in D. Zadra, "Introduzione" in V. Turner, *Il processo rituale. Sruzione e antistruttura*. Trad. N. G. Collu (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1972), 10. My translation.

We are presented, in such rites, with a “moment in and out of time,” and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.⁹

Liminality is thus characterized by a suspension of time in which previous symbolic and social structures are radically changed and new values and structures are introduced and become normative both for the collectivity and for the structured individual.

However, this process is not unidirectional, and the suspension of time does not concern only the rift caused by the dialectical tension between structure and anti-structure and between the totality in the individual and the individual in the totality, for in this suspension of time we also find the inverse passage, namely the re-composition of the totality of a (new) structure. And in this re-structuring of the symbolic world (in which both collective and individual meanings are redefined), the festival has a primary role. As D. Zadra keenly observes:

The real social tension, found within and beyond the structure, is at the origin both of the sacred gravity of rites of intrastructural passage and of the exaltation and sense of completeness of the inverse passage from the particular to the whole in which, whether in the festival, in the rite, or in the revolution, contact with the totality is recovered. In both cases, there is a suspension of structure, an individual or collective liminality, a region in which the individual or the group redefines the universal role of structure in relation to the origin myth and the sacred symbols.¹⁰

The festival thus becomes one of the elements that frees the individual from its previous structural position and introduces him or her into the *communitas* of equals who can now share in the same experience. Thus understood, the festival (just like time) assumes the character of an “ex-static” experience in the literal sense of the term, that is, an experience where the individual is located outside (*ex*) of its structural status (*static*) and comes to join (through the rites of passage) the liminal community that is characterized by radical equality and social solidarity.¹¹

9. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, op. cit., 96.

10. D. Zadra, “Introduzione” in V. Turner, *Il processo rituale. Struttura e anti-struttura*, op. cit., 11.

11. Observe how Turner’s definition of festival as ex-static has a fitting parallel in H.-G. Gadamer’s philosophical reflections on the same topic: “A festival exists only in being celebrated... The festival is celebrated because it is... The being of the spectator is determined by his ‘being there present (*Dabeisein*)’. Being present does not simply mean being there along with something else that is there at the same time. To be present means to participate... Being present has the character of being outside oneself... Being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching.

In liminality there is a greater contact with the totality, and, for this reason, not only are the individual and the group able to redefine the structure, but liminality itself comes to be considered sacred and protected by taboos. The rite guides the passage from structure to liminality and from liminality to structure. The resolution of the social drama is an integral part of the social dynamic and the conflict (or the feast) allows society to redefine and confirm its unity.

TIMES TO FEAST

In the course of Japanese history, and despite an apparent lack of interest in keeping an accurate record of its events,¹² three overlapping calendars were used to determine festivals in Japan: the agrarian calendar, the lunar-solar calendar derived from China, and the more recent Gregorian calendar.¹³ The coexistence of different ways to determine the dates of the festivities in Japan made it difficult for scholars to identify a clear rhythmic pattern for dividing the time of the year. Some, like Yanagita Kunio, tried to reduce the variety of festive events by simply distinguishing between those dictated by the calendar and those that follow the agrarian cycle. Others, like Miyamoto Jōichi, hold that the year is not divided on the basis of the rites (for these have a rather simple structure with several elements in common) but rather on the nature of the divinity worshipped in the rites (that is, ancestors or gods of nature).¹⁴

Yet, in spite of the difference in views, almost all experts agree that the time of the year is structured around three elements: the first concerns the division of the year into two symmetrical segments; the second decrees that the rhythm of the year is caused by the movement of the divinities who in the spring descend to the valleys and in the autumn return to the mountains, where they dwell;¹⁵ the third element is the idea that the alter-

Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a privative condition, for it arises from devoting one's full attention to the matter at hand, and this is the spectator's own positive accomplishment" in H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trad. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 121–22.

12. Regarding the accuracy of historical sources about Japan, the *Nihongi* (drafted in classical Chinese in 720) is certainly more reliable than the *Kojiki* (drafted in 712 in typical Japanese style) since it follows the system used by the great historiographical models from the continent, which report precisely the years, months, and days of the events of that long period of Japanese history.

13. For a brief description of these calendars and the festivals associated with them, see M. Ashkenazi, *Matsuri. Festivals of a Japanese Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 19–22.

14. By K. Yanagita, see *Saiji shuzokugoi* [*Vocabulary of Usages Concerning Annual Cerimonies*], (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1939); by J. Miyamoto, see "Minkan goyomi" [Folk Calendars], in *Miyamoto Jōichi Cōshakushu* [*Selected Works of Miyamoto Jōichi*] (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1942), 73–264. Both texts are cited by L. Caillet in her "Time in Japanese Ritual Year" in J. Hendry, *Interpreting Japanese Society. Anthropological Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 15–30. For a careful analysis of the relation between time and ritual in Japan, I followed the valuable contribution by Caillet.

15. "In the spring, the divinities, who dwell in the mountains, move to the rice fields to protect the crops, while in the autumn they return to the mountains. This belief gave rise to suggestive celebrations in which the divinities are respectively welcomed or bidden farewell" in S. Yoshiaki, "Shintoismo e cultura giapponese"

nating of the two segments of the year is metaphorically assimilated to the succession of human generations. It is therefore important for us to analyze the way in which the ritual days and the overall ritual structure of the year are chosen.

The Choice of Ritual Days

Concerning the first element, we must observe that in the past (and contrary to the present custom of simply following the dates fixed by the calendar) there were three ways to determine a ritual day: on the basis of the day of the month (this method was called *jūnichi* 重日, “double day,” consisting in matching up the number of the day and that of the month¹⁶); on the basis of the Zodiac signs of the Chinese, and Japanese, calendar (for example, *hatsu-uma* 初馬, “First Day of the Sign of the Horse,” which traditionally celebrates the arrival of the goddess Inari, the divinity of rice, to Japan); finally, on the basis of the phases of the moon, determining that the various ceremonies should fall on three dates: the fifteenth day of the month (full moon), the seventh or eighth day of the month (the first lunar phase), and the twenty-second or twenty-third day of the month (the last lunar phase).¹⁷

In Japan, moreover, annual rituals are usually called *nenchū gyōji* or *nenjū gyōji* (年中行事).

This term indicates the events through the year, that is, the annual cycle of

in F. Sottocornola, *Religioni giapponesi. Shintoismo. La via degli dèi. La religione autoctona del Giappone*. Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna 2002, 42.

16. Four of the feasts referred to as *Gosekku* 五節句, “The Five Seasonal Days,” are determined through this method. Except for the first, which is celebrated the 7th of the 1st month (七草 *nanakusa*, Seven Herbs), the others are respectively celebrated on 3 March (3/3: 桃の節句 *Momo-no-sekku* or 雛祭り *Hina-matsuri*, Dolls Festival), 5 May (5/5: 端午の節句 *Tango-no-sekku* or 子供の日 *kodomo-no-hi*, Children’s day), 7 July (7/7: 七夕 *Tanabata*, Seventh night) and 9 September (9/9: 菊の節句 *Kiku-no-sekku*, Chrysanthemum Day).

17. Cf. “*Hare-no-hi*. Clear days” in B. Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, op. cit.: “The four days in each month on which festivals could be held according to the lunar calendar. These are the days of the new, full and half-moons, i.e. the 1st, 7th or 8th, 15th, and 22nd or 23rd. Other days are known as *ke-no-hi* and were seldom used for festivals. After the solar calendar was adopted in 1872 many festivals were re-scheduled, regardless of the hare/ke distinction, though local festivals often still keep to the lunar calendar.” One of the most important festivities that follow the lunar calendar is the one celebrated in October at the Izumi Taisha shrine, cf. “Izumi Taisha” in *Ibid.*: “In the month of October by the lunar calendar all the *kami* (*yao-yorozu no kami*) from every part of Japan (with the exception of Ebisu who is deaf to the summons) are sent off with rites from their local shrine to gather at Izumo taisha. At Izumo this month is known as *kami-ari-zuki*, the month when the gods are present, while elsewhere in Japan it is *kanna-zuki* or *kami-na-zuki*, the month when the gods are absent. The arrival of the gods is marked by the Izumo Taisha *jinza-sai* (enshrinement rite). The assembling *kami* are welcomed at the seashore by priests who conduct them to the shrine and offer rites. The *kami* are accommodated at Izumo in two long buildings until the 17th October (lunar calendar) then move on to the Sada jinja. Here they stay from November 20–25th (modern calendar) in an empty space enclosed by shimenawa and bamboo between the haiden and the honden before moving on to the Mankusen-no-yashiro on November 26th.”

religious observances. Japanese religion at every level is profoundly calendrical, normally structured around an annual cycle of festivals and special days referred to as *nenchū gyōji*. Details vary from region to region and among different religious institutions. Shintō shrines, like Buddhist temples and new religious movements, virtually define themselves by their particular *nenchū gyōji* which contain, as well as nationally-celebrated festivals such as *niinamesai* [新嘗祭 lit. “Celebrations of the First Taste,” and it refers to the set of harvest festivals in November carried out at the imperial palace and shrines throughout the country] *shichi-go-san* [七五三, lit. “Seven-Five-Three,” is a traditional rite of passage and festival day in Japan for three and seven-year-old girls and three and five-year-old boys, held annually on November 15 to celebrate the growth and well-being of young children.], etc., the special festivals or rites of the shrine celebrating its founding or other significant events in its history. The *nenchū gyōji* may include events dated according to the lunar or solar calendar. The traditional lunar calendar, which required an extra month to be inserted every three years, was replaced by the Western-style (solar) calendar in 1872.¹⁸

From this description, we deduce that the day established for the rite, as well as its cyclical recurrence, varies depending on the place and the religious organizations that celebrate it. Moreover, the day chosen for the rite does not seem to have a univocal meaning; in fact, the same rite (even one that is celebrated on the same day) may have different religious meanings and nuances. Take for example the feast celebrated on the spring and autumn equinox called *higan* (彼岸, literally “other shore”). In Japan, this feast is commonly considered a Buddhist celebration commemorating the passage of the spirits of the dead to the “other shore,” that is, *nirvana* (as opposed to this world, which represents *samsara*). The choice to celebrate this feast on the equinox is due to the fact that on this occasion the sun sets furthest to the West, that is, the point that is closest to Amida’s paradise, which is located in the West. Now, almost everywhere in Japan this feast coincides with the visit paid by the souls of one’s dead ancestors to their relatives, just as it happens on the Buddhist feast of *o-bon* (お盆).

The festival starts with a “welcoming fire” (*mukae-bi*) at the entrance of the house to call back the ancestors. Offerings are made to them, usually in the *butsudan*, graves are visited (*haka-mairi*) and special bon-odori dances are performed... *Bon* ends two days later with an *okuribi* or “sending-away fire” as well as the custom of *shōrō nagashi*, floating lanterns downriver. The festival is an expression of filial piety and pacification of ancestral spirits, as well as a reason to visit one’s “home” village (*furosato*).¹⁹

18. “*Nenchū gyōji* (or *nenjū gyōji*)” in B. Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, op. cit.

19. “*Bon*” in B. Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, op. cit.

It is clear, then, that many of the feasts celebrated in Japan do not signify only one thing but are open to several interpretations. The ritual day, therefore, does not exhibit a single and primordial meaning, but rather takes us back to a time or a period considered sacred because in it there occurred the mysterious encounter between the world of the individual and the world of the divinities, an encounter whose meaning is not clearly configured, or fixed once and for all, but lends itself to a variety of contents and explanations.²⁰

In addition to this, the coexistence of different methods to determine the ritual days, as well the various meanings that may be attributed to the same rite and the local character of the holiday calendar, indicate that the time that dictates the annual festivals in Japan is not perceived as something universal, but rather as an eminently contextual reality. Time, rather than an abstract category, shows itself as something concrete which can be articulated and manipulated on the basis of the local, ecologic, agricultural, and communal needs of a given community or social group.

One last point about the choice of ritual days concerns the repetition of the same feast during the year. One might think that these repetitions express an obsessive tendency. The purpose of these rites, however, is not to fix some definitive points on the temporal axis of the year, but rather to form temporal segments. For example, there is no established day to celebrate the divinity of rice, but rather a long period which may be called the “time of the arrival of the divinity.” The rites are privileged moments (*toki* 時) that determine the meaning of ordinary days, which in turn take on the character of interval, or *intermezzo* (*aida* 間), between rites. Thus, the continuous repetition of rites contributes to establish the idea of a real and concrete time that can be grasped only through the multiplicity of meanings assigned to it (auspicious days, inauspicious days, perilous days, etc.), rather than through the mathematical and impersonal model dictated by the calendar.

The kind of time engendered by the annual rites, therefore, is not an empty medium, but the uninterrupted repetition of various temporal segments. Time, in this sense, is valued qualitatively rather than quantitatively, or as a measuring tool.

20. Besides *higan* and *obon*, there are two other feasts whose meaning was enriched by Shintō and Buddhist elements throughout history. These feasts are the “first visit” to the Shintō shrine (*hatusmōde* 初詣), or to the Buddhist temple (*shushōe* 修正会), and take place on New Year’s Day (usually between January 1st and 3rd), and *setsubun* (節分 “Bean-throwing Festival”), a new year rite related to the Chinese calendar that takes place on February 3rd and 4th, that is, New Year’s Day, according to the old lunar calendar. In Japan the following feasts have typically Buddhist features: the Buddha’s nirvana (*nehane* 涅槃会), celebrated on February 15th to commemorate the Buddha Gautama’s death and entrance into *nirvana* (and for this reason also called “*Parinirvana* Day”); the birth of the Buddha (*hana matsuri* 花祭り) literally “Flower Festival”, celebrated on April 8th to commemorate the Buddha Gautama’s birth; Buddhist thanksgiving (*segaki* 施餓鬼) literally “The offering to those who are in desperate need”, celebrated during the summer, when all the members come together to distribute food and money to those in need; the Buddha’s enlightenment (*jōdōe* 成道会), celebrated on December 8th; and finally New Year’s Eve (*joya no kane* 除夜の鐘), when the faithful go to the temple to hear the 108 chimes, a symbol of the banishment of all human errors committed during the past year.

The Structure of the Ritual Year

The complexity and variety we observed in the determination of the ritual days is inevitably mirrored in the structure of the ritual year. Scholars have suggested three ways of dividing the year: the halving of the year, the arrival of the divinity of rice, the anthropological course of time.

According to some Chinese commentaries of the fifth century, the Japanese were unaware of the division of the year into four seasons; instead they divided it into two periods: spring (or sowing time) and autumn (or harvest time). This helps to explain the agrarian origin of the bipartition of the year (the ideogram for “year,” *toshi* 年, etymologically means “rice harvesting,” and later it came to signify the “duration between two rice crops,” namely “one year”). Evidence of this symmetry is the connection between the new year celebration and the *bon* festivities (which are very similar not only in their cyclical structure but also in their typology as feasts, since both celebrate an auspicious time), and most obviously the days dedicated to the exorcisms against dangers related to water, namely the first day of the sixth and twelfth months, when special offerings are made to the divinities of water (often represented as serpents or dragons) and people are advised against dipping into the sea or into rivers so as to avoid drowning.

A different division of the year is based on the arrival and send-off of the divinity of rice, two events that give rise to elaborate processions and celebrations. There are regional differences, but it is generally believed that the divinity of the mountain descends to the valley at the beginning of spring under the name of “divinity of rice” to protect the growth of rice. After the harvest in autumn, the divinity leaves the plain and returns to its abode, becoming once again the “divinity of the mountain.” In some places, it is said that during the winter the divinity of rice dwells in the village, while in other places the divinity of rice and that of the mountain are viewed as two distinct divinities who are joined in marriage at the end of autumn. In any event, the visit or arrival of the divinity of rice determines the division of ten months of agrarian time, thus leaving two or three months of undetermined time around the feast of New Year. In this case, the division of the year based on the arrival and departure of the divinity of rice does not correspond to the bipartition of the year described above. Indeed, these movements of the divinity point to the complementarity of the two seasons, spring and autumn, as well as to the complementarity of the world of individuals and that of the divinities.

According to a third hypothesis used to determine the structure of the time of the year, scholars hold that the spring and autumn celebrations establish a contact between the time of individuals and the time of the divinities, and that the alternating succession of these two times extends through the entire duration of human generations. It is important to highlight the anthropological aspect of this hypothesis, namely, the fact that it is grounded in the sexual metaphors developed from the connection between the agrar-

ian cycle and the biological cycle of human life.²¹ Many agrarian activities are obviously associated with sexual representations, for example, the immersion of rice seeds for germination (which is compared to the period of rest after childbirth), or again rice planting (with clear allusions to sexual intercourse). We should also bear in mind that lapse of time between the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, namely, the period of the germination and gestation of the seeds, corresponds to the time of marriages among the divinities—as well as of human marriages.

All these hypotheses are in part correct. The bipartition of the year reflects the symmetry of the astronomical year, the movements of the divinity of rice certifies the complementarity of spring and autumn, and the anthropological metaphors related to certain times of the year confirm the essentially agrarian nature of the Japanese symbolic universe. However, these theories offer only a partial explanation of the structure of the year because they do not take into account the obvious complexity of the ritual calendar, a complexity resulting not only from the overlapping of different calendars, but also from the simultaneous use of these calendars in Japan throughout the year.

The main characteristic of the ritual year seems to comprise a multiplicity of references between rites that appear on the surface of time; and as I already pointed out, it is precisely this multiplicity that prevents us from considering the time of the year as a mere mathematical structure—or as a straight line on which past, present, and future are arranged. Put differently, the Japanese ritual calendar is not used to measure time, but rather to describe it and give it meaning. And the Japanese attitude toward time does not require a subject to (re-)compose or (re-)construct the various temporal segments into a unity. On the contrary, it is this very subject which, during the feasts, is completely submerged by time. Time, therefore, completely loses its character of simultaneity, duration, or succession, and inaugurates a different temporal universe in which the relationships between the world of the individual and that of the divinities transfigure time itself by dissolving it in the joy of the feast. Our study will now turn to the joyous encounter between these two worlds.

21. Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), a conscientious student of ancient Shintō, upheld the principle according to which the universe is a synthesis of seemingly opposed but actually complementary elements. This idea is expressed in the concept of *musubi* (結ひ), which Hirata interprets as “binding” or “tying together,” a terminology that symbolizes the harmony of the polar opposites of existence. Hirata’s philosophy was influenced by the Chinese *yin yang* theory, according to which all aspects and phenomena of life are shaped by two unitary and interactive forces: the *yin*, or passive, dark, and lunar principle, identified with the feminine; and the *yang*, or active, luminous, and solar principle, identified with the masculine. At the time this view was based directly on the common sense of Japan’s rural and farming people, who used the idea of masculine and feminine gender to classify and select plants (as studied and reported in farm manuals during the Edo period). This fact also explains the rapid and widespread circulation of Hirata’s theories and of Shintō in all strata of the Japanese population. For a study on the compilation of these farm manuals, see J. Robertson, “Sexy Rice: Plant Gender, Farm Manuals, and Grass-Roots Nativism” in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1984, 39/3: 233–60.

MATSURI: “DIVINITIES AND HUMANS ENJOYING TOGETHER IN HARMONY”²²

In Japan the term used to indicate the religious festival is *matsuri* (祭), which literally means “to make an offering to the divinity.”²³ In antiquity this term, as well as being semantically related to the concept of “veneration” (*sūhai* 崇拜), was used in connection with governmental activity (*matsurigoto*).²⁴ From a religious point of view, the term *matsuri* indicates the encounter of the individual with the divinity in view of their union. For the individual, this encounter implies a twofold expression: an active or external one (the words and gestures that accompany the rite) and a passive or internal one (the spiritual disposition of the individual participating in the celebration).

The primary purpose of the festival is to invite the divinity through an offering by which the divinity itself is appeased and, seeing how the people worship it, grants them and their land its protection. The offering seeks to elicit a joyful harmony between humans and the divinity. This should not be confused with a magical act, but should be interpreted in light of the Shintō religious worldview, in which the divinity is considered an ever-changing being, hence amenable to be consoled and able to move away from its usual abode for a brief time. In this sense, the offering resembles an act of welcoming, hospitality, and reception rather than a strictly liturgical act. The sincerity with which the individual presents its offering to the divinity, and the divinity’s perception of the rectitude of the individual’s heart in its gesture, generate a profound communion between the divinity and humans: the divinity, in this harmonious encounter, bestows on humans its protection, its aid, and its favors. These favors are given not only for the particular benefit of the individual, but also for the progress of society. Therefore, we could say that, through the festival, the world, space, and time are radically transformed: the world is refashioned or recreated, the space where the celebration takes place becomes the “center” of the world, and time acquires a sacral dimension.

The Rite and Its Structure

The structure of the rite, or the visible elements that make up the celebration and which must be coupled with the appropriate inner attitude of the officiant and the participants, unfolds in a precise order or sequence which remains the same in all festivals. This order first includes the *preparation*, which primarily consists in the purification (*harai* 祓い) or

22. *Shinjin waraku* (神人和楽). This expression is normally used to describe the essence of the Japanese festival (*matsuri*). In this chapter I focus primarily on Shintō feasts and use some material from my T. Tosolini, *Shintoismo*, op. cit., 63–75.

23. The Sino-Japanese ideogram for “feast” (祭) is composed of the characters for “meat” (肉, originally written 夕), “hand” (手, originally written 又), and “to show” (示). In its entirety the ideogram indicates the meat offering presented to the divinity on one’s right hand. For a study on the *matsuri*, see J. Swyngedouw, “A Few Thoughts on Matsuri” in *The Japanese Missionary Bulletin*, 1989, 43/1:40–9.

24. This idea is expressed by the term *saisei itchi* (祭政一), meaning “unity of rites and government.”

removal of all traces of contamination, malice, and wickedness that would hinder the effectiveness of the rite. The purification concerns both the place in which the rite will take place and the people who are in charge of it and who will participate in it. The fence of the shrine is carefully mopped, the shrine and the objects used during the celebration are thoroughly cleaned and polished. As for the people, the purification is usually performed by the main celebrant in the form of a complete ablution (*misogi* 禊),²⁵ by other officiants (such as the *tōya* 頭屋 and *miyaza* 宮座, who are in charge of annual festivities) through abstinence from food and forbidden behaviors, and by the worshippers through a symbolic washing of their mouth and fingertips with water (*temizu* 手水).

The second phase of the festival deals with the *invitation of the divinity* to come to dwell in the community. This is an appeal to the divinity (called *kami oroshi* 神降ろし, or *kami mukae* 神迎え) to “descend” to the place from where they are invoking it (*yorishiro* 依り代²⁶), and for this reason it is necessary that there be a tree where the divinity may take up residence, if only provisionally.

The next phase of the festival is concerned with the *delivery of the offering to the kami* (*shinsen wo osonaeshi* 神饌をお供えし), an offering given for thanksgiving and propitiation. Before the rite, the following must be prepared: white paper (*nusa* 幣), or else green branches from the sacred *sakaki* (榊) tree adorned with white paper or strips of flax (*tamagushi* 玉串), the symbols of the kimono, the drinks, food offerings, and the prayers (*norito* 祝詞). The most common offerings are silk or cotton cloth (called *mitegura* みてぐら, or *heihaku* 幣帛), money, jewels, weapons, symbolic offerings, and food (*shinsen* 神饌). Food offerings are further divided into: offerings of cooked food (*juku sen* 熟饌) and raw food (*seisen* 生饌); fish offerings (*sosen* 素饌); various offerings (*seisen marumono shinsen* 生饌丸物神饌). Drink offerings, instead, are limited to bowls of water (usually drawn from a well located inside the shrine) and sake (rice wine).

The number, list and method of preparation of the offerings are meticulously described in the shrine registers, although people usually bring their offerings to a designated purified room where these are arranged on plates and trays (called *sanbō* 三方 or *takatsuki* 高坏). Once prepared, the offerings are taken to the celebration hall and laid out on raw wooden counters. The list (but not the type) of offerings usually varies depending on the importance of the celebration and of the shrines where the rite is performed.²⁷ Moreover,

25. The etiology of this rite is connected to the mythical tale in which Izanaghi, after having escaped the dark land of the dead where his spouse Izanami now lived, washes himself in the river to purify his body from the impurities he contracted in that world.

26. The term *yorishiro* indicates the object (or the person) in which the spirit of the *kami* comes to dwell as it descends for a religious ceremony. The *yorishiro* may be represented by a natural object, such as a tree or a rock, as well as by ritual instruments, such as columns, banners, or ritual emblems called *gohei* (御幣, a wand with strips of white paper folded in a zig-zag fashion placed in front of the doors of the inner sanctuary of the shrine). The objects inhabited by the *kami* will later become objects of worship (*go-shintai* 御神体) and, when carried in a palanquin during a procession, placed behind a veil.

27. The offerings are the following: rice (*kome* 米), sake (酒), rice cakes (*mochi* 餅), saltwater fish (*kaigyō*

the officiant must keep an upright inner disposition through a rigorous purification of his heart and body, he must ensure that the place where the offerings will be laid out is clean, without any trace of dust or foul smell, verifying that the offerings are fresh and correspond to content of the prayer, and ascertaining that they are carefully arranged in the trays in the proper sequence and position.²⁸

The fourth phase of the festival, the most cheerful and lively, is the *symbolic banquet* with the divinity, or *naorai* (直会), a term formerly meaning “to repeat again,” that is, to reestablish the profound communion with the divinity as it was experienced since the Age of the Gods,²⁹ although the term gradually came to signify the concept of “eating with the divinity.” This stage of the festival usually takes place before the divinity is put back in the shrine’s inner sanctuary and occurs in an area circumscribed by a tent, some bamboo poles and a straw rope from which hang the typical zig-zag shaped paper stripes. All these elements indicate that the place of the banquet has now become a sacred space. The purpose of the banquet is to celebrate human communion with the divinity, who alone can protect our daily life and make it bear fruit. Those who participate in the rite are the officiants and the local worshippers (or their representatives). Externally, the rite consists in formally drinking a sip of sake (*o-miki* お神酒) served by the celebrant.

The fifth and last phase of the festival concerns the *send-off of the kami* (*kami okuri* 神送り). For the most part, this phase occurs when the sacred palanquins are taken back to the shrine at the end of the procession and the *kami* comes to dwell again in the inner sanctuary.

Types of Festivals

Matsuri can be of two kinds: public and private. Until the Meiji period (1898–1912), the

海魚), freshwater fish (*kawauo* 川魚), landfowl (*yachō* 野鳥), waterfowl (*mizutori* 水鳥), seaweeds (*umina* 海藻), vegetables (*yasai* 野菜), fruit (*kudamono* 果物), salt (*shio* 塩) and water (*mizu* 水), the last two represent a single offering. During a great festival, all these eleven offerings are presented to the divinity; during a medium festival, the offerings are only nine (rice, sake, rice cakes, saltwater fish, land fowl, seaweeds, vegetables, fruit, salt and water); during a small festival, the offerings are seven (rice, sake, rice cakes, saltwater fish, seaweeds, vegetables, salt and water); daily offerings to the temple are five (rice, sake, saltwater fish, vegetables, salt and water).

28. Fish and birds, for example, must be placed with their heads toward the altar (the stomach of the fish must face the altar, while that of the birds must face the floor); the leaves of vegetables, as well as fruit stalks, must face the roof; the folded part of folded offerings must face the roof; when the number of the trays of the offerings is odd, the offerings must be arranged first from the center, then from left to right, while if it is an even number, the offerings must be arranged first on the left and then on the right, etc.

29. The expression “Age of the Gods” refers to the sacred period of superhuman events narrated in the first chapters of the *Kojiki*. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) strongly emphasized the importance of this period as he said: “A person who desires to know the Way (Shintō) should reflect deeply on the events of the Age of the Gods, and investigate their traces in everything. He will then come to know the principles of all things” in “The Jeweled Comb-box. Motoori Norinaga’s *Tamakushige*”, trans. J. Brownlee, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1988/43, 1:46.

diction “public festival” was reserved for all celebrations mandated by the state, while festivals celebrated in particular shrines were called “private festivals.” Today these meanings have changed: “public festivals” denote those festivals organized and celebrated by the shrine, while “private festivals” are those requested by individual worshippers.

Public festivals are further divided into *main celebrations*, *middle celebrations*, and *minor celebrations*. The *main celebrations* mainly include those *matsuri* based on the natural cycle and the celebration of the divinities. Among the main celebrations is also the annual festival (*reisai* 例祭), which is celebrated on a date that is significant for the shrine or for a certain place. Since the date of this celebration has a religious meaning, it cannot be changed in any way. Furthermore, there is the spring festival (*haru matsuri* 春祭), which is celebrated when cereals are sown to ask for a good harvest and the nation’s prosperity. Since, as mentioned earlier, it was believed that the divinity of harvest would come down from the mountain to the rice fields at the beginning of the sowing season and would remain until the time of the harvest (in autumn), the purpose of this festival was to welcome and host the divinity in the shrine. In spite of its agrarian origins, today this festival is celebrated also to pray for prosperity in all works and industries throughout the country. Other important *matsuri* include the summer festival (*natsu matsuri* 夏祭), originally a purification feast to ask for protection against diseases, but today primarily associated with fun and relaxation, and the autumn festival (*aki matsuri* 秋祭), which is celebrated in thanksgiving for the harvest.

The main celebrations also include festivals related to the movements of the divinities, such as the celebration of the relocation of the divinity from its usual residence to a temporary one (*senza sai* 遷座祭), the celebration for the reunion of two or more divinities at the same shrine (*gōshi sai* 合祀祭), and the celebration for the relocation of one or more divinities to other shrines (*bunshi sai* 分祀祭).

Among the *middle celebrations* we will only mention the New Year festival (*ganjitsu sai* 元日祭, when almost all Japanese visit the local shrine for the first time during the year to ask for the *kami*’s blessing and protection) and the festival of the great shrine (*jingū sai* 神宮祭), while *minor celebrations* include all those festivals that do not fall under the first two divisions.

A typical feature of public festivals, besides the spectacular character of their ceremonies, is the joyful, jubilant, and enthusiastic atmosphere among their participants. These feelings and attitudes are especially evident during the procession, which represents the most significant moment of the *matsuri* as it carries the divinity through neighborhood or village over which it presides. As Ono reports:

As a rule, the procession may be said to have one or more of the following meanings: 1) It may signify the going out to welcome to the shrine a *kami* coming from a faraway world or coming down from the *kami*-world (*shinkai*). This may be the reason why in some cases a procession is starting from a shrine

is calm, as if travelling incognito, while on the return journey it is sometimes merrily animated or proceeds in the darkness with all the lights of the shrine extinguished. 2) It may signify a visit to some place in the parish which has special spiritual or historical significance to the *kami*. 3) It may be an occasion for the *kami* to pass through the parish and bless the homes of the faithful. 4) And finally, it may commemorate the historic processions of some Imperial messengers or feudal lords on their way to the shrine.³⁰

Usually the procession begins with the preparation of the *mikoshi* (御輿), the sacred palanquin that is used to symbolically transport the divinity. The day or night before the festival, some designated people take the *mikoshi* to the shrine, where the officiant performs a purification rite and recites some prayers both for the palanquin and for those who will carry it on their shoulders. On the day of the festival, the divinity (or its symbolic substitute, such as a mirror or a *gohei*) is carried in the palanquin, and at the end of the ceremony the palanquin-bearers lift it and carry it out of the shrine. As they start singing and chanting the refrains later repeated by all the participants, the young palanquin-bearers walk along the path in a zig-zag pattern, and lightly jerking the *mikoshi* on their shoulders, they carry it along the streets of the neighborhood to a designated midway resting point (*otabisho* 御旅所), where it will remain for a short time before being carried back to the shrine.

Other types of *matsuri* require the use of *dashi* (山車), large and elaborate wooden floats, finely decorated and adorned with lanterns, pulled by merry participants along the streets of the city or village.³¹ In many cases the float, as well as the spirit of the divinity, accommodates flute and drum players whose rhythm sets the pace of the procession, while dancers show off their balance skills as they perform ritual dances on the roof of the float.

A characteristic feature of these public festivals is the central place that music and dance have in them. The nature of these performances is usually celebrative or sacred and their purpose is to entertain the divinity and please the *kami* (*kagura* 神楽), although in some cases (as when they play court music, or *gagaku* 雅楽) music and dances have a more historical character and are surrounded by an air of mystery. The *matsuri* is very often characterized by long processions of people dressed in colorful costumes who participate in the festival by alternating between frenzied dances and elegant and composed motions. Sometimes professional dancers perform popular dances representing events derived from Shintō mythology.

During the *matsuri* other kinds of exhibitions, performed primarily for entertainment purposes, are connected to the traditional Japanese arts, such as *yabusame* (流鏝馬,

30. S. Ono, *Shinto. The Kami Way* (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1979), 69–70.

31. The *dashi* are given different names depending on the place. Some are called *danjiri* (だんじり), like the famous *danjiri matsuri*, which is celebrated in September in Kishiwada, near Osaka), others are called *yama* (山) and *hoko* (鉾), both names are used during the *Gion matsuri* (祇園祭), which is celebrated in July in Kyoto.

mounted archery), horse races, *Nō* plays, Japanese wrestling (*sumo* 相撲). These are beautifully fascinating performances that attract crowds from all over the country.

Finally, some *matsuri* are characterized by the use of fire, others by the use of water (for example, those in which the palanquin with the symbol of the divinity is carried by boat from an island to another, or those in which the palanquin-bearers carry the palanquin over their heads into the sea until they are nearly submerged by the waves), others still by the use of lanterns and lights.

As for the second type of Shintō festivals (which we called *private festivals*), it includes a great number of propitiatory rites (to ask favors from the *kami*) and initiation rites (marking the various stages of human existence), rites performed during the year, and rites related to personal needs. We will mention only one rite belonging to the first group, the land purification ceremony (*jichinsai* 地鎮祭), which is performed before the construction of a new building. The rite takes place on the construction site immediately after the land has been cleared and levelled for construction. The purpose of the rite is to appease the *kami* for occupying the land as well as to pray for the safety of the workers and the success of the project. A part of the land is marked off by four stalks of bamboo connected by a sacred rope (*shimenawa* 注連縄), and an evergreen branch adorned with white paper stripes (*shide* 紙垂) is placed at the center of the square to provide a place where the divinity may descend during the celebration. The officiant recites a *norito*, then purifies the land and the participants by waving the purification wand (*haraigushi* 祓串).³² Then the rite turns to a small earth mound, prepared in advance, with a tussock growing on it. The participants cut the grass with a (symbolic) sickle, break the earth mound with a (symbolic) hoe, and turn the topsoil over with a pickaxe (also symbolic). At this point some *tamagushi* is offered, and the rite ends with a symbolic banquet in which the participants drink a sip of sake.

The rites of initiation (*tsūka girei* 通過儀礼) are celebrated to attract the benevolence and protection of the *kami*, to precisely mark the stages of a person's life, and to gradually incorporate the individual into the group.³³ The first of these rites is the parents' visit to the shrine to present their newborn to the *kami* of the local shrine.³⁴ This event, called *hatsu miyamairi* (初宮参り) or "first shrine visit", is celebrated about a month after birth (31 days for a boy, 32 days for a girl) and consists of a purification rite and a *tamagushi*

32. Ono puts it well: "The wand (*haraigushi*), which has many long paper streamers and a few strands of flax, is for the rite of purification. In performing this rite, the wand is removed from its stand by a priest who, facing the worshipper or object to be purified, waves it first over its left, then the right, and finally back to the left shoulder with a characteristic flourish before replacing it." In S. Ono, *Shinto. The Kami Way*, op. cit., 24.

33. For the anthropological and religious significance of rites of passage see Arnold van Geene's study mentioned earlier.

34. Some rites of initiation are celebrated even before the first visit to the shrine, for example the *obi iwai* (帯祝い, in which a special band is tied around the waist of five-month pregnant women to ask for a safe and painless delivery) and the *oshichiya* (お七夜, naming ceremony, in which a name is assigned to the child seven days after birth and prayers for the baby's health are offered before the family altar).

offering to the divinity. Infants are not counted as believers (or *ujiko* 氏子) in the full sense of the term, but as others offer prayers for their health and growth, they acquire a certain social *status* in the community.

A second rite, called *shichigosan* (七五三, “seven, five, three”), is the visit to the shrine to pray the *kami* to accompany and protect children as they grow. On November 15th boys of three or five and girls of three or seven wear a kimono or some other festive dress and are taken to the shrine to receive a blessing, so that the *kami* may protect them in their vulnerable age.³⁵ Finally, at seven they are granted the right to carry the children’s *mikoshi* during public festivals.

Another important celebration, which takes place on January 15th, is the Coming of age festival (*seijin sai* 成人祭), the feast of those who, having turned twenty, have become full citizens. The rite, mentioned in the *Nihongi* and initially celebrated in the Imperial Palace for the sons and daughters of the Emperor, was gradually introduced into Shintō shrines and extended to all young people of the samurai class. For the occasion, during the Medieval period the sons of the warriors received a special hat, the boys from the class of commoners were given a new garment, and the girls a belt. Today the festival is celebrated not only in the shrines, but also in public rooms and town halls, and it still has a particular religious significance.

Among the initiation rites we also find the celebration of marriage, which in the Shintō tradition is called *shinzen kekkon* (神前結婚, “wedding ceremony before the *kami*”). Through this celebration the couple becomes an integral part of the community and fully contributes to the maintenance and continuation of society. For the celebration the groom usually wears a black or grey kimono, while the bride wears a completely white kimono called *shiomuku* (白無垢). The bride can wear one of two main headcovers for the occasion: the *wataboshi* (綿帽子), in the shape of a hood, or the *tsunokakushi* (角隠し, literally “to hide horns”), which symbolizes the bride’s decision to be obedient to her husband. As in all Shintō celebrations, the wedding begins with the purifications of the couple, followed by the offering of food and sake to the divinity, the recitation of a *norito* by the officiant, and the ritual banquet. This banquet consists in sipping some sake, which is offered to the

35. On this day parents buy certain red and white (festive colors) sweets called *chitose ame* (千歳飴, “one-thousand year sweet”), which are sold at the shrines in envelopes decorated with the representations of a heron and a turtle (symbols of longevity). For every *matsuri* there is a certain food to be consumed or displayed during the day (or period) of the festival. For instance, for the New Year, to celebrate the arrival of the divinity of the new year (*toshigami* 年神) a *kagamimochi* (鏡餅, two round rice cakes (the smaller placed on the larger one, which serves as a basis) is placed in the *kamidana* and people drink a soup called *zōni* (雑煮), made with *mochi* (a food usually associated with religious occasions), herbs, and fish. During the girls’ festival people cook *hishi-mochi* (菱餅, a sweet made of three layers of rice: a green one, a white one, and a pink one) and drink the typical *shiro-zake* (白酒, white sake with rice malt). Typical foods for the *tanabata* festival include melon and *sōmen* (素麺, very thin buckwheat noodles, which are usually eaten cold), the latter being consumed to wish for a good harvest. For further information on foods especially prepared for each festival, cf. “Annual Observances and the Rites of Passage” in I. Naomichi, *The History and Culture of Japanese Food* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 62–7.

couple by the *miko* (巫女, young women serving at Shintō shrines and altars) and drunk according to a particular sequence called *san san kudo* (三三九度): first the groom takes three sips of sake, then the bride does the same, and then again the groom takes three more sips.

Finally, while it is commonly held that Shintō deals mainly with rituals concerning life while Buddhism is the religion of funerary rites, Shintō, too, includes a celebration for the deceased called *shinsōsai* (神葬祭), as well as prayers for the dead.³⁶

A ritual called *senreisai* (遷霊祭) is performed before the spirit of the deceased is entrusted to the tutelary or guardian god and to the ancestral spirits. The deceased does not receive any posthumous name, but only an honorific title (*mikoto* 命). After the wake, the funerary rite is performed not in the shrine (since death is impure), but in a common funeral hall. The altar is decorated with small bamboo poles and braided ropes, branches of sakaki, and with some flowers. After the rite of ablution (which amounts to rinsing one's mouth and washing one's hands with water), the *kannushi* (the priest) continues with the rite of purification, followed by a brief farewell speech. Music is played on traditional instruments while the musicians sing a funeral song. The family of the deceased and the other mourners place on the altar the *sasaki* branches decorated with stripes of white paper. All those present join their hands in silence (*shinobite* しのび手) as they pray.³⁷

As for the third group of private festivals, those celebrated during the year (*nenchū gyōji* 年中行事), I will limit my observations to children festivals (*hatsu sekku* 初節句). The first, which is called *hina matsuri* (雛祭り) or *momo no sekku* (桃の節句), is for girls and is celebrated on March 3rd. For this feast, decorative dolls are displayed on especially designed platforms; the dolls portray the Emperor, the Empress, and attendants and musicians of

36. A very early mention of Shintō funerary rites is found in the *Kojiki*, where we are told of the death of prince Ame-uaka-hiko, the third messenger sent by Amaterasu ō mi kami to rule on earth. "So the sound wailings of the Heavenly-Young-Prince's wife Princess' father, the Deity Heaven's-Earth-Spirit, and his wife and children who were in heaven, hearing it (the wailings of the Heavenly-Young-Prince's wife), came down (to Izumo) with cries and lamentations, and at once built a mourning-house there, and made the wild goose of the river the head-hanging bearer, the heron the broom/bearer, the kingfisher the person of the august food, the sparrow the pounding-woman, the pheasant the weeping woman; and having thus arranged matters, they disported themselves for eight days and eight nights" in *The Kojiki. Records of Ancient Matters*. Trans. B. H. Chamberlain (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982), 116. All the animals appearing in the rite have symbolic meanings: the goose carries the offering because it walks holding its head high, thus not contaminating the food offerings for the deceased with its breath; the heron has broom-shaped feathers on its head (in Shintō funerals, the leader of the procession carries a wicker broom); the green bird (or kingfisher) is chosen because it can offer fish; the sparrow's pecking the floor represents a pestle grinding rice in a mortar (rice cakes are among the offerings for the deceased); the pheasant, with its strong and sad voice, resembles professional mourners at funerals (who in modern times are replaced by funeral songs and melodies).

37. T. Tosolini, ed., *Death and Those Beyond* (Osaka: Asian Study Centre, 2011), 72.

the imperial court dressed in court garments from the Heian period (794–1185). The other festival is for boys, it is celebrated on May 5th and is called *tango no sekku* (端午の節句) or *kodomo no hi* (こどもの日). In ancient times this was an annual purification festival because the fifth month of the year was thought to be an inauspicious month, and the fifth day of that month was considered particularly nefarious. This is now the day when people wish children to grow healthy and have a successful career. This wish is expressed externally all over the country by means of large and colorful banners shaped like carps (*koinobori* こいのぼり) and attached to flag poles: according to the tradition, as the carp swims upriver (the adversities of life), it becomes a dragon. And indeed, the way these banners flutter in the wind recalls the image of the carp swimming upstream.

Other important festivals include *setsubun* (節分), which is celebrated on February 3rd as part of the spring festival and which from antiquity symbolizes the expulsion of evil spirits, winter cold and darkness, and the heralding of the new season,³⁸ and *tanabata* (七夕), a festival celebrated on July 7th whose origins seem to date back to a Shintō purification ceremony in which a miko would weave a dress on a loom and offer it to the divinity to ask for the protection of the crops from the rains and an abundant harvest in autumn.³⁹

Other particular rites are performed during the so called “unlucky years” (*yaku doshi* 厄年) and as part of the celebrations marking the passage into adulthood (*toshi iwai* 年祝い). Traditions differ depending on the place, but it is generally believed that 25 and 42 years of age for men, and 19 and 33 for women are especially ominous and unfavorable. Purification rites are particularly necessary for those who reach any of those ages and who, therefore, must perform special tasks during the *matsuri*. Rites concerning longevity, by contrast, are the most positive and are usually celebrated at 60 (*kanreki* 還暦), 70 (*koki* 古稀), 77 (*kiju* 喜寿), 88 (*beiju* 米寿), 90 (*sotsuju* 卒寿), and 99 (*hakuju* 白寿) years of age.

We should observe that, besides these public and private festivals celebrating the joyful encounter of humans and *kami*, there are several simple, daily practices performed by families before the household altar (*kamidana* 神棚). These practices prove the very close bond that the Japanese feel with the divinity and their ancestors and ancestral spirits, who protect those who trust them, giving them the strength to live an upright life. The offerings that are placed daily in front of the *kamidana* (which usually contains an amulet from the Ise shrine at its center, an amulet of the local *kami* on its right; and one or more amulets of other *kami* worshipped by the family on its left) consist of rice, fresh fruit, and

38. This celebration includes a rite called *mamemaki* (豆撒き, literally “bean throwing”), during which people open their doors and windows to let out bad luck and evil spirits and throw beans in the air as they yell: “Demons out! Good luck in!” (*oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi*, 鬼は外 福は内).

39. This festival has also been linked to the day when people can witness the encounter of an engaged young couple turned into stars (Hikoboshi 牽牛, turned into the star Altair, and Orihime 織姫, turned into the star Vega), which cross paths in the sky only on the seventh day of the seventh month. For this reason, it is believed that the wishes expressed on this day will be fulfilled, so people place bamboo stems with leaves in public gardens and other public places, using their branches to hang small slips of paper containing prayers and wishes to the stars (*tanzaku* 短冊).

water and salt. On special feasts or anniversaries, other offerings are added (for example, vegetables, sweets, rice cakes, and seaweeds), while on days dedicated to ancestor worship (for which there are commemorative tablets placed on a different small shelf inside the *kamidana*) one can offer the favorite foods or drinks of the deceased when they were alive. The offerings are usually placed at the center of the altar, in front of the small mirror at whose sides are some *sakaki* branches and some tiny lanterns, and are later removed to be served during the meal.

The ritual performed before the household altar is generally very simple and brief: after purifying himself by rinsing his hands and mouth, the faithful steps in front of the altar and bows, first once briefly, then twice deeply. The recitation of a short prayer or invocation follows, and after two more bows and a hand clap at chest level, the rite closes with one last, deep bow. Other times the rite is less formal and is limited to a quick respectful gesture as one prepares to leave the house for a day of work.

PRAISING TIME (NORITO)

The reader will have noticed that a fundamental component of rites in Shintō festivals is prayer, or the invocation of the divinity, recited by the officiant during the celebration. Prayer is the primary means of communication between humans and the divinity, for through it the individual presents its request to the divinity and the divinity manifests its will to the individual. Prayer, therefore, is primarily a divine word addressed by humans to the divinity, so that both, united by the very content of the prayer, may walk together and reach a common goal. Prayer, moreover, is a divine word proclaimed to the faithful and which, for this very reason, immediately becomes normative. The term *norito* (祝詞) is a compound word whose etymology is still uncertain. Some claim that

The first part, *nori*, is the conjunctive stem of the verb *noru*—to tell, recite, command (superior to inferior) reveal (as the divine will), decree—and the second part is *to*, a noun. *To* has been taken by some scholars of the past to stand for *koto*, but that would be redundant in this case. The theory of modern scholars... is that *to* means a spell or magical device. Thus, the compound *norito* would mean the chanting or reciting of the spell. The combined form of *norito-koto* then is “words for reciting a spell.”⁴⁰

40. F. Bock, *Engi-Shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era*. Vol. II (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1972), 61. The same scholar continues: “Cognates of *noru* are: *inoru*, to pray; *nori*, law, rule; *norou*, to curse, to imprecate; *noroi*, a curse, a malediction; *noboru* or *noboru*, to tell, express, relate, narrate, state; *notama(f)u*, to speak, to tell (superior to inferior)... Cognates of the archaic word *to*, a spell, are: *tona(f)u*, to make a sound, and the verb *tonaeru*, to name or call.” Observe that among the various compositions of the word *norito*, there is one that connects the character for “order coming from above” (宣) with the character of “divination” or “spell” (呪). In this case, the word could indicate a magic or divinatory rite performed on the basis of a command coming from above, that is, from the Emperor or someone speaking on his behalf.

By contrast, others scholars argue that

Noru means that the Heavenly Gods and Goddesses give their solemn commands to the common people, and *to* means “place.” As a whole, *norito* originally meant “the holy place where the deity gives his/her commands;” then, the word gradually came to mean the divine commands themselves.⁴¹

Whatever the best interpretation may be, *norito* are prayers the words of which are both powerful and beautiful because they are directed and offered to the divinity. These are words of extraordinary power because they are word-soul, and as such they operate by virtue of special powers.⁴² For this reason, *norito* must be written in the best language, with evocative words charged with meaning, so as to be a blessing for the divinity and useful for the officiant.⁴³ Moreover, the words of *norito* achieve different purposes depending on the circumstances: they are words of offering and of joy, they express the will of the divinity, and sometimes they are used in magic. Their style, or literary genre, is that of proclamation and praise, which appears to be older than that of petitionary prayer. To sum up, we may say that *norito* are written in the language of imperial decrees and can have the following purposes: to celebrate and praise the virtues of the divinity, as petitions, and to elicit the benevolence of the divinity.

Historically, *norito* did not make up a systematized and compact group of prayers, but encompassed a large number of orations, spells, magic charms, and invocations composed and used in different places and by various clans (*uji* 氏) throughout the country. With the gradual development of the Yamato kingdom, the various religious traditions are progressively consolidated: not only are the numerous divinities assimilated into the *uji* Yamato

41. T. Iwasawa, *Tama in Japanese Myth. A Hermeneutical Study of Ancient Japanese Divinity* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2011), 107. In a note, the author adds that “The verb *noru* is included in such words as *inoru* (to pray) and *norou* (to curse). These examples show that the verb *noru* expresses the awful, extraordinary power the divine words possess,” in *Ibid.*, 120. The interpretation of the term *norito* given by this scholar is very close to the composition of the word as it appears for the first time in the *Kojiki*, when the divinity Ame-no-ko-yane utters some sacred words at the entrance of the cave where the goddess Amaterasu ō mi kami was hiding. The ideograms used in that passage are 詔戸言葉: the first character, 詔 *mokotonori*, denotes an “imperial order made public”; the second, 戸 *to*, means “place;” the remaining characters, 言葉 *kotoba*, signify the “word.”

42. On the notion that words contain the soul (or spirit, *kotodama* 言霊), the ancient text *Man'yōshū* provides the following definition: “Since the age of the gods it has always been said / That the Land of Yamato (Japan) is / A Land where Sovereign-Gods hold solemn sway, / A Land where the word-soul brings us weal.” And further on: “The Land of Yamato is a land / Where the world-soul gives us aid; Be happy, fare you well,” in *Man'yōshū*. Trans. by The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969), 207 and 59. In the past it was believed that these words, once uttered, would take on their own spirit, and that wishes expressed through them would come true.

43. Observe that the ideogram for “blessing” (祝) is composed of the characters for “divinity” (神) and “leaf-word” (葉), to indicate that every word must be uttered to gladden the divinity, and as such it must be put at the service of the divinity.

pantheon, but the various rituals, prayers, and spells are integrated in the ceremonials of the ruling clan. As Shintō becomes the dominant religion, hereditary classes of masters of ceremonies are established, and families are specifically appointed to perform Shintō rites at court (for example, the Nakatomi family—中臣氏, “those who mediate between the *kami* and the king”—was appointed to manage the Ministry of Divinity or Jingi-kan 神祇官) and to compose and recite ritual prayers (the *norito*).

According to tradition, the first collection of *norito* is included in the *Kōnin Shiki* (弘仁式), or Code of the Kōnin period of 820, and in the *Jōgan Shiki* (貞觀式), or Code of the Jōgan period of 869–871; but the most complete collection of ancient *norito* is doubtlessly the one found in the *Engi Shiki* (延喜式). The eighth book of this collection of court rules and rituals contains a list of 27 *norito* that were to be recited by court masters of ceremonies during the most important Shintō festivals or on other special occasions. Of these 27 *norito*, 13 are related to the agrarian cycle (sowing, cultivation, harvest, and offering of the first fruits), 7 concern the purification rite, and 7 are prayers to be recited during particular periods. Thus codified, *norito* were considered not only as the words of the *kami* publicly proclaimed in front of the assembly and as petitions of the people to the *kami*; indirectly, they also served to consolidate and strengthen the figure of the Emperor insofar as, being a direct descendant of the goddess Amaterasu ō mi kami, he was to be considered a manifestation of the *kami* and the only true ruler of the country. Therefore, as Kitagawa observes, it is not surprising that

Norito has a heavy dose of *yogoto*, a formula for blessing the reign of the sovereign to ensure that the ruler’s era will be prosperous. However, it is well to remember that *norito* is not a text of doctrine; rather, it is what might be called “performed text.” That is to say, *norito* was not a book of doctrines or dogmas from which people learned the meaning of life and the world; its aim was to provide people with proper orientations for the practical performance of rituals, prayers, and charms.⁴⁴

The *Engi Shiki* remains the basic text where the principal ancient *norito* are collected, as well as the manual (both as regards style and as regards content), after which all other *norito* commissioned by the government in its efforts to make Shintō the state religion during Meiji period were patterned. These *norito* were then revised in 1914 and in 1927, and as Ono points out, “today, prayers drafted by the Association of Shintō Shrines are in general use among member shrines, but the priests are free to write their own if they wish to do so.”⁴⁵

44. J. M. Kitagawa, “Preface” to D. L. Philippi, *Norito. A Translation of the Ancient Japanese Ritual Prayers* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1990), xxvii.

45. S. Ono, *Shinto. The Kami Way*, op. cit., 56. The Association of Shintō Shrines (*jinja honchō* 神社本丁), or Shine Association is the present co-ordinating or governing body for most Shintō Shrines.

In what follows I would like to provide a sketch of the structure of the *norito* and their classification. *Norito* usually have a fixed structure featuring the following elements:

a) first, there is an *introduction* in which the divinity to whom the prayer is directed is praised and revered, with a mention of the name of the shrine and the rank of the officiants. Worship officials are summoned, with a reference to the Emperor, on whose command the prayer is performed;

b) next is the *main corpus*, which is composed of several elements. First, the officiant address the divinity, proclaims its greatness and goodness, humbly thanks it for all its ongoing favors, and expresses their trust in it, explaining in detail the purpose of the prayer. To show that they are in perfect harmony with the divinity, they also state the day, hour, and place in which they are reciting the prayer. The *norito* contained in the *Engi Shiki* also mention the myth from which the rite and the festival originated.

Next, the officiants describe the preparation of the festival to assure the divinity of their veneration. This description focuses particularly on the adornment of the shrine, the inner garden, and the worshippers' gathering place. The divinity can thus ascertain that the fire was prepared with devotion and the branches were gathered from the depths of the mountains, as well as joyfully take note of the precision and utter care with which the offerings were prepared.

This description is followed by the officiants' own profession of loyalty at the service of the divinity, a profession in which they also state their commitment to meticulously observe all the rules of the rite. The divinity is then invited to enjoy the service and relish the lights, the dances performed in its honor, the exquisite wood used to build the shrine, the lustral water, and the nature surrounding the shrine.

Next comes the presentation of the offerings: the officiant carefully introduces them by naming them one by one and assures the divinity that each offering was duly purified. Sometimes the way and the place where the offerings were gathered or caught are also specified.

The presentation of the offerings is followed by a petition asking the divinity to accept the prayer recited by the officiant. The divinity is then invited to eat from the offerings that were prepared by the worshippers and to heed the petitions that these offerings represent.

The main corpus of the prayer ends with a final plea on behalf of the entire country, its leaders (especially the Emperor), society and its necessities, and all the families of the village.

c) We thus reach the *conclusion* of the *norito*, in which the divinity is again addressed with respect and reverence, the date and purpose of the festival is repeated, and the prayer is brought to a close.

In spite of the extreme simplicity and linearity of the structure of the *norito*, we should not forget that their phraseology and terminology are regulated by very strict laws, for one must bear in mind not only their aesthetic character and poetic style, but also the

quasi mystical feeling that makes of the word the very first gift offered to the divinity—a word which, addressed to the divinity, is itself brimming with a unique and special power.

Another classification of *norito* (besides the one of the 27 *norito* of the *Engi Shiki* given earlier) is based on the content of the festivals for which they were composed.⁴⁶ First there are prayers of reverence and thanksgiving for the divinity's past and present favors. The term used to describe this type of prayers is *hōsai no norito* (奉養の祝詞), an expression that indicates the joy that typically arises from thankfulness and gratitude.

A second type of prayers are the *shinkoku no norito* (申告の祝詞), which may be described as report prayers, or prayers by which divinity is informed of what happened in one's life. It is in fact necessary to give a detailed briefing of one's life to the divinity in order to be granted the benefits or aid requested because, since the divinity is not omniscient, it may be unaware of the events mentioned in the prayer.

Third, there are petition prayers for present necessities and other urgent needs (*kigan no norito* 祈願の祝詞). This type of prayer is almost conceptually opposed to report prayers, and worshippers and officiants recite them with the firm conviction that the divinity will grant their requests.

A fourth type of prayer, the most frequent ones since they deal with various aspects of existence, concerns prayers recited on special occasions, such as prayers for the protection of the land and for the construction of a new building (*chinsai no noirito* 鎮祭の祝詞).

The fifth and last type of *norito* includes prayers recited during funerals and for the deceased (*sōreisai* 葬霊祭). These prayers are seldom recited, since Shintō avoids any relation with death as much as possible. Death is always seen as a source of contamination and evil that requires purification to restore one's participation in the power and blessings emanating from life, hence from the *kami*.

CONCLUSION: TILL THE END OF TIME

Japanese historian and anthropologist, Sonoda Minoru, recently connected the meaning of the term *matsuri* to the interpretation of the feast given by Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, namely a kind of sacred drama in which the myth of the community's origin is re-created and the identity of the individual blends with the identity of the group. Sonoda remarks:

Matsuri consists of ritual and festival components in a dramatic structure, set in a phase of extraordinary communitas, in which the cosmology of the group is symbolically actualized. Within this representation of the symbolized world concept, the group reconfirms the fundamental meaning of its continued exist-

46. For a more detailed analysis of the structure and content of the 27 *norito* contained in the *Engi Shiki*, see F. Sottocornola, "Structure and Content of Ancient Japanese Norito" in *The Japanese Missionary Bulletin*, 1989, 43/1: 21–36 and 43/3: 187–202.

tence and strengthens the ethos of each member. In summary, *matsuri* concerns the symbolic rebirth of the group.⁴⁷

In other words, Japanese festivals (especially those we referred to as “public festivals”) are celebrated periodically to strengthen the meaning and the very life of the community by putting it in a direct and special relation with the divinity. In this sense, the festival has nothing to do with questions of faith or incredulity; it is rather what completely transforms the subject (and the *communitas* itself) by freeing him or her from all coercion, conditioning, and restrictions imposed on him or her by society, thus introducing him or her into a sacred space and an ecstatic time. As Hardacre observes:

During the *matsuri*, society’s rules are suspended and overturned. Unrestrained feasting, singing, dancing, violence, and sexual license are permitted—even expected. All these elements are regarded as contributing to the rebirth of the *Kami*, the community, and the life force of the individual. Society returns to primitive chaos, making possible a complete communication with a different world, with the *Kami*.⁴⁸

One may say that the various *matsuri* continue to reveal and display a magnetic and engaging power for both old and new generations: take for example the orderly and almost unceasing flux of Japanese people who, on designated days, travel to the shrine to pay homage to the divinities and ask for their protection. All the rituals we have described indicate that the festival, particularly within Shintō and in spite of the fact that times have changed, is still successful in expressing life’s excess, exuberance, fullness, and dynamism. For according to Shintō (hence for all Japanese), life is and will always be celebration, communion, and intimacy with the divinities, a relationship that continuously recreates a purer and simpler world and individuals. This is a relationship that is founded on neither faith nor reason, but on a mysterious, profound, and archaic spiritual instinct which has the power to sublimate time and history, transfiguring once again this reality of ours by causing it to dance to the invisible rhythm of its passion for the divine.

47. Cited in H. Hardacre, *Shinto. A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 475.

48. *Ibid.*, 476. However, we must observe that especially after World War II—when Shintō shrines lost their privileged status of religious sites directly controlled and sponsored by the state and have come to be considered once again as any other private organization—the various activities connected with *matsuri* have undergone gradual restrictions by local authorities. Indeed, the authorities insist that the shrines should limit the time devoted to processions and other activities that could disrupt traffic, as well as reduce episodes of violence, drunkenness, and ruckus at night—all elements that are traditionally associated with festivals.

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TAIWAN

LUIGINO MARCHIORON

“Tai Shi Gong said: ‘Yellow Emperor studied the functioning of stars and set up the calendar... People and the spirit work on different ways. People respect the spirit without blasphemy. So, the spirit dropped down grains.’”
太史公曰：“蓋黃帝考定星曆... 民神異業，敬而不瀆，故神降之嘉生”。

“When Emperor Yao handed down his reign to Emperor Shun because of his old age, he admonished Shun: ‘The heaven’s calendar is for you to observe.’”
堯年耆禪舜云：“天之曆數在爾躬”。

“And in this mountain shall the Lord of Hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined” (Is 25:6).

“At all times, dress in white and keep your head well scented” (Qo 9:8).

“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven” (Qo 3:1).

1. Tai Shi Gong (太史公) is the official title of Si Ma Qian (司馬遷). Huang Di (黃帝) Yellow Emperor (2697–2597 BC) is a legendary leader in China. Jia Sheng (嘉生) was explained by scholars as “grains.” Si Ma Qian (司馬遷), 史記, vol. 2, 1256.

2. Yao (堯) is a legendary leader in China (2356–2255 BC). Shun (舜) is a legendary leader in China (2255–2205 BC). Si Ma Qian (司馬遷), 史記, vol. 2, 1258.

The festive dimension constitutes one of the most important indicators of memory capacity and celebration capacity of the human being, and its “mystery” in the history of a people. To take part in a feast means to recall as a family its ideal message and be committed to fulfilling it. To celebrate and take part in a feast becomes for a family or a community a unifying act, capable of combining symbolically the past, the present and the future. Celebrating together helps recover the roots of the common participation in the events of history, and encourages rediscovering the reasons for unity and development of a nuclear family or a community. The meaning of a feast and the desire to celebrate always accompany the existence of the human being.

The extraordinary richness and wisdom of the Chinese civilization which has developed over the centuries has contributed to shaping a profound and well-rooted sense of feasts and celebrations. In addition, the diversity and uniqueness of fifty-six ethnic minorities in Mainland China³ offer remarkably mosaic experiences of feasts and celebrations. The same holds true for Taiwan where the different ethnic groups (84% Taiwanese or Hakka, 14% from Mainland, and 2% Aborigines) contribute to the multiculturalism and variety of proper styles of celebrations.⁴

It would be simplistic and reductive to claim a presentation of all the festivals in the daily life of these communities.

In this research, therefore, we will confine ourselves to highlighting six major feasts and festivals which are traditionally rooted in both Taiwanese history and culture, officially enlisted in the official calendar of Taiwan, and have deep and numerous elements in common with Mainland China. These six feasts or festivals are: 1) the Spring Festival (*Chun Jie* 春節); 2) the Lantern Festival (*Yuan Xiao Jie* 元宵節); 3) the Tomb Sweeping Festival, (*Qing Ming Jie* 清明節); 4) the Dragon Boat Festival, (*Duan Wu Jie* 端午節); 5) Universal Ferry or Universal Salvation Festival, a festival celebrated during Ghost Month (*Zhong Yuan Jie* 中元節, also known as *Zhong Yuan Pu Du* 中元普渡) and 6) the Mid-Autumn Festival, (*Zhong Qiu Jie* 中秋節).

Through changes over the years and regions, these festivals maintain throughout history and in our times, too, an extraordinary and creative spirit of encounter, re-union, reconciliation, protection, blessing, joy and social cohesion in the Taiwanese *modus vivendi*.

For this reason, we will consider the structure of these feasts from four predominant characteristics : 1) the regular periodic celebration, rooted in the tradition of a people and

3. From Tibet to Manchuria to China's tropical south, different ethnic minorities celebrate their new year, harvest, etc. in various ways.

4. In this regard, it is interesting to notice how the aboriginal communities (*Yuan Zhu Min* 原住民) are able to keep alive the importance of taking food together (particularly the “culture of Millet” or *Xiao Mi Wen Hua* 小米文化). Seed-grain myths of aboriginal are mostly about millets (*Xiao Mi* 小米). Diverse and widespread millet myths have their special position for aboriginals since they display cultural traits of sacred millet and good harvest rituals. The millet myths and rituals indicate the importance of millets to their lives and reveal the cultural uniqueness of aboriginals in Austronesian peoples.

incorporated in the official calendar; 2) the collective character as a social event where the group experiences a sense of belonging and shares a common ethos; 3) the sacred or transcendental characteristic formalized in a particular rite, which is placed at the center of the entire festive moment; 4) the play or recreational value of the festival through the sharing of food (banquet), dance, music, games or pastimes.

Nevertheless, the most distinct characteristic of these six feasts is the coexistence of sacred and profane needs, where there is an intimate interrelationship between the worship experience (cult) and the recreational experience (playfulness).

In discussing these festivals, we will recognize the potentialities and resources (traditional, sapiential, psychological and spiritual) inherent to the dynamism of daily life that pushes a person to put aside his or her daily routine to highlight the sense of belonging to a community and being open, in a new way, to the experience of what has been bestowed as a precious and free gift.

In addition, while in no way pretending to be exhaustive, the idea of presenting the concept of “feast” and “time” in the Bible is to recognize on the one hand how “feasts,” “festivals,” and “celebrations” ran and governed the Judeo-Christian calendar year and shaped a proper identity, and on the other hand, how the category of “time” pervaded the value-driven nature of daily life and entered interpersonal relationships.

We will present the major feasts in the Old Testament: the Feast of Passover or *Pesach* (פֶּסַח); the Unleavened Bread or *Massot* (מַצּוֹת); the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout* (שָׁבוּעוֹת), the Feast of Tabernacles, or Grape harvest, or *Succot* (סֻכּוֹת); and the feast of *Sabbath* (as the verb שָׁבַת), that is, to “stop,” to “cease,” and to “rest”). In the New Testament, we will observe the continuity of the Jewish tradition and the gradual transformation of the meaning of feast, starting from the Paschal event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reader will be surprised by the fact that the Bible is an amazing laboratory of celebrations and re-actualization of the understanding of feast in daily human experience. We will also identify some fundamental commonalities with the festivals in Taiwan. Above all, the Biblical perspective clearly presents the true Creator and Author of the gift of the “Feast,” where “to celebrate” is a concrete way to receive and welcome life as a gift.

We will start our research by presenting the possible etymological roots of the word “feast.” We will recognize how the concept of “festival” or “feast” naturally suggests a relation between food and celebration to be shared joyfully with others (gathering). “Feast” is a delightful time, a time of peace, tranquility and fulfilment. Ecstatic time, precisely!

We will complete our study by drawing some concrete conclusions on the fundamental need of the human being to “make feast” and its religious component.

Lastly, we may notice that the abundant use of Chinese characters in this article is motivated by the fact that the Chinese thinking proceeds through concrete images (pictographs). The Chinese language tends to represent not only the concepts, but also mental attitudes. The linguistic structure of Mandarin conveys thoughts through images. Apart from visualizing an idea or an item, it is necessary to make a discourse on the depicted

item. It is a very intuitive way of thinking.⁵ The Chinese names of the feasts, in fact, are all connected with agricultural, historical, cosmological, celestial, and mythological “events” that shaped a distinctive way of expressing abstract concepts. As a matter of fact, there is a preference for the idea of a “round circle.”⁶ To keep the originality, the creativity, the beauty and the truth of these festivals as revealed in their original names, we have decided to reproduce the Chinese characters throughout this article.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE TERM FEAST OR FESTIVAL

The word “feast” or “festival” comes from the Latin vocable *festum* (*fĕstum-fĕstī, fĕsta-fĕstōrum*) or *dies festus*,⁷ that is, “a day of feast.” It indicates a day of “public joy, rejoicing, and merrymaking.” Although the etymology is uncertain, some etymologists⁸ assert that the most likely origin of *festum* comes from the same gender of the Greek verb *Estiao* (ἐστίαω, the verbal form of *Festaio*), which indicates the act of “receiving, hosting or welcoming someone at the domestic hearth and offering food.” The verb *Estiao* (ἐστίαω) in turn comes from the Greek substantive *estia* (ἐστία [-ας, ἡ], the substantive form of *festaiia*), which literally means “domestic hearth or fireplace; house, home, and abode.”⁹

The Greek substantive *estia* (ἐστία) is connected to the Sanskrit substantive *vastyā* (house, home, dwelling place, domestic hearth), coming from the Sanskrit verb *vasati* (to dwell, to live).¹⁰ The concept of “Feast,” therefore, is related to a domestic, familiar or community event to be shared joyfully and in communion with others.

The Chinese Character 節 (Jie)

The concept of “festival” or “feast” in Chinese naturally suggests the relation between food and celebration of festivals.

The word “feast” or “festival” in Chinese is written as 節 and it is pronounced as *Jie*, exactly as the radical 卩 (*Jie*) on its lower right side. Originally 節 (*Jie*) was used to indicate the nodes around a bamboo rod, and later 卩 (*Jie*) meant “credential.”¹¹ As time went by,

5. See Huang Po Ho, “An Observation on the Thought Patterns of the Han Ethnicity and their Impact on Religions and Theologies” in *Concilium*, 2017/1: 27–37.

6. We will examine, for example, in the Lantern Festival, the two characters *Tuan* 團 and *Yuan* 圓, that is, “round,” “circular” “circle” (“full,” “complete”).

7. It abides by the same radical “*Fesiae*,” the primitive form of “*Feriae*” (Weekdays).

8. O. Pianigiani, “Festa,” in *Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Segati: Società editrice Dante Alighieri di Albrighi, 1907).

9. L. Rocci, “ἐστίαω” and “ἐστία” in *Vocabolario greco-italiano* (Città di Castello: Società editrice Dante Alighieri, 1958).

10. “Spoken Sanskrit Dictionary” at <spokensanskrit.de/index.php?script=HK&beginning=o+&tin-put=vasati&trans=Translate&direction=SE>.

11. 卩 (*Jie*) is related to 瑞信 (*Rui Xin*), that is, “auspicious credentials.” In the ancient time, a piece of jade was given by the King to an envoy or a general as a certification of the King’s authorization.

the character 卩 (*Jie*) was replaced by the character 節 (*Jie*). Gradually, the character 節 (*Jie*) included other meanings.

The Chinese characters are formed in accordance with the so-called six rules or six categories (*Liu Shu* 六書). In our case, the character 節 (*Jie*) is the result of two of them: 1) “form and sound” or “determinative-phonetics” (*Xing Sheng* 形聲), and 2) “ideograph or gathering of ideas” (*Hui Yi* 會意). With respect to the first category, “form and sound,” 節 (*Jie*) is the combination of two symbols. On the upper part, there is the pictorial symbol 竹 (*Zhu*), meaning “bamboo.” On the lower right side, there is the phonetic radical 卩 (*Jie*). Therefore, 節 (*Jie*) possesses the pictorial form of “bamboo” 竹 (*Zhu*) and the phonetic sound of 卩 (*Jie*).

For the second category, “ideograph or gathering of ideas,” 節 (*Jie*) is the combination of two characters. On the upper part, there is the character 竹 (*Zhu*), meaning “bamboo.” On the lower part, the character 卩 (*Ji*), meaning “to approach,” “to be,” etc.

The character 卩 (*Ji*) is a combination of two symbols. On the left side is a pictorial symbol initially representing a “pot” containing food 食/食 (*Shi*). On the right side is a phonetic and pictorial symbol of 卩 (*Jie*), originally portraying a man kneeling down at the right side to approach the pot to get food.¹² The upper part of the ancient character 食 (*Shi*) represents a mouth upside down!

THE SPRING FESTIVAL—THE CHINESE NEW YEAR (CHUN JIE 春節) OR CROSSING THE YEAR (GUO NIAN 過年)

The Chinese people follow the Lunar Calendar, also known as *Nong Li* (農曆). The first day of the first month of the lunar year¹³ is called *Chun Jie* (春節), which literally means Spring (*Chun* 春) Festival (*Jie* 節). It is commonly called *Guo Nian* (過年).

This festival is the most ancient and solemn celebration in the Chinese culture, and it is the main event of the Chinese calendar.

The origins of this feast are intimately related to agricultural production. Since ancient times, Chinese culture attached much importance to agricultural production, this festival was called *Guo Nian* (過年), that is, “to cross” or “to pass” (*Guo* 過) a year (*Nian* 年).¹⁴

The character 年 (*Nian*) originally indicated the time in which the grain was ripe, that is, “the harvest of a year.” Three thousand years ago, the character 年 (*Nian*) was written as the combination of the character 禾 (*He*) indicating the “standing grain (especially rice)” and the character 千 (*Qian*) meaning “thousand” and indicating “a great amount of.” These two characters merged together resulting in the “accumulation of grain” or the

12. See G. D. Wilder and J. H. Ingram, *Analysis of Chinese Characters* (Beijing: North China Union Language School, 1922). 正中形音義綜合大字典, 增訂本, 民國 63 (1974) 年 台二版, 正中書局印行。

13. The New Year's Day.

14. See 漢啓新 - 朱筱新, “中國古代漢族節日風情” (臺北: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 8–25.

“good harvest.” In the ancient literature, the ripening of the five grains¹⁵ was called *You Nian* (有年) to indicate exactly a “year of good harvest,” that is to say, a year in which all five grains were fully ripe. A whole year’s harvests therefore became *Nian* (年), that is, “Year.” The expression *Da You Nian* (大有年) indicated a “year of very good harvest.”

There are many other names to indicate the Chinese New Year: *Yuan Ri* (元日), *Yuan Shuo* (元朔), *Yuan Zheng* (元正), *Yuan Chen* (元辰), *Zheng Dan* (正旦), *Xin Zheng* (新正), *Xin Chun* (新春), *Xin Nian* (新年) etc. All these names indicate the same reality: “The beginning (*Yuan* 元) of the first day of a year.”

With regard to the origin of *Nian* (年), there are widespread legends or traditions. One of the legends narrates about a mythical animal resembling a ferocious lion called *Nian* (年). Throughout the year, this animal lived in remote mountains. Since food was scarce in the mountains during winter time, the ferocious animal would come down and enter into the village spreading terror and wounding people and animals. With each coming winter, a sense of terror was felt among the villagers. The entire hamlet was completely unpeaceful. Many people had no alternatives but to escape from the ferocity of *Nian*. As time went by, people realized what *Nian* was most afraid of bright red, bright flames, and the tremendous voice. After conferring together, the villagers decided that every household should also have these three elements: red color, bright flames and loud noises.

In this way, *Nian* would not dare to enter the village anymore. For this reason, when winter started, to prevent the animal’s mortal attack, every household had to hang a big red painted plank on the door, and burn a big bonfire at the entrance of the house. During the night, the residents of the house did not sleep. In every house, people had to shout and make tremendous noise. On that night, as *Nian* approached the village, it would see the red planks and the bright fires and hear the terrifying noises coming from every corner, and a great fear would compel the ferocious animal to retreat back into the mountains.

On the second day, in the early morning, the villagers would gather together and celebrate the victory over evil. They would congratulate each other for the remarkable feat by saying to each other: “*Gong Xi, Gong Xi*” (恭喜恭喜!), that is, “Congratulations! Congratulations!” The townspeople would also congratulate each other on the happy occasion by saying to each other “*Guo Nian*” (that is, the ferocious animal *Nian*) has already passed (*Guo* 過)! All believed that that day was a great day. Every following winter, the families would not forget to protect themselves from *Nian*. For this reason, every family would continue to hang up a red plank on the door, set an open fire and make noise.

The Sound of the Firecrackers (Bao Zhu 爆竹) Does Away with the Old Things

Since ancient times, on New Year’s Eve, family members gather together to talk and laugh in an atmosphere of recreation and entertainment to wait for the time period between 11

15. Barley, wheat, rice, beans and sesame (*Wu Gu* 五穀, five grains).

p.m. and 1 a.m. As the clock strikes 11:00, both the wide streets and small alleys are filled with the sound of firecrackers announcing the arrival of the new year.

It is interesting to note the fact that the firecrackers are wrapped with red paper. After going off, the red paper explodes into small pieces, indicating the sweeping victory over *Nian* (年), symbolizing a happy and auspicious event. Setting off firecrackers during the Chinese New Year manifests a lively, bustling and exciting time. The action of setting off firecrackers is also meant to expel pestilences, to drive out epidemic diseases, and to get rid of old things.

The Meaning of the First Meal

The Chinese New Year is not only the first day of the year, it is also the “first” meal. Although different regions and provinces have their own recipes and culinary traditions, all are attentive to the dishes served on that day. Furthermore, all the dishes are connected with the spirit of the festival.

People usually eat dumplings¹⁶ (*Jiao Zi* 餃子), an ancient foodstuff which dates back at least to the Three Kingdoms period (*San Guo* 三國, 220–265 AD). The reason why dumplings are eaten during the Chinese New Year is primarily attributed to the fact that originally *Jiao Zi* (餃子) were also known with another character pronounced exactly the same as our *Jiao Zi* (餃子), that is, 角子 (*Jiao Zi*).¹⁷ Now, 角子 (*Jiao Zi*) and although 交子 (*Jiao Zi*) have the same pronunciation, but are written differently. The character 交 (*Jiao*) means 接交 (*Jie Jiao*), that is, “to hand over.” 交子 (*Jiao Zi*) means “it has arrived” (or *Dao le* 到了) meaning the time to celebrate “has arrived”! On New Year’s Eve, many families fold and wrap dumplings together. This precious moment further develops relations between the members of a family.¹⁸

On the New Year’s Day: To Pay a New Year Call or to Wish Somebody a Happy New Year Rite

To pay a New Year call or to wish someone a Happy New Year (*Bai Nian He Jie* 拜年賀節) is quite an important ceremony during the Spring Festival. In ancient times, on the first day of the Chinese New Year, early in the morning, civil and military officials had to go to the imperial court to congratulate the Emperor. Different social groups had to go to the ancestral hall or memorial temple to celebrate the rite of exchanging greetings. Without a doubt, the most common ceremony is to call on relatives or to visit them (*Zou Qin* 走親) and offer congratulations to each other.

Started in the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), by the Ming Dynasty (明代, 1368–

16. The word “dumpling” is a broad classification for a dish that consists of small pieces of dough shaped like a crescent moon, often wrapped around a filling (meat or vegetable).

17. In the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279) there is already the name *Jiao Zi* (角子).

18. The New Year’s Eve dinner is the most important dinner for the Chinese. Normally, this is the family reunion dinner *par excellence*, especially for those with family members who normally live away from home.

1644 AD) the custom to offer New Year congratulatory cards became popular. In the Qing Dynasty (清代, 1644–1912 AD), the use of the color red for these cards also became common. The red New Year congratulatory card was then put into an elegant and well decorated small box to express the solemnity and beauty of the ceremony.

Some Recreational Activities from the Chinese New Year to the Lantern Festival (Yuan Xiao Jie 元宵節, the 15th Day of the First Lunar Month)

There are many varied recreational activities which occur from the first day of the first lunar month (New Year's Day) to the fifteenth day of the first lunar month (Lantern Festival, *Yuan Xiao Jie* 元宵節). The Lantern Festival is considered the conclusion of the Spring Festival. Although every region has its own unique activities, nevertheless, all are invited to take part in the festivities, to greet each other, and create a joyous atmosphere.

The lion dance, the dragon dance, walking on stilts (*Cai Gao Qiao* 踩高蹺), and strolling through the temple fairs (*Miao Hui* 廟會) are the main traditional recreational activities during the Spring Festival. From ancient times, the dragon (*Long* 龍) was considered as a deity, along with the phoenix (*Feng* 鳳), the mythical Chinese unicorn or Kylin (*Qi Lin* 麒麟), and the tortoise (*Gui* 龜). The concept of dragon suggests a kind of beautiful imagination; it is the embodiment of what is auspicious and prosperous. People ask the dragon for blessing and protection, good weather for the crops, and a bumper harvest for the four seasons. The dragon dance, therefore, expresses the joyful desire of the people to enjoy a good year. In the traditional dragon dance, the shape of the dragon is made of strips of bamboo and wrapped with silk, satin or leather. The silhouette becomes bright and colorful. Beginning in the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), the custom to light a candle inside the dragon became common.¹⁹

Another ancient dance is called stilt walking (*Cai Gao Qiao*). Initially, in order to collect the fruits on tall trees, farmers employed two long rods tied to their legs or feet. In the Warring States (475–221 BC), there were already some evidence of the practice of walking on stilts while dancing. In Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD), dancing on stilts started to become a real art. The variety and the complexity of dancing on stilts creates an atmosphere of amusement and attracts the attention of viewers.

The purpose of strolling about the temple fairs (*Miao Hui*)²⁰, apart from enjoying the lion or dragon dance and a variety of other shows, is to buy toys and eat snacks. These recreational activities originated from a time when there were no department stores nor

19. The Dragon dance in Southern and Northern Dynasties (南北朝, 420–589 AD) was a kind of weapon used in the battlefield to beat back the enemy.

20. *Miao Hui* (廟會) literally means “temple gathering.” It refers to the Chinese religious gatherings held by folk temples for the worship of the Chinese gods. These collective rites are usually held in the Chinese New Year or in specific temples at the birthday of the deity enshrined in the temple itself. Other names for 廟會 (*Miao Hui*) are: *Jie Chang* (節場), which means “outside festivals;” *Xiang Hui* (香會), that is, “incense gatherings;” *Sai She* (賽社), that is, “communal ritual bodies;” and *Sai Hui* (賽會), that is, “communal ritual gatherings.”

24–7 entertainment on TV. Strolling about the temple fairs is when people can relax from the stress of daily life and enjoy themselves.

Praying in a Temple to Receive a Year-Long Blessing

Praying in a temple during Chinese New Year is believed to be a particularly blessed activity that will lead to a smooth coming year. Thousands of people flock to pray in the temples throughout the Spring Festival. Religion in Taiwan is primarily about practice, about an individual relationship with deities and spirits, about harnessing the powers of the spirit world to help people in the human realm. There are common patterns in worshipping (*Bai Bai* 拜拜) across the different folk religions, but all include praying and offering. It is first of all an expression of respect (*Jing Yi* 敬意) to approach the temple altar or tablets and statues. Candles and incense²¹ are lit; “golden paper” (*Jin Zhi* 金紙, joss money) is burnt. The supplicant puts his/her hands together before the chest, and bows towards the deities. It is also an “expression of thanksgiving” (*Gan Xie* 感謝). The supplicant thanks the deities for help received in response to earlier entreaties (illness, good fortune, etc.).

Praying at the temple can also be an “expression of offering apology” (*Xie Zui* 謝罪). If one’s life or those of one’s family seem to be dogged by ill health or bad luck, people assume that they have offended a malicious spirit or demon. Divination may be used to ascertain the nature of the offense and the deity offended. By throwing of divinatory blocks called *Bwa-Bwei* (筊杯)²², the supplicant receives yes or no answers to questions asked by the diviners. Finally, it is an expression of preventing “haunting” (*Bi Sui* 避祟). Since it is believed that each piece of ground and each building has its own specific spirit, many could have been uncared for by descendants and therefore liable to malicious acts. In such cases, care must be taken to avoid causing offense.²³

THE LANTERN FESTIVAL (YUAN XIAO JIE 元宵節)

The fifteenth day of the first month of the Lunar Year is called *Yuan Xiao Jie* (元宵節), that

21. The Chinese word for incense, *Xiang* (香), means “fragrance,” which is produced by burning the resins, barks, wood, dried flowers, fruit and seeds of various botanical species. The main ingredient of Taiwanese incense is “sandalwood” (*Tan* 檀). Since prehistoric times, smoke rising from incense has symbolized a believer’s prayers floating upwards to the heavens. The fragrant smell also symbolizes pure thoughts in a supplicant’s heart.

22. In Mandarin, the two characters are read *Jiao Bei* (筊杯, literally translated as “bamboo cups”). The blocks are wooden divination tools, which are used in pairs and thrown to answer a yes or no question. They are made of wood or bamboo and carved into a crescent shape. Each block is round on one side (known as the *Yin* 陰 side) and flat on the other (known as the *Yang* 陽 side).

23. See M. Caltonhill, *Private Prayers and Public Parades. Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei* (Taipei: Department of Information, Taipei City Government, 2002), 43–6.

is, the first evening of the New Year in which the moon is full and is commonly known as the Lantern Festival.²⁴

The fifteenth day marks the end of the activities related to the Spring Festival or Chinese New Year (*Chun Jie* 春節). For this reason, the celebration of the Lantern Festival (*Yuan Xiao Jie*) is as joyful and lively as the Spring Festival celebration. The forefathers called the first month of the lunar year *Yuan Yue* (元月). Furthermore, the character 夜 (*Ye*) “night” means the same as the character 宵 (*Xiao*). Therefore *Yuan Xiao* (元宵) indicates the “first evening” in which the bright full moon is visible in the New Year. The celebration conveys the meaning of the beauty of being fully reunited (of family members). In fact, *Yuan Xiao Jie* has another name: *Tuan Yuan Jie* (團圓節), which means “Family Reunion Festival.”

The most important activity of this celebration is the offering of sacrifices to gods and ancestors. In the evening of the festival every household displays different decorated lanterns. This is why the festival is also called *Deng Jie* (燈節), the Lantern Festival.

Riddle guessing (*Cai Mi* 猜謎) was also an interesting game among educated people in old times.

The Origins of Yuan Xiao Jie (元宵節)

There are many traditions explaining the origin of the *Yuan Xiao Jie* (元宵節), however they all share a nexus: the offering of sacrifices to gods and ancestors. The first root is related to the worship of *Tai Yi* (太乙). *Tai Yi* is the name of the spirit of the Pole Star. *Tai Yi* occupies the central position in the heavens, and oversees the hundred spirits. This spirit has been widely worshipped and received cult offerings. Evidences for the popular cult following of *Tai Yi* appeared in Warring States Period (481–403 BC)²⁵. Mythological and cosmological interpretations also relate *Tai Yi* to the sun and the moon. It is also said to control rain and water.

In order to have good weather for the crops, prosperity for the country and peace for its people, at the beginning of every new year, people held solemn ceremonies offering sacrifices to *Tai Yi*. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (141–87 BC), used to hang many shining lights throughout the palace on the evening of offerings so that the rite of offering sacrifices could continue all night long. When Emperor Wu established the *Tai Chu* (太初) calendar in 104 BC, he classified the celebration of offering of sacrifices to *Tai Yi* as an important festival and fixed the date on the fifteenth day of the first month of the Lunar Year.

A second root of this festival is related to a Taoist tenet: three gods are in charge of heaven, earth and water (*San Guan* 三官). Each god has its own mission: the god in charge of heaven bestows blessings on people; the god in charge of earth absolves people from guilt, and the god in charge of water saves people from calamities. Each god has also its

24. See 漢啓新 – 朱筱新, “中國古代漢族節日風情” (臺北市: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 26–39.

25. See XiaoGan, Liu, ed., *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy* (Chinese University of Hong Kong: Springer, 2014), 109–12.

own birthday: the god of heaven celebrates on the fifteenth of the first month of the lunar year, or the first full moon; the god of earth celebrates on the fifteenth of the seventh month, and the god of water on the fifteenth of the tenth month.

On the birthday of the god of heaven, in particular, musical instruments are played, colored lights are hung up, people walk in the streets admiring the festive lanterns, asking for blessing, forgiveness, and protection from calamities.

A third root of the origin of *Yuan Xiao Jie* is connected with the encouragement that Buddhist doctrine received during the Han Dynasty (220 BC–220 AD). In the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD), Buddhism had already entered Chinese culture. Emperor Han Ming Di (漢明帝, 28–75 AD) was an advocate of Buddhist doctrine. Regardless of the social condition, he officially established that every year on the fifteenth of the first month of the lunar year, for that night, bright lights should be hung up everywhere to show reverence to Buddha.

Yuan Xiao (元宵): Sweet Dumplings Made of Glutinous Rice Flour for the Lantern Festival (Yuan Xiao Jie 元宵節)

The name *Yuan Xiao* (元宵) not only indicates the Lantern festival but also a particular foodstuff eaten on this occasion. *Yuan Xiao* are sweet dumplings made of glutinous rice flour. This custom started probably during the Tang (唐代, 618–907 AD) and Song (宋代, 960–1279 AD) Dynasties. During the Tang Dynasty, people would eat *Tang Wan* (湯丸), that is, “soup with balls” at the time of the Lantern Festival.

It is probably the earliest form of the current sweet dumplings. Particularly during Song Dynasty, people liked to eat milk sugar balls (*Yuan Zi* 圓子) and sweet bean balls (*Tuan Zi* 團子). Now, both characters *Yuan Zi* and *Tuan Zi* mean “ball,” “round,” “circular,” “unity,” and are synonyms of *Yuan Xiao*. These “balls” are made with polished glutinous rice mixed with fine flour, and the filling is made of walnut meat, rose petals and refined sugar. The balls are as big as a walnut.

Furthermore, the tradition of eating *Yuan Xiao* during the Lantern Festival *Yuan Xiao Jie* (元宵節) is also related to the “Lady in the Moon” (*Chang E* 嫦娥). *Chang E* is the Chinese moon goddess prominently found in legend and literature, who in mortal life stole from her husband *Hou Yi* (后羿), a good archer and a ruthless ruler of the state of You Qiong (有窮) during the Xia Dynasty (夏朝, 2205–1766 BC), the herb of immortality and fled to the moon.

The legend tells that *Hou Yi* obtained some immortal drugs from goddess *Xi Wang Mu* (西王母). *Chang E*, the wife of *Hou Yi*, considering that people would suffer forever if *Hou Yi* would enjoy immortal life, stole and secretly swallowed the immortal drug and ran away to the moon.

THE TOMB SWEEPING FESTIVAL (QING MING JIE 清明節)

Qing Ming (清明) is another celebration (*Jie Qi* 節氣)²⁶ belonging to the lunar calendar. Every year, during this period, farmers begin the spring ploughing and sowing. People also wait to welcome the arrival of the spring season.

In ancient times, one or two days before *Qing Ming*, there was a festival called the Cold Food Festival (*Han Shi Jie* 寒食節). These two festivals, in the past, were two different celebrations. However, over time, as people could not adjust to the practice of “consuming cold food and using no fire for cooking” (*Jin Huo Han Shi* 禁火寒食), the Cold Food Festival gradually lost its flavor and was merged into the *Qing Ming Jie*²⁷.

The Origin of Cold Food and the Ban on Fire or Cooking (Jin Huo Han Shi 禁火寒食)

The festival of “cold food” (*Han Shi Jie* 寒食節) or the festival of “fire forbidding” (*Jin Huo Jie* 禁火節) is related to the legendary selfless subject of Duke Wen of Jin, Jie Zhi Tui (介之推).²⁸ The story should begin with *Li Ji* (驪姬),²⁹ the beloved concubine of Jin Xian Gong (晉獻公),³⁰ the Ruler of the State of Jin (晉). According to the Chinese historical book, *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳), *The Zuo's Recordings* or *The Annals of Spring and Autumn* (722–484 BC), written by Zuo Qiu Ming (左丘明), *Li Ji* in order to help her son Xi Qi (奚齊) to become the heir of the Kingdom (Jin Xian Gong 晉獻公), intrigued to cause the suicide of the wronged crown prince, Shen Sheng (申生), telling him that the Duke dreamt about his late queen and that he wanted Shen Sheng to offer a sacrifice to his mother, the late queen.

Shen Sheng was a devoted son who sacrificed himself silently rather than let his father know the truth and suffer from knowing her viciousness. Learning that they would be the next target of *Li Ji*, Chong Er (重耳) and Yi Wu (夷吾), Shen Sheng's younger brother born of the same mother, ran away to the neighboring states. Jie Zhi Tui was one of the followers of Chong Er. After nineteen years of wandering among the states, Chong Er finally went back home and ascended the throne. Since his return, Jie Zhi Tui had never talked about official positions though he had never been named for any political appointment. His mother said to him, “Why don't you ask Chong Er?” He answered, “It is Heaven's grace that Chong Er gained the throne to continue the Duchy of Jin (晉). But my colleagues arrogantly thought that it was the result of their efforts. To steal a thing

26. The Chinese expression *Jie Qi* (節氣) indicates the solar term or period, that is, one of the 24 periods, or approximately 15 days each, into which the lunar year is divided, corresponding to the day on which the sun enters the 1st or 15th degree of one of the 12 zodiacal signs. Each period being given an appropriate name indicating the obvious changes in nature at the time it comes “round.”

27. See 漢啓新 - 朱筱新, “中國古代漢族節日風情” (臺北市: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 40–50.

28. See Zuo Qiu Ming (左丘明) “Jie Zhi Tui Ignoring Official Positions” in *Annals of the Spring and Autumn Period*, “春秋左傳句解,” vol. 2, (Taipei, 1969), 84.

29. See Zuo Qiu Ming (左丘明) “Jin Duke Killing Shen Sheng, the Crown Prince” in *Annals of the Spring and Autumn Period* “春秋左傳句解,” vol. 2, (Taipei, 1969), 52.

30. Jin Xian Gong (晉獻公) fathered three sons: Shen Sheng (申生), Chong Er (重耳) and Yi Wu (夷吾) all bore by his wife, the late Queen.

from others is to be a thief. They are taking heaven's grace as their own merits. It is hard for me to work together with them." His mother said, "You may let him know that you are here." "It would be senseless to do that, since I am going to live in seclusion in Mian Mountain (綿山)." "I will go with you, then," his mother replied. When the memory about Jie Zhi Tui came back to Chong Er, he summoned Jie Zhi Tui several times in vain. He was so earnest to see Jie Zhi Tui that he tried many ways to get him out of the mountain but was unsuccessful. Finally, Jie Zhi Tui died and Chong Er ordered Mian Mountain to be the memorial place for Jie Zhi Tui.

However, the legend goes that Chong Er resorted to setting a fire on the mountain, in the hope to force Jie Zhi Tui to come out. Sadly, he found Jie Zhi Tui's burnt body holding a burnt tree and his mother died nearby. The festival of cold food (*Han Shi Jie* 寒食節) was thus set up in memorial of Jie Zhi Tui by Chong Er. No fire (*Jin Huo Jie* 禁火節) was allowed on this day.

Bustling with Ancestral Memorial Ceremonies and Tomb Sweeping on Qing ming (清明)

The earliest written evidence of the two characters *Qing Ming* (清明) can be dated back to the Zhou Dynasty (周朝, 1046–221 BC). According to the forefathers' explanation, the expression *Qing Ming* refers to "every creation growing and thriving readily. All fresh and bright."³¹ That is, when the whole creation grows, everywhere is fresh (clean, *Qing* 清) and bright (pure, *Ming* 明). This is the reason why the celebration is called *Qing Ming Jie* (清明節).

With the arrival of the spring season, the sprouting of grass and trees or a patch of fresh green vegetation offers people a sense of freshness, peace, serenity, brightness and purity. The practice of going to sweep the tombs (*Sao Mu* 掃墓) actually came much later.

During Nan Zhou period (南周, 1046–256 BC), the already common practice of ancestral memorial ceremonies was held only in the temples, and it was not related to a particular feast. Presumably, only after the Spring and Autumn Period (Chun Qiu 春秋, 770–476 BC), in order to celebrate the memorial of Jie Zhi Tui (介之推), who was burnt and buried on Mian Mountain (綿山), the practice of ancestral memorial ceremonies at the graves and "tomb sweeping" became more common.

In the Han Dynasty (漢代, 260 BC–220 AD), the custom of holding ancestral memorial ceremonies by the tombs was called "going up to the grave" (*Shang Zhong* 上塚 or *Shang Fen* 上墳). In the Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD), the practice of "going up to the grave" and bringing "cold foodstuffs" (*Han Shi* 寒食) became common. The practice to scatter paper money (*Zhi Qian* 紙錢) made to resemble real money as an offering to the dead also became popular. Later during the Five Dynasties Period (Wu Dai 五代, 907–979), the sober practice of "going up to the grave," the open ancestral memorial ceremony, the eating of cold foodstuffs, and the burning of paper money remained popular. In the Song

31. See 漢啓新 – 朱筱新, "中國古代漢族節日風情" (臺北市: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 44.

Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), teachers and students used to go to sweep the tombs and at the same time to have an excursion (*Jiao You* 郊遊). In the Ming Dynasty (明代, 1368–1644 AD), the practice of “going up to the grave” (*Shang Fen*) and the school or family outing (*Jiao You*) were combined. Thus during the third month of the new year, on the day of *Qing Ming Jie* (清明節), people went out for the tomb sweeping. Some carried offerings and others wine pots. On the sedan (or chair) or on the back of the saddle of the horse, paper money was hung up to be burnt later by the grave. People, on bended knees, worshipped the ancestors and sprinkled wine on the tomb. Some wept aloud and others removed the weeds on the grave.

After concluding the ritual, people found a suitable place, to gather together, to arrange the food and drink that were just offered, and eat in harmony.

The Tomb Sweeping Festival, Qing Ming Jie (清明節) and the Joyous Treading on the Green Grass (To Go for an Outing in Early Spring): Ta Qing (踏青)

Originally, *Qing Ming Jie* (清明節) was a joyous day for welcoming the spring season. On that day, cheerfully, every family went out to the countryside. This outing was called *Ta Qing* (踏青). *Ta* (踏) means “to step on” and *Qing* (青) means “green.” After a long and hard winter, people felt the need to enjoy the warm breeze, the sunlight and enchanting scene of the new season.

Ta Qing (踏青) does not only refer to the outing, but also to leisure activities: family or friends having a picnic, picking all kinds of grass (flora), chasing butterflies, playing tug-of-war or seesaw, and flying kites. The last two activities are very interesting. In the past, the seesaw consisted in tying only one rope to a big tree and people had to grip the rope and sway. It was intended to cultivate a spirit of courage and promote a healthier condition in body and mind. With respect to flying kites, during the Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD) this activity referred to a kite placed on a flute (*Xiao Di* 小笛) made of bamboo. While the kite is flying high, the air is forced into the cavity of the small flute and produces a sound like that of the instrument *Zheng* (箏)³². It was also used by the army to transmit messages to ask for help. In the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), flying kites became a leisure activity for ordinary people. People organized competitions to fly kites, and in the night they would hang small colorful lanterns made of paper to fly in the air, as bright as the stars. As a matter of fact, such kites were also called *Shen Deng* (神燈), that is, “magic lamps.”

In the Qing Dynasty (清代, 1644–1911 AD), the practice of flying kites became even more fashionable. On the Tomb Sweeping day, after concluding all the ancestral memorial ceremonies and tomb sweeping, people liked to fly kites around the grave. A successful kite flyer could fly the kite higher and steadier than other people. The free waving of

32. *Zheng* (箏) is a 21-25 stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to the zither.

the kite in the air was also considered a good omen. People thought that it would bring good luck by getting rid of diseases and calamities.

Finally, the practice of *Ta Qing*, that is, “treading on the green grass,” also includes the action of sticking some small branches of willow in their hair. Coming home from the outing, people carried branches of willow on their heads to express their joy.

THE DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL (DUAN WU JIE 端午節)

The fifth day of the fifth month of the Lunar calendar is called Dragon Boat Festival (*Duan Wu Jie*). Originally this festival was called *Duan Wu* (端五). The character *Duan* (端) means “the first,” “the beginning,” that is, the beginning of every month. The character *Wu* (五) means “five.” In a year, the “fifth day” of each of the twelve months, can be called *Duan Wu*. In order to distinguish the festival *Duan Wu* from the “the fifth day of the beginning” of all the other months, *Duan Wu* (端五) became *Duan Wu* (端午). *Wu* (五) and *Wu* (午) have the same pronunciation. Therefore, the expression *Duan Wu* indicates “every year, the fifth day of the fifth month”³³.

The Origin of the Duan Wu Jie (端午節)

There are several traditions regarding the origin of this festival. According to ancient records, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝, 420–589 AD), people handed down five possible explanations: to remember Qu Yuan (屈原 340–278 BC), a famous Warring States Period statesman and poet; to remember Jie Zhi Tui (介之推), the selfless subject of the Duke of Jin; to remember Wu Zi Xu (伍子胥, died 484 BC), a famous politician removed from office; to remember the young girl Cao E (曹娥, 130–143 AD) who showed filial piety for her father; or to remember an ancient sacrifice to a Daoist god. However, the majority of Chinese people believe that the festival is set to remember Qu Yuan (屈原).

Qu Yuan (屈原, 343–290 BC)³⁴

Qu Yuan’s (屈原) is a patriotic poet. His poetic work is called *Li Sao* (離騷). It was, in his time, a creation of a new style of the Chinese poetry. Through *Li Sao*, he established an unshakable position in Chinese literature history. He loved his state and his King.

According to *The Biography of Qu Yuan* (屈原列傳) of *The Historical Records* (史記) written by 司馬遷 (Si Ma Qian), Qu Yuan (屈原) was very trusted by King Huai of State Chu (楚懷王), because of his outstanding ability. This caused the envy of his colleague, Shang Guan Da Fu (上官大夫), who defamed Qu Yuan to King Huai. The King then estranged Qu Yuan. As a reaction, Qu Yuan wrote the famous poetic work *Li Sao* to express himself

33. See 漢啓新 – 朱筱新, “中國古代漢族節日風情” (臺北市: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 51–63.

34. See 司馬遷 (Si Ma Qian), *The Historical Records* “史記,” vol. 4 (臺灣: 大明王氏出版公司, 1975), 28.

but could not change the situation. At that time, State Qin (秦) planned to attack State Qi (齊), an ally of State Chu (楚). State Qin promised State Chu with a land of six hundred *Li*³⁵ in exchange of Chu's neutrality. Chu agreed but Qin failed to keep the promise, resulting in a war between the two and Chu suffering a big defeat. Afterwards, with a lure of marriage, Qin invited King Huai (懷王) to visit Qin (秦). Turning a deaf ear to Qu Yuan's (屈原) objection, King Huai went to Qin. He was kept there as a hostage until his death. His successor, King Qing Xiang (頃襄王) also believed in the calumny of Shang Guan Da Fu (上官大夫) and decided to exile Qu Yuan. Finally, Qu Yuan sank himself in the Mi Luo River (汨羅江)³⁶ on the fifth day of the fifth month.

His deep love for his motherland, the sense of despair because the people in power only cared about themselves, the protection of his innocence and the moral principles of his life were the reasons for his decision.

The Chinese people love Qu Yuan because of his patriotic personality and his contribution to Chinese literature. The legend says that the people of Chu State, upon hearing of Qu Yuan's death, dropped glutinous rice stuffed with different fillings and wrapped in bamboo, called *Zong Zi* (粽子) into the Mi Luo River to feed the fish, in order to protect Qu Yuan's body from being eaten by the fish. For the search of his body, people organized a team of boats which was the origin of the dragon boat competition to be held in memory of him, year after year to this day. *Zong Zi* has also become the traditional delicacy served on the fifth day of the fifth month, the Dragon Boat Festival.

The Dragon Boat Race (Long Zhou Jing Du 龍舟競渡) on the Fifth Day of the Fifth Month of Each Year

During the Southern Dynasties (南朝, 420–589 AD), the practice of celebrating the dragon boat race competition was already in vogue.

The reason why in ancient times people used to participate in these dragon boat races is very interesting. The boat was shaped like a dragon: the head, the tail, the scale and the shell. For this reason, the boat was called a "Dragon Boat" (*Long Zhou* 龍舟). There were many jobs for those on the boat. Some rowed, others beat the drum, and one person, chosen as the official of the boat, waved a banner in order to coordinate the movements of the occupants. The movement of waving the banner was intended to coordinate the movements of the occupants. The rhythm of the beating of the drum was the key point for the rowers. According to the drumbeats, the rowers had to paddle. The sound of the clapping of hands was meant to combine with the sound of the water. The clapping incited the vigor of the rowers.

Over the course of several dynasties, the number of boats increased. The spirit of

35. The *Li* (里), also known as the Chinese mile, is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. The *Li* has varied considerably over time but was usually about a third as long as the English mile and now has a standardized length of a half-kilometer (500 meters or 1,640 feet).

36. Hu Nan Province (湖南省).

competition and a need for strong leadership skills also became indispensable. The race also aimed at encouraging both sides to strive to be the first.

To Eat Dumplings Made of Glutinous Rice Wrapped in Bamboo or Reed Leaves (Zong Zi 粽子) and Drink Realgar Wine (Xiong Huang Jiu 雄黄酒)

In the Han Dynasty (漢代, 206 BC–220 AD), the name *Zong Zi* (粽子) was already in use. It indicated rice or sticky rice wrapped with reed leaves or wild rice leaves. In the Ming Dynasty (明代, 1368–1644 AD), it was used to describe the use of wild rice leaves to bind up broomcorn millet-rice, shaped like horns or palm leaves (*Zong Lu* 棕櫚). For this reason the dumplings were called *Zong* (粽). In the Han Dynasty, the eating of *Zong Zi* was not related to the Dragon Boat Festival, *Duan Wu Jie* (端午節). It was eaten during summer time. Only during the Western Jin Dynasty (西晉, 265–316 AD) did people start to eat *Zong Zi* for the Dragon Boat Festival. The filling of the *Zong Zi* was made of sweetened bean paste, lard, pine nuts, walnuts, honey, etc.

During the Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD), in the Imperial Palace, on *Duan Wu Jie* there was a competition of shooting *Zong Zi* using a bow decorated with horns. Those who were able to hit the target were allowed to take that dumpling. Another kind of competition consisted in unwrapping the *Zong Zi* and the one who was able to keep the longest leaf in the least amount of time was declared the winner.

In the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), the *Duan Wu* (端午) celebration was also called *Zong Festival* (粽節), that is, the Dumpling Feast. The *Zong Zi* was also considered a nice present for relatives and friends. As mentioned earlier, the custom to eat *Zong Zi* and the memorial of the famous statesman and poet Qu Yuan (屈原) were connected.

The custom to drink realgar wine (*Xiong Huang Jiu* 雄黄酒) also is related to the celebration of *Duan Wu*. Realgar (*Xiong Huang* 雄黃) is a kind of drug or remedy. “Realgar” is a monoclinic arsenic sulfide mineral with a brilliant red color. It is a toxic mineral. It has the ability to inhibit fungus, the coccus of the gold grapes, bacillus that make things deformed, among other capabilities. Chinese medicine says that realgar can kill hundreds of deadly insects. In the old days, to drink liquor with a small amount of realgar on the Dragon Boat Festival was believed to have the effect of avoiding attacks from snakes and insects. As a matter of fact, *Duan Wu Jie* marks the beginning of the new season, summer time, when insects are much more common.

Some people have the custom to use realgar water (*Xiong Huang Shui* 雄黃水) to sprinkle in and around their house. Some realgar water is also poured on the ears, in the nose, and on the forehead of kids as a sign of protection. Realgar wine had to be taken with moderation to avoid any harm.

To Stick Sweet Sedge (Chang Pu 菖蒲), to Girdle Fragrant Bags (Xiang Dai 香袋) and to Hang up Pictures of Zhong Kui (鍾馗)

In ancient times, in the early morning of the *Duan Wu Jie* (端午節), people went to the

countryside to collect wormwood (*Ai* 艾) and stick it on the doors of the house. *Ai* is a kind of chrysanthemum. Its stalk and its leaves contain a volatile fragrant balsamic oil that can expel mosquitos and flies. On the same day of the celebration, people also girdled fragrant bags with colorful silk strips and hang them on the doors. This practice increased the atmosphere of joy and happiness.

After the Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD), the practice to hang up the portrait of Zhong Kui (鍾馗) also became popular. Zhong Kui is traditionally regarded as a hero and conqueror of ghosts and evil beings. His picture is often painted on household gates as a guardian spirit, as well as in places of business where expensive goods are sold.

ZHONG YUAN JIE (中元節) ALSO KNOWN AS ZHONG YUAN PU-DU (中元普渡):
UNIVERSAL FERRY OR UNIVERSAL SALVATION OF ZHONG YUAN JIE

Zhong Yuan Jie (中元節) falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar. On this day, Chinese people present offerings to the ancestors (*Ji Zu* 祭祖) and to the homeless ghosts (*Ye Gui* 野鬼, or “Wild ghost”).

In Taiwan, people think this is the day to feed the “good brothers” (*Hao Xiong Di* 好兄弟). They believe that on the first day of the seventh lunar month, the “gates of hell” (*Gui Men Kai* 鬼門開) are opened allowing ghosts to wander the earth. They are not closed until the last day of the month. In the meantime, many local people refrain from certain activities and make lavish offerings to placate any mischievous ghosts. People will rarely open a new business in this month, plant crops, move home, rearrange furniture, erect a stove, or marry. Superstitious people will travel less, and will avoid leaving clothes outside overnight, in case they are worn by ghosts, which may lead to illness or death of the owner.

According to tradition, a person whose descendants carry out the appropriate funeral ceremonies and make regular offerings will become an ancestral spirit (*Shen* 神); those whose “sons and grandsons” neglect their duties becomes a ghost (*Gui* 鬼) and suffer torments in the afterlife. People dying far from home, without an heir, and by drowning or suicide, also become ghosts. Let out from hell, they seek substitute bodies with which to continue their own transmigration (rebirth), and swimmers present easy targets.³⁷

Normal food, which may be offered to spirits, is said to turn to fire on the lips of these “Hungry Ghosts” (*E Gui* 餓鬼), also known euphemistically as “Good Brothers.” To make it edible, Buddhists recite sutras and conduct ceremonies such as the “Buddhist Ceremony of Water and Land” (*Shui Lu Fa Hui* 水陸法會), *Yu-Lan-Pen* (盂蘭盆, from the Sanskrit, *avalambana*), or simply *Pu-Du* (普渡), that is, “universal ferry” or “universal salvation.”

37. See M. Caltonhill, *Private Prayers and Public Parades. Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei* (Taipei: Department of Information, Taipei City Government, 2002), 131–33.

Originally, *Pu-Du* rites in Taiwan were held continuously throughout the seventh lunar month rotating from one household to another until the end of the month. Following government efforts to curb lavish temple activities, *Pu-Du* activities began being held on the 15th of the month.³⁸

The *avalambana* is intended to signify literally the condition of those unredeemed souls who suffer in a kind of “purgatory” (*Lian Yu* 煉獄), by being suspended upside down until sacrifices made by their offspring on earth compensates to rescue them from their sufferings. It is said to derive from Buddha’s disciple Maudgalyayana (*Mu Lian* 木蓮), who discovered his dead mother in infernal torment, unable to eat any food he offered her. The Buddha told him to feed all abandoned souls, firstly preparing the food by prayers. Food and other offerings are donated by local dignitaries and affluent families who spend large amounts of money to ensure the community’s peace at this time. Floating or hanging lanterns are also displayed to guide the returning ghosts. The burning lanterns, in fact, light the way for the “Good Brothers.” Buddhists and Daoists both celebrate this event. Buddhist temples also construct “dharma boats,” sometimes made of joss money. These symbolize the “ferrying” (*Du* 渡) involved in salvation.

This festival, especially in Ban Qiao (板橋) near Taipei, also developed into the custom of “grabbing the flag” (*Qiang Qi* 搶旗) in which flags are mounted dozens of feet up in the air at the top of a bamboo framework and greasy poles. The first person to capture the flag is rewarded with rice and money, while the flag may be sold to sailors to ensure safety at sea.

THE MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL (ZHONG QIU JIE 中秋節)

In the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, the seventh, the eighth and ninth months correspond to the Autumn season (*Qiu Ji* 秋季). The fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar is exactly the middle of the season. On this night, a full moon fills the sky. It corresponds to late September to early October of the Gregorian calendar.

In the Han Dynasty (漢代, 206 BC–220 AD), the Mid-Autumn Festival (*Zhong Qiu Jie* 中秋節) is one of the three most important festivals of the year. It is inherently connected with the system of rites and the tradition of *Chang E* (嫦娥), the Lady in the Moon, the Chinese moon goddess found prominently in legend and literature, who in mortal life stole the herb of immortality and fled to the moon.³⁹

The Origin of the Mid-Autumn Festival

The forefathers always considered the moon to be a deity. It was said that the Moon goddess was a virtuous goddess. She blessed people. Whenever people throughout the

38. The 15th day of the 7th lunar month.

39. See 漢啓新 – 朱筱新, “中國古代漢族節日風情” (臺北市: 臺灣商務印書館, 1995), 74–85.

world violated the will of Heaven, she acted on behalf of the Lord of Heaven and issued a warning. For this reason, people revere the Moon goddess.

In the ancient times, springtime had one day for holding memorial ceremonies, whereas autumn had one month for the offering of sacrifices. Both the one-day spring memorial ceremony and the autumnal one-month memorial ceremonies were particularly solemn. Since the Wei and Jin Dynasties (魏晉代, 220–420 AD), every year, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, offering sacrifices and worshipping the moon were already commonplace.

Starting from the Zhou Dynasty (周代, 1046–221 BC), the lunar deity, became a female, but she was not identified yet with *Chang E* (嫦娥). It was only during the Warring State Period (戰國, 475–221 BC), that the legend of Chang E the lady fleeing to the moon, became popular.

To Enjoy a Beautiful Full Moon (Shang Yue 賞月) and the Reverence to the Moon (Bai Yue 拜月)

On the night of Mid-Autumn Festival (*Zhong Qiu Jie* 中秋節), when the moon is completely bright, clear, gentle and soft, people gather together to enjoy the beauty of the moon.

Since the Tang Dynasty (唐代, 618–907 AD), on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival (*Zhong Qiu Jie*), when the Jade Hare (*Yu Tu* 玉兔), that is, the moon, rises from the East, every family takes moon cake (*Yue Bing* 月餅), pomelos (*You Zi* 柚子), taro (*Yu Tou* 芋頭), peanuts (*Hua Sheng* 花生) and arranges them in the courtyard, on the balcony, or on the table.⁴⁰ All the members of the family talk together and share the offerings with the moon deity while enjoying the shining of the moon.

In the Song Dynasty (宋代, 960–1279 AD), the custom to enjoy the beauty of the full moon became even more elaborate. Rich and powerful families, sat on their balconies dining on bountiful banquets and enjoying the beautiful full moon together until dawn.

Enjoying the splendor of the moon also included revering the roundness of the moon (*Tuan Yuan Yue* 團圓月). The roundness of the moon (that is, “full,” “complete”) symbolized the unity and reunion of the family members (*Tuan Yuan* 團圓). The two Chinese characters, in fact, literally mean “ball,” “round,” “circle,” “reunion,” “to gather,” “to reunite,” etc. On the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, (*Zhong Qiu Jie*), family members gather together.

In the Ming Dynasty (明代, 1368–1644 AD), the offerings on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, such as fruit or flat cake, had to be as round as the moon. After presenting the offerings to the moon, the family members share the goods with each other.

It was important to count the number of family members so that the pieces of the “moon cake” (*Yue Bing* 月餅) should neither exceed nor fall short. The size of each cut

40. Every region has different fruits and vegetables that are offered.

piece also had to be the same. If there was someone in the family who was pregnant, then the portion should be bigger. Some people used to keep a piece of “moon cake” (*Yue Bing*) till the New Year’s Eve (*Chu Xi* 除夕) and share it when the whole family reunited again. This piece of “moon cake” was called “round cake” (*Tuan Yuan Bing* 團圓餅). The main ingredients were pine nuts, walnuts, melon seeds, crystal sugar, and lard. The cake had to be fragrant, soft, and delicate not too sweet.⁴¹ The surface of the moon cakes always comes with beautiful patterns: the image of the mythical Moon Palace, the cassia tree, or the portrait of *Chang E* (嫦娥).

The Legend of Eating Moon Cakes (Yue Bing 月餅)

As previously mentioned, the tradition of eating moon cakes (*Yue Bing* 月餅) goes back to ancient times where, during the month of oblations to the moon (*Ji Yue* 祭月), people provided edible offerings to the moon deity. In the past, on the surface of the moon cake there was a color printing (usually red to symbolize victory), whereas on the reverse side, there was a small piece of a squared paper containing a story. The custom consisted in eating the moon cake while discussing the meaning of the pattern and the legend printed on the small piece of paper.

THE CONCEPTS OF “FEAST” AND “TIME” IN THE BIBLE

There are two Hebrew terms to designate the concept of “feast” in the Old Testament: *Hag* (הַג) and *Moed* (מוֹעֵד). The root of the term *Hag*, conveys the idea of “dancing in a circle” and is used to indicate the ritual celebrations of the Hebrew feasts of “pilgrimage.” *Hag* and *Moed* are translated into Greek with one comprehensive term: *Eorte* ἑορτή (ἡς, ἡ), whose original meaning is “liturgical service” and “public commitment” (with respect to the life of the “polis” or city). This service had a clear religious purpose: the worship of the divinity.

The peculiarity of the Hebrew tradition regarding “feasts” and time has been well expressed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century: “Judaism is a religion of ‘time’ which aims at the sanctification of time... Judaism teaches us to feel united to the holiness of time, to be united to sacred events. It teaches us to consecrate sanctuaries that appear during the magnificent course of the year.”⁴²

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Qohelet*) points out in chapter 9 that no matter how uncertain and transient life is, it is always a gift. If justice and wisdom exist, then they consist in valuing and admiring this fundamental gift: “All the times, dress in white clothes....”

41. Other moon cakes commonly have a salty egg yolk in the filling.

42. A. J. Heschel, *Il sabato. Il suo significato per l'uomo moderno* (Milano: Rusconi, 1972), 14–5. Our translation.

For the biblical author of the Old Testament, our time is not a neutral time. Destiny and fate may find the person not ready: “That the race is not won by the speediest, nor the battle by the champions; it is not the wise who get food, nor the intelligent wealth, nor the learned favor: chance and mischance befall them all” (Qo 9:11). For Qohelet, time comes and suddenly overtakes us: “We do not know when our time will come: like fish caught in the treacherous net, like birds caught in the snare, just so are we all trapped by misfortune...” (Qo 9:12).

For this reason, the exhortation to “at all times, dress in white” is not just a question of elegance, but an internal and constant attitude. It is a concrete way to receive and welcome life as a gift.

For Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the human being does not come to the Lord only to praise Him, but also to know exactly the right behavior to have, and how to go ahead in daily life and the life which goes beyond daily life, and to go ahead together. To celebrate a feast in the Bible, therefore, is about the relationship of collaboration between God and human beings. With this existential attitude, even when life is tough and people do not grasp its meaning, there is always the possibility to enjoy life with love: “Spend your life with the woman you love...” (Qo 9:9). Love is seen as the only inheritance given to the human being during his/her life and the struggle for life.

The author offers a parallelism between life and death: “Whatever work you find to do, do it with all your might, for there is neither achievement, nor planning, nor science, nor wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (Qo 9:10). In the Semitic concept of *Sheol*, there is nothing that can make the human being feel alive. The invitation of the author, therefore, is to seize the moment because everything that has been left aside is lost:

So, eat your bread in joy, drink your wine with a glad heart, since God has already approved your actions. At all times, dress in white and keep your head well scented. Spend your life with the woman you love, all the days of futile life God gives you under the sun, throughout your futile days, since this is your lot in life and in the effort you expend under the sun (Qo 9:7–9).

The Bible is full of surprises, joy of living, feasts, music, and dances. For a good feast, there is always a good meal.⁴³ Eating appears in nearly every page of the Bible. In the Gospel of John, the first sign of Jesus is at the wedding banquet in Cana of Galilee (*Jn* 2:3). To eat, drink and celebrate together is also the best description of the universal judgement. The prophet Isaiah presents the final judgement with the images of a banquet:

On this mountain, for all peoples, Yahweh Sabaoth is preparing a banquet of

43. See S. Bieberstein, “Gioia e feste nella Bibbia.” A lecture presented on the occasion of the Congress of Circus Performers, held in Rome, March 2002. At <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom2002_88_90/rc_pc_migrants_pom88-89_bieberstein.htm>.

rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of succulent food, of well-strained wines... he has destroyed death for ever. Lord Yahweh has wiped away the tears from every cheek; he has taken his people's shame away everywhere on earth, for Yahweh has spoken (*Is* 25:6.8).

God Himself recalls this audacious image, that is, to put an end to any kind of suffering, to defeat death, to wipe away the tears of all the peoples. This condition of life is celebrated in a context of a marvelous banquet where God presents himself as a perfect "gastrophile." God Himself takes seat in the feast and celebrates life in all its magnificence, making peace between peoples.

Jesus, answering to a dining companion who recognized as blessed those "who will share the meal in the Kingdom of God," taught the parable of a man who gave a great banquet, and he invited a large number of people. When the time for the banquet came, he sent his servant to inform the invited guests, "Come along: everything is ready now" (*Lk* 14:17).

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes stresses also the importance of the *feast dresses*: "Dress in white clothing." The clothing is not only the external manifestation of the position or the situation of a person, but it is also the expression of his/her internal condition.

In the parable of the celestial banquet (*Mt* 22:1-14), there was someone "not wearing a wedding garment" and the king threw him out.

The use of fragrant oils or precious ointments also played an important role in the celebrations and festivities: "You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over" (*Ps* 23:5).

The psalmist presents God as the master of the house who takes care of the well-being of his guests by offering them food, but also by anointing them.

Again in Psalm 104, God Himself provides oil to make the faces of the guests glow: "Wine to cheer people's hearts, oil to make their faces glow, food to make them sturdy of heart" (*Ps* 104:15).

The anointment then is seen as a "good work" in Psalm 133:

How good, how delightful it is to live as brothers all together! It is like a fine oil on the head, running down the beard, running down Aaron's beard, onto the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon falling on the heights of Zion; for there Yahweh bestows his blessing, everlasting life (*Ps* 133: 1-3).

Dance and music are other fundamental components of the feast. In the Book of Exodus, we have a powerful image of women dancing and celebrating the liberation as a gift of God. Miriam, the prophetess and sister of Aaron took up a tambourine, and all the women followed her with tambourines, dancing: "The prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, while Miriam took up from them the refrain: Sing to Yahweh, for he has covered himself in glory, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (*Ex* 15:20-21).

Miriam is the first dancing-girl and singer in the Bible. She is an elderly person! The liberation of the oppressed people in Egypt started with the whip used by the superintendents of the workers, and now it ends beyond the Sea of Reeds with the tambourine of Miriam. It is the beauty and meekness of a tambourine that celebrates the gift of freedom and salvation.

It is also the experience of many women who welcomed David coming back from defeating the Philistine:

On their return, when David was coming back from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel singing and dancing to meet King Saul, with tambourines, sistrums and cries of joy (1S 18:6).

David, the King of Israel, from Baalah of Juda, brought up the Ark of God. The decision and enthronization was the reason for a joyful dance: “David and the whole House of Israel danced before Yahweh with all their might, singing to the accompaniment of harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals” (2S 6:5); “And David danced whirling round before Yahweh with all his might, wearing a linen loincloth” (2S 6:14).

Not only successful military undertakings, but also events of joy in the ordinary life of a person, a family, a race, or a city are fundamental reasons to celebrate. This is particularly true in the hymns addressed to God. To praise the Lord is the reason to express joy and gladness:

Alleluia. Praise God in his holy place, praise him in the heavenly vault of his power, praise him for his mighty deeds, praise him for all his greatness. Praise him with fanfare of trumpet, praise him with harp and lyre, praise him with tambourines and dancing, praise him with strings and pipes, praise him with the clamor of cymbals, praise him with triumphant cymbals, Let everything that breathes praise Yahweh. Alleluia! (Ps 150).

A real feast always has some gifts to offer to everybody, especially to the poor people. The last part of the Book of Esther presents an interesting aspect of the feasts: the gifts. The jolly festival of Purim is celebrated in the Jewish community every year on the fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Adar (late winter/early spring). It commemorates the liberation of Israel in ancient Persia from Haman’s plot to destroy the people of Israel:

Enjoining them to celebrate the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar every year, as the days on which the Jews had rid themselves of their enemies, and the month in which their sorrow had been turned into gladness, and mourning into a holiday. He therefore told them to keep these as days of

festivity and gladness when they were to exchange presents and make gifts to the poor (*Est* 9:21).

The Biblical texts indicate four major feasts that, with the passing of time, have gone through changes and overlapped their meanings: the feast of Passover or *Pesach* (פֶּסַח); the Unleavened Bread or *Massot* (מַצּוֹת); the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout* (שָׁבֻעוֹת), and the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Grape harvest, or *Succot* (סֻכּוֹת).

The feast of Passover or *Pesach* and the Unleavened Bread or *Massot* originally were two different feasts, but later were united into only one feast.

According to the oldest calendar feasts, in the Book of Exodus (23:14–17; 34:18; 22–23) the three feasts were celebrated in an agricultural context: the Unleavened Bread or *Massot*; the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout*, and the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Grape harvest, or *Succot*. The celebration of these three festivals expressed the hope of having a good harvest and the thanksgiving for the abundant crop. On the occasion of these feasts, the Israelites had to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and present their offerings to the temple, to slaughter animals and celebrate in a family context.

The feast of *Massot* or of the Unleaven Bread, for example, comes from the custom of the farmers to eat, at the beginning of a new harvest, the bread of that harvest to honor the divinity. Being the bread of a new harvest, it was prepared without yeast/leaven, that is, without part of the cereal coming from the old harvest. Later this feast was associated with Israel's hasty escape from being enslaved in Egypt when only unleavened dough could be brought along. The Unleavened Bread is therefore called “bread of affliction” (*Dt* 16:3).

The Fifty Days after Passover, also called the Feast of Weeks in English or *Shavuot*, (literally, “weeks”) and Pentecost (Πεντηκοστή) in Greek, marks the all-important wheat harvest in the Land of Israel (*Ex* 34:22). In origin, this feast was the feast of harvesting and was celebrated at the beginning of wheat harvest. On this occasion, the first fruits were offered to the divinity.

Much later, in the Jewish literature this feast took on the meaning of the feast of the Covenant by being connected with the arrival at Mount Sinai after the first Passover in Egypt. For this reason this festival represented a commemoration of the gift of the Law.

The two above-mentioned festivals, the Unleavened Bread or *Massot* and the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout* both refer to harvesting activities and express the hope of having a plentiful crop.

The third festival was celebrated in autumn, after the harvesting season: the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Grape harvest, or *Succot* (the plural of “*sukkah*”), that is, the name of the “temporary dwelling” called “booths,” “tabernacles,” or “huts” where farmers used to live during harvesting. This feast was agricultural in nature; it was the “feast of ingathering at the year's end” (*Ex* 34:22) and marked the end of the harvest time and thus of the agricultural year in the Land of Israel. According to *Ex* 23:16, this feast marked the beginning of the new year; in *Ex* 34:22 it was the end of the old year, and in any case fell

on New Year's Day, which is in autumn. This celebration was held outside, in the fields and vineyards. During the feast, they built provisional booths or huts. The feast was later associated with the Exodus, because the Israelites lived in small huts during the migration from Egypt. It came to commemorate the Exodus and the dependence of the people of Israel on the will of God (*Lv* 23:42–43). In this way, the descendants celebrated this feast in memory of this migration.

The fourth feast is *Pesach* or Passover⁴⁴, which was originally related to the rite of shepherds taking place at the beginning of their departure towards summer grazing places: by putting the blood on the entrance of their tents, they prevented the “destroyer” (a demon called *Mashit* מַשִּׁיחַת *Ex* 12:23), from striking people and livestock.

This feast was later associated with the experience of Exodus, which recalled when “Yahweh goes through Egypt to strike it, and sees the blood on the lintel and on both door-posts, he will pass over the door and not allow the Destroyer to enter your homes and strike” (*Ex* 12:23).

As we have already mentioned above, later the feast of *Pesach* or Passover merged with the feast of the Unleavened Bread or *Massot* to become one great feast: the celebration of the liberation from Egypt.⁴⁵

The feast of *Sabbath* (as the verb שָׁבַת, which means to “stop,” to “cease,” or to “keep”) is first mentioned in the Book of Genesis where the seventh day is set aside and made holy by the Lord: “On the seventh day God had completed the work he had been doing. He rested on the seventh day after all the work he had been doing. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day he rested after all his work of creating” (*Gn* 2:2–3).

In contrast with the yearly festivals, the Sabbath is considered the celebration par excellence and it happens weekly. Every day of the week goes by in anticipation for the seventh day. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

44. In the Jewish calendar, spring's first full moon marked the Passover. The Catholic Church fixes the date of Easter based on the moon's cycle, which is, in turn, relative to the solar cycle. To figure out the date of Easter, we must start with the date of the vernal equinox (in spring, when the length of day and night are equal) the official beginning of spring. Then we look for the first Sunday after the first full moon after spring's equinox. Since the Gospels situate the Lord's paschal mystery at the time of Passover, Catholics fix Easter on the same basis. Easter, therefore, always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox. So, in 2018, Easter will be celebrated on April 1, and on April 21 in 2019.

45. Besides the three feasts of pilgrimage, that is, the Unleavened Bread or *Massot*; the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout*; and the Feast of Tabernacles, Grape harvest, or *Succot* there are other important festivals: 1) the *New Year's Day* (*Rosh Hashanah* ראש השנה, literally meaning the “beginning” or “head” of the year). The Biblical name for this festival is *Yom Teruah*, יום תְּרוּעָה, literally “day of shouting or blasting;” 2) and the festival of *Yom Kippur* יום כיפור, also known as the “Day of Atonement” and repentance. The first festival commemorates the creation of the world. This celebration is characterized by the use of a *shofar* (שׁוֹפָר) the ancient musical instrument made of ram's horn and biblical readings on the final judgement. The second festival celebrates the mercy of God and His justice. Within ten days starting from the Feast of the Creation, the people of Israel sets some signs of conversion and repentance.

The Sabbath has two aspects, as the world has two aspects. The Sabbath is meaningful for the human being and it is meaningful for God. The Sabbath keeps the two aspects together because it is a sign of a deal between the two... The Sabbath is holy because of the Grace of God, however it is still in need of holiness coming from the celebration of the people.⁴⁶

The Sabbath is not just a day of rest, but above all a day of delight (*Is* 58:13), peace, tranquility and fulfilment (*Gn* 2:2). One of the motivations for the people of Israel to observe the Sabbath is to remember their liberation from slavery:

Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, and that Yahweh your God brought you out of there with mighty hand and outstretched arm; this is why Yahweh your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (*Dt* 5:15).

A day of rest was established to remember the experience of having been freed from slavery in Egypt. The experience of the gift of liberation became for Israel a fundamental commitment to offer this time of good to himself and to the others. A time free of self-interest where people and animals can rest and breathe. Sabbath, the seventh day, has freed people from hard work. It is a day that is not determined by the duty of production and profit. Sabbath is a day that anticipates another time: a time of “being” rather than of “doing.” It celebrates life:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as Yahweh your God has commanded you. Labour for six days, doing all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You must not do any work that day, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servants—male or female—nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your animals, nor the foreigner who has made his home with you; so that your servants, male and female, may rest, as you do (*Dt* 5:12–14).

Sabbath announces a sacred time, a time that must be celebrated: “For in six days Yahweh made the heavens, earth and sea and all that these contain, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why Yahweh has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred” (*Ex* 20:11). “Sabbath,” therefore is rooted in the origin (creation). According to the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, it is God Himself who prepares a grand banquet with tasty food and perfect wines for all the nations.

As a conclusion, we can notice that the feasts strengthen the community by highlighting important moments of the community’s life. The festivals mark the whole year: the

46. A. J. Heschel, *Il sabato*, op. cit., 82–3. Our translation.

beginning of the harvest, the beginning of the demanding and risky march towards grazing lands, etc. They are comparable to feasts celebrated during important moments of the life of an individual, a family or a community.

In the Old Testament, except for the Feast of Weeks or *Shavout*, all the important festivals, over the course of the history of faith of the people of Israel, were inserted in the fundamental experience of “exodus” or “liberation.” Accordingly, with these important festivals, the entire people of Israel remembered and celebrated its “liberation” as the beginning of its history which marked its foundation as the people of Israel.

These celebrations create identity and strengthen and consolidate the uniqueness of the people. The community remembers its roots and integrity. The feasts break the monotony of ordinary life characterized by contrasts, pain, suffering, scarceness, routine, and boredom. The feasts make the participant perceive the profound dimension of the ordinary and introduces him/her into a sacred time: plenitude, abundance, joviality, and proximity.

In the Bible some practices of celebrating feasts or festivals are also subject to criticism. The books of the Prophets partially present an impetuous criticism about some procedures for the celebrations. Prophet Amos curses in the name of God:

I hate, I scorn your festivals, I take no pleasure in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, but let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (*Am* 5:21–24).

The reason of the prophet’s fury is not a kind of ascetic reservation about celebrations or festivals. The real reason is the behavior of priests. They conciliate the feasts, in fact, by manipulating the right of the country, exploiting the poor, and using violence against the weak. With these words, the prophet Amos points out the unbearable hypocrisy of celebrating the religious feasts, the Sabbaths, and the new moon festivals (*Rosh Khòdesh* ראש חודש⁴⁷) as if they had nothing to do with justice:

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and that we may sell the refuse

47. Cf. *Nb* 10:10: “Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the Lord your God.”

of the wheat?” The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, “Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds. “Because of this will not the land quake and everyone who dwells in it mourn? Indeed, all of it will rise up like the Nile, and it will be tossed about, and subside like the Nile of Egypt. “And it will come about in that day,” declares the Lord God, “That I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight. “Then I shall turn your festivals into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring sackcloth on everyone’s loins and baldness on every head. And I will make it like a time of mourning for an only son, and the end of it will be like a bitter day (*Am* 8: 4–10).

For the People of Israel, to celebrate the Sabbath means to re-celebrate and re-actualize the fundamental and joyful experience of having been liberated. Having experienced the liberation from Egypt, Israel is now called to donate more, to offer itself to help other people re-experience and re-create this fundamental event. The celebration of the Sabbaths manifests a powerful and magnificent plan: to celebrate every week a day freed from the burden of work, a day not determined by the duty of production and profit; a day free from slavery and profitability. It is a celebration that announces “another” time in which everyone lives and is.

The Books of Genesis and Exodus offer another explanation of the celebration of Sabbath:

And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made (*Gn* 2:2–3).

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy (*Ex* 20:11).

This celebration is related to creation itself. God himself asks us to dedicate time to contemplate and enjoy what has been done well in our work (*melaka* מְלָאכָה, business, work, occupation, labor, employment, craft, job, task, etc). The word “work,” therefore, goes beyond the concept of employment and profession: it indicates every action by which men and women cooperate in God’s creative work. Celebration brings work to a pause, and it is sacred because it reminds men and women that they are made in the image of God, who is not a slave to work but is its Lord; thus, we, too must never be slaves to work, but its “lords.”

This condition concerns every person, without exception. It belongs to the dignity of men and women of every culture and nation. The obsession with economic profit and technical hyper-efficiency put human rhythms of life at risk, for life has its human

rhythms. The ideology of profit and consumerism even wants to feed on celebration: which very often is reduced to a “business.”

Sabbath in the Old Testament allows in a unique way free spaces of relationship with others. It is a time offered and donated to human existence and it makes possible to become closer to God. Sabbath is an anticipation of “another” time, a time full of God, where human beings and the whole creation fully live and exist.

THE FEAST IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The rich experience of the festive dimension has been received in the ecclesial community and re-elaborated in the writings of the New Testament in different ways. From the evangelical testimonies and the liturgical praxis of the first Christian communities, it appears clearly in continuity with the festive tradition coming from the Jewish world and at the same time a gradual transformation of the meaning of the feast, starting from the Paschal event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Christian Passover). In general, we can say that the religious system and the chronological structure follow the path of the Jewish tradition, but re-interpreted from the Christological experience.

The Gospels show how Jesus himself observed the Jewish feasts of his time, and through his person, teaching and deeds, gave them a definitive and full meaning: the Sabbath and the celebration of the Jewish Passover.

The centrality of the Eucharistic sacrifice of Jesus in the Gospel is presented as the summit and the source of the salvific mission of Christ. The new Passover, celebrated by Christians every Sunday (that is, every week!) in memory of the Resurrection of Jesus as the “first day” of the week (*Dies Domini*), unites all believers in communion with God, awaiting His glorious coming.

Besides the Dominical Passover, the Christian faith also includes the yearly celebration of the Passover, in which the Christian community revives in Christ, and is liberated from sin and death. The entire community joyfully shares eternal life and the hope for the glorious coming of the Risen Lord.⁴⁸

48. There are some secular Easter symbols re-interpreted by Christianity. The *Easter bunny*: the Easter rabbit represents ancient fertility. Rabbits traditionally have large families. Today's Easter bunny originated among German Lutherans as a figure who judged if children were obedient or not. *Easter eggs*: The egg has been symbolic of life. The cracking of the eggs calls to mind the opening of the sealed tomb of Christ at the moment of Resurrection. The custom of hunting for eggs is linked to Mary Magdalene's quest for Christ: “They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid Him” (*Jn* 20:13). *Lamb*: Jesus Christ is the Paschal Lamb, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” This recalls Jesus' identity as the Passover lamb of the new and eternal covenant who frees people from the slavery of sin and makes possible for people to have eternal life. *Easter lily*: An Easter lily's white flower is symbolic of Christ's purity. The flowers' springtime blossoms call to mind Christ's Resurrection. *Butterfly*: Caterpillars emerge from their cocoons in the spring transformed into butterflies. The three-fold events of the butterfly's life mirrors Christ's—His life, death and burial, and the resurrection of His glorified body. Many people in United States, especially those of Polish descent, bring baskets to church with their Easter foods for the priest to bless. The traditional foods contained

This radical novelty (“Good News”) opens the New Testament, particularly the experience of the Lord Jesus and the celebration of the Kingdom of God, which is close at hand.

When Jesus was asked why his disciples were not fasting like John’s disciples or the Pharisees, he answered: “Surely the bridegroom’s attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is still with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast” (*Mk* 2:19). Jesus introduces the presence of the bridegroom as the reason for the feast.

Jesus presents himself as the “master even of the Sabbath” (*Mk* 2:28). The Evangelist Mark narrates that on a Sabbath day Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples were picking the heads of grain. Their behavior provoked the reaction of the Pharisees: “See here, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus replied: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (*Mk* 2:23–24.27–28).

The Mystery of Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is “the” feast for the Christian. On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, asking:

“Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?” And he said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says: My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.’” And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover (*Mt* 26:17–19).

The event of the Resurrection of the Lord gives testimony of the Christian centrality of time. The luminous event of the Resurrection allows us to recognize in our time the sign of eternal splendor, the Trinitarian mystery. It is in the dimension of time where every person encounters the Lord and becomes aware that every moment is an act of creation, a beginning which opens new paths of life to the fullest. Time is the presence of God in space, and it is in time where we experience unity with other men and women. In April 2006, in his homily in the Easter vigil Eucharist Pope Benedict XVI said:

The Resurrection was like an explosion of light, an explosion of love which dissolved the hitherto indissoluble compenetration of “dying and becoming.” It ushered in a new dimension of being, a new dimension of life in which, in a transformed way, matter too was integrated and through which a new world emerges.⁴⁹

in the baskets have meaning: eggs, lamb, salt (representative of purification), bread (symbolic of Jesus’ body), horseradish (symbolizing Christ’s passion), and ham (signifying the joy and abundance of the feast).

49. Pope Benedict XVI, *Easter Vigil, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI*, Vatican Basilica, Holy Saturday, 15 April 2006. At <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060415_veglia-pasquale.html>.

CONCLUSIONS

The Feast: A Celebration of Life. A Time of Freedom

A return to the original meaning of the feasts is not to be found in the external forms, but rather in the value of time and life.

As we can see in the six Chinese festivals and the Judeo-Christian tradition the act of celebrating is an act of freedom and communion. It goes against any form of slavery and division. Feast is a bet on the value of life and the future of an individual and a community.

If we compare some elements studied in the presentation of the Spring Festival the Chinese New Year (*Chun Jie* 春節) or Crossing the Year (*Guo Nian* 過年), the feast of Passover or *Pesach*, and the feast of Unleavened Bread or *Massot*, they all share the richness of a common symbology: protection from evil, the vigil-waiting attitude, the setting off of firecrackers, the unleavened bread as the beginning of a new time, etc. This symbology can still stress the importance of eliminating every trace of old yeast in the houses, that is, removing what is old, stagnated, exhausted and inactive in life so that a new beginning is possible as individuals and as a family. The setting off of firecrackers is also a concrete way to say “goodbye, old year” and “welcome, new year.” When presenting the first festival, we mentioned the large amounts of firecrackers lit for the Chinese New Year’s Eve. This is traced back to the mythological monster *Nian* (年) said to eat people and prevent the arrival of the new year (*Nian*). The explosive sounds and the color red keep away its curse. The tradition of setting off firecrackers, therefore, symbolizes also the “ringing out” (*Bao Zhu* 爆竹) the old year and “ringing in” the new year.

In the first letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul expresses the concept in a clear way:

Throw out the old yeast so that you can be the fresh dough, unleavened as you are. For our Passover has been sacrificed, that is, Christ; let us keep the feast, then, with none of the old yeast and no leavening of evil and wickedness, but only the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1Co 5:6–8)

On the other hand, the Lantern Festival (*Yuan Xiao Jie* 元宵節), for example, highlights the concept of “circularity,” “fullness,” or “round circle.” The festival presents “round” as representing the “perfection” and “completion,” that is, the family re-union. The concept of “consummation” which is expressed in a pictographic way in Chinese Characters as “round and full” (*Tuan* 團, *Yuan* 圓, *Yuan Man* 圓滿) conveys a fundamental value. “Round” and “full” are, thus, taken to denote the highest satisfaction and success. A round table, therefore, becomes the most preferable table for a family reunion.⁵⁰

50. See Huang Po Ho, “An Observation on the Thought Patterns of the Han Ethnicity and their Impact on Religions and Theologies” in *Concilium*, 2017/1: 27–37.

The Feast: A Time of Hope

The six Chinese festivals, that is, the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year (*Chun Jie* 春節) particularly stresses the dimension of protection, abundance, blessing, fulfilment and reunion. The Lantern Festival (*Yuan Xiao Jie* 元宵節) highlights the concept of “circularity,” “fullness,” which is unity and communion of a family. The Tomb Sweeping Festival, *Qing Ming Jie* (清明節) focuses on the arrival of the spring season, a new beginning; this experience offers to people a sense of freshness, peace, serenity, brightness and purity. *Qing Ming Jie* also celebrates ancestral memorial ceremonies. The Dragon Boat Festival, *Duan Wu Jie* (端午節) invites us again to celebrate the experience of being rescued. The *Zhong Yuan Pu-Du* (中元普渡), the Universal Ferry or Universal Salvation of *Zhong Yuan Jie* stresses the experience of salvation, a clear manifestation of hope for a “clear sky.” Finally, the Mid-Autumn Festival, *Zhong Qiu Jie* 中秋節, celebrates the time to enjoy the splendor of the “roundness” of moon (*Tuan Yuan Yue* 團圓月), symbolizing the “unity” and the “reunion” of family members (*Tuan Yuan* 團圓).

In human history, to celebrate is always an act of profound hope and for a Christian this human history is guided in a providential way which demands our personal responsibility. The six festivals, in general, help hold a sapiential memory of the past, a creative responsibility in the present time and an active expectation for the future.

The Feast: An Experience of Sharing

The six feasts have a deep collective dimension. This collective character of the Chinese festivals involves the family, the social group, the village, the region or the nation. In these feasts, everybody is called to take part and share the ritual-mystical and recreational experience. This sense of sharing is expressed through forms of mutual support and social solidarity. The feast helps “re-discover” the dimension of interpersonal relationship and its “circularity” in diversity. To celebrate together becomes the occasion to enlarge the boundaries at a personal, familiar and social level, and it is also an occasion to reunify different components of a group. The feast possesses an extraordinary capacity for reconciliation, reciprocal acceptance and self-offering.

The strong desire of the Taiwanese young people for communion can find a credible and constructive answer in the enhancement and celebration of the festive dimension of relationship. In moments of joy, when people sing, dance, gather together, and offer gratuitously their time for others, there is consolidation of the family and the community identity. Interpersonal relationships are strengthened and help people face difficult times.

The feast, therefore, has a unifying and pedagogical function because it overcomes the differences of daily life and creates new bridges of encounter and sharing.

The Feast: A Memorial of Being Protected, Blessed, Reunited, Rescued and Saved

The six festivals are a living memorial of being protected, blessed, re-united and rescued.

For the Bible, the theological reflection on the category of “feast” finds its reason in the

Lord and His merciful and saving presence in the history. It is always the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*Ex* 3:13) who makes great things in favor of His people. This is the object and the cause of the “feast” in the Bible. The people of Israel remembers and celebrates the divine revelation and the saving events in every stage of its journey.

In the New Testament, the cornerstone of the narration is the oblation of Christ as the sign of love for every person: “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me” (*Lk* 22:19). The feast, therefore, becomes a “memorial” (*Zikaron* זִכָּרוֹן), that is, a remembrance of the continuous and “actual” saving presence of God in our history. It is the memorial of His salvation: “Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good, make music for his name—it brings joy” (*Ps* 135:3). The festive dimension is the celebration of this salvific event, a joyful memory whose effects are present today. Without this “memorial” the feast would turn into a formal and sterile ritualism.

Contemporary Taiwanese society tends to reduce festivals to a consumeristic celebration, substituting ambiguously and gradually external and marketing meanings to their internal reasons and dynamism. The individualistic approach, strengthened by an excessive use of tablets, smartphone, video games, etc., threatens the real meaning of the festivals and their face to face conviviality. Over-concern for work hurts the very core of the feast.

The *China Post*, the leading English newspaper in Taiwan, on April 2, 2017 published an article with the title: “Most parents, kids speak for less than 30 minutes a day.”⁵¹ The survey reported that more than half of Taiwan’s parents spend less than half an hour talking to their children every day. Of the children surveyed by the *Child Welfare League Foundation* (兒童福利聯盟), 51.6 percent said they talked with their parents for less than 30 minutes a day, while some reported doing so for even less than 10 minutes a day. The survey found that even when they do talk, the conversation are mostly about schoolwork, which was cited as a common topic by 80.7 percent of respondents. The next most common topics were daily routines and friends, which were cited by 71.2 percent and 52.8 percent of respondents, respectively. The results showed that parents were most concerned about their children’s academic performance.

It is necessary to educate our young generations “to celebrate,” “to feast.” “Feasting” is joy, it is the willingness to be together and to rest together; it is the joy of being able to talk to each other and prolong the encounter. The feast is conviviality, interaction, communion, rest, is healthy *re*-creation. It is a new beginning. It is the gift of life! This festive dimension is celebrated through daily encounters, like eating together, especially on the weekly day of rest where the family has the opportunity to *re*-unite and gratuitously spend time together.

Family is the key influence on the formation of a child’s personality and character.

To celebrate together is a powerful measure for shielding against the solitude of many

51. *The China Post*. Sunday, 2 April, 2017.

Taiwanese children. Where there is limited time for interaction between parents and children, exchanges tend to be one-way, with the parents instilling their ideas in the children. In such circumstances, there is no sufficient interaction and discussion for the children to digest and internalize the information from the parents. About 40 percent of the children surveyed said they tended to try to force their ideas on others during discussions, and about 36 percent said they threw a tantrum or otherwise became upset when their demands were rejected.

“Behold, how good and how pleasant⁵² it is for brothers to dwell together in unity”! (*Ps* 133:1).

52. The cognate adjective *na'iyim* נְאִיִּים (*Ps* 133:1) can also be translated as delightful, lovely, and agreeable. It parallels “joy.” The ecstatic time, precisely!

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Conclusion

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Since time immemorial, and as far as we can see into our history and across the planet, ceremonies, dances, processions, initiations and rituals have been celebrated. As the anthropologist Victor Turner explained, these festivities were performed to promote the fertility of human beings and crops, to cure illnesses and to avert epidemics, to turn boys into men and girls into women, to “cool” those who were “hot”, and to transform ordinary people into mediums and shamans. Ceremonies and festivals, as well as the time which they inhabit, transforming it and being transformed by it, release in music, songs, dance and also in religious trance, resources of pleasure, pain, and expressions of our bodies and/or our unconscious processes that are untouched by everyday life. Collective performances also produce, in an enigmatic way, splendor and ecstatic moments and gestures; they transform and transfigure the time it takes to perform and experience that feast or ritual into something sacred, eternal, and creatively unique.

Feasts and ceremonies establish a special bond with the divinities in which human beings ask (and sometimes expect) protec-

tion, rewards and safety, as well as celebrating and rejoicing for the blessings received. In some places, as in Indonesia and in Bangladesh, this relationship is not devoid of expectations and even of demands that await to be fulfilled and satisfied, whilst in other countries, as in Taiwan and Japan, the approach to the gods and ancestors is more gratuitous. In both cases, the world of the divinities is seen as a relatively positive world that listens and is attentive to the needs of human beings and is ready (either through explicit supplications or offerings) to grant their requests. Thus, it seems that festivals and celebrations are not so much derived from human calendars or calculations but, on the contrary, it is these collective performances that give “sense” (that is, meaning and direction) to time which, precisely because of this, becomes *ex-static* (i.e., a time that goes beyond the common time of human affairs).

Yet, and apart from this positive approach to festivals and time, we cannot fail to notice how the divine atmosphere and the historic dimensions surrounding these celebrations are being slowly eroded, or even corrupted, by modernity and a pervasive mundane understanding of reality. It seems as if, to paraphrase R. Otto’s famous intuition, the divinities which were once seen as *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, are now instead demoted to fading appearances (if not commercial utilities, or even petulant venialities of our pervasive mercantile culture) on the stage of a simple and absent-minded recurrence. Their mystery seems to have little relevance to the mass production of food and commodities, the fear once felt before their presence is slowly being replaced by a world full of sounds and fury signifying nothing, and their fascination has given way to a secularized view of beauty and splendor devoid of transcendence and charm. It is as though the inescapable process of secularization, urbanization and globalization experienced by the world in recent decades have finally managed to lift the religious veil which once covered and protected the enigmatic identities of the divinities, and behind that veil human beings found a disappointed void, a sacred absence, a place from which even the divinities have fled.

Could it be that ceremonies and festivities, the most explicit expressions of human joy and harmony with God, the others and the surrounding environment, are now transformed into their very opposite, that is, into a kind of nostalgia for an experience full of passion, desire and frenzy visions? Could it be that the time which once transformed people into glorious ornaments and movements, which embellished their gatherings into something dramatic, epic and cosmic, has now vaporized, leaving behind only sentiments of folklore and lifeless commercialized entertainment? Could it be that the once felt need to approach the divinities, thereby recognizing a trustful dependence on their power to intervene in human affairs, has been substituted by a fictitious human self-sufficiency and pride?

Yet, over and beyond, or beneath meaning and cultural symbols, our study still detected a power generated by collective performances which escapes human grasp and knowledge. It is a gratuitous and excessive power and splendor, a power which cannot

be understood only from the intentions of the organizers, participants, and bystanders or from their economic, historical, political and ideological contexts. It is a powerful meeting with the divine that produces rituals, ceremonies and dances overflowing with emotions, feelings, and sacred representations. It is a powerful encounter with God that reflects the need for a harmony with what human being truly discover to be in themselves, that is, humble and finite creatures before someone transcendent who guides their history and their destiny.

This being the case, could it not be that human beings are now called to re-think their understanding of feasts and collective celebrations in order to approach them, not so much as something they have to do in order to please God, but as something the paternal love of God itself has already prepared and arranged for them to join in and celebrate? As the Gospel of Luke aptly says: “We are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life, he was lost and he is found” (*Lk 15:23*). Would this not be the best celebration we individuals, now immersed in our frivolous world of lost meanings—but still nostalgic for that kind of relationship with God—could indeed partake?

Asian Study Centre

Xaverian Missionaries – Japan



Ecstatic Time

The starting point for *Ecstatic Time* was the realization that the concept of feast, and the role of time in it, are structural elements of any culture, the defining constituents of people's identities. As missionaries, we recognize and experience every day that, for the people with whom we live, feast is a ruptured time, an interruption in ordinary duration to make space for something else, for another kind of time which is qualitatively different from normal, ordinary time. This time, which we have called "ecstatic" reflects, complements and fulfils the meaning of life by recognizing the sacred through the celebration of festivals and rituals—FROM THE INTRODUCTION