

# TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUES

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INTELLECTUAL  
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# DEMISE OF THE CROWN: A 'SHAIVITE-ORIENTED' REFLECTION ON THE CHALLENGES OF NATURE AND HUMAN ALTERNATIVES

This essay, written by Adrián Navigante at Zagarolo in the period from March 10 to 25 (the worst moment of the Corona crisis in Italy), attempts a broader horizon of reflection concerning our experience of this pandemic, bearing especially in mind Alain Daniélou's "Shaivite-Dionysian" attitude as a kind of existential guideline. If viewed as an interruption of "normal life" (with the wish to return to it as soon as the critical moment is over), nothing will have been learned from the Corona crisis, since the criterion of normality many people long for is an essential part of what produced the worldwide emergency: predatory environmental politics and an utter disregard for Nature as the most concrete and never-fully-understood source of Life.



Alain Daniélou at the Labyrinth, Zagarolo (photo by Jacques Cloarec)

### Human Jungle

Ever since the Corona crisis broke out, it has not been easy for people to find an orientation: how to think and what to do about it. Any middle way seems impossible between the morbid sensationalism of some (whether factually- or fake-news-oriented) newspapers or TV chains and the negationist tendencies of several protagonists-antagonists of the social media – some of them with a strong inclination to conspiracy theories. We have witnessed the promotion of Dean Koontz and Bill Gates to the rank of prophets; how Giorgio Agamben insisted on shifting attention from the factual core of the problem to conceptual categories

with practically no bearing on the present situation<sup>1</sup>; how Slavoj Žižek celebrated Corona's Kill-Bill-esque blow to capitalism and the possibility of a communist renaissance<sup>2</sup>; how some virologists like Wolfgang Wodarg transformed an objective fact (the expansion of Covid-19 among different populations across the globe) into a mere subjective state (generalised panic without any clearly identifiable referent in reality) of the European population<sup>3</sup>; how controversial doctors like Didier Raoult tended to transgress the prudent requirements of a scientific community and its business-oriented pharmaceutical counterpart with a good dose of prophetism (the chloroquine case)<sup>4</sup>. We have

seen an amazing scapegoat dynamics in the attempt to trace the expansion of the virus back to a partial or conclusive ‘cause’: for a moment, the Chinese became a *miasma* in Italy, afterwards Italians became a *miasma* in Europe, subsequently Europeans became a *miasma* in America, Africa and India. Donald Trump’s metonymic shift in one of his public declarations (‘*Chinese*’ instead of ‘*Corona*’ virus), which he deemed a justified response to a previous accusation by the Chinese, triggered further conspiracy arguments in China as to a possible implantation of the virus in Wuhan by US soldiers. In the meantime, horror-images are circulating in the printed and virtual media of massive numbers of people dying without decent treatment or even proper burial. Time will reveal the pitfalls and virtues of each (regional or national) government in dealing with this sanitary emergency. The fact that the sphere of politics is usually run with an entrepreneurial mentality is already a sign of the direction inquiries should take to reveal the possible “mistakes”.

On a popular level, the toilet-paper crisis in Germany (already referred to by some psychologists as a compensation mechanism in situations of overstress) and the case of an American citizen called Matt Colvin (who cornered more than 1700 bottles of disinfectant in order to make a profit) are not promising signs about the repercussions of the illness on the behaviour of city dwellers, but these are of course the ostensible things emphasized by the media. The most important aspects of this story remain invisible: there is little or no mention of doctors and nurses facing a war-like situation in the different hospitals, or of volunteers taking humanitarian action to ease the shock and mitigate the suffering. This is not only because such positive aspects are minority, but also because they don’t help feed mainstream emotion – something that needs to be expanded further and further, as a kind of apotropaic

measure emptied of its own content. We hold the head of the Gorgon without knowing what to do with it. It does not divert evil, but intensifies all possible phantasmatic variants within us. It is precisely the opposite of what was done in ancient cultures, where obtaining the name or an image of the unknown and threatening agency meant gaining control over it. The indigenous Wiwa people of the Sierra Nevada in Columbia, quite aware of the global character of the threat, on March 18 published a letter<sup>5</sup> calling their members to a joint effort to deal with the problem, avoiding naming the illness itself. This is not escapism of any kind, but a deep awareness of the interconnectedness of human agency and its disadvantages when it comes to global repercussions on the part of non-humans (in this case, a virus).

### Socio-Political Urges and Non-Human Teaching

Almost every time I have mentioned – of course carefully avoiding any apocalyptic undertones – the factual problem posed by Covid-19 for the human genre, some Corona-sceptic acquaintances of mine have come up with the number of casualties related to car accidents, tobacco consumption and other habits or diseases whose quantitative death-toll exceeds by far what Corona has caused so far (I am writing this essay in March, I have no idea of what the situation will be when this text gets published). Much as I understand the importance of re-framing dramatic impressions using relativity principles, I wonder how such disparate comparisons might help us understand or provide any solution to the problem we are facing. The number of people dying of air pollution is a thousand times higher than the meagre number of Europeans killed by Islamic terrorism. Should we therefore avoid security measures where terrorist attacks are concerned? Most probably such exercises of relativity are a good way of temporarily



Shiva in Yoga posture, Bhuvaneshwar, Orissa IX Century (source: FIND archive, Zagarolo)

banishing the fear of death, but there is no point in insisting on that kind of relativity as if the immediate fact has no importance, because it has.

Some people already think that China should receive an international sanction for its voluntary ignorance regarding bromatological conditions in the city of Wuhan, as well as its obligation to report the Corona outbreak immediately to the rest of the world. Others think it should be commended for helping severely affected European countries when the US and non-severely-affected European countries have turned their backs and closed their doors (which will probably be repeated when the financial post-Corona crisis breaks out, not without corresponding predatory interests). Whatever the course of time reveals, the main point is another: questions about the intentional or non-intentional human origin of the illness are irrelevant, because the illness is becoming a global problem. In the face of this much more complex factual issue, it is vital to

attempt a proper way of thinking in searching for the right (and not only immediate but also future) reaction. Quite pragmatically, one could say: at a time when there is a lock-down in almost all countries affected by Coronavirus, the only thing to do is wait patiently until the restrictions are over. And rather than think, we should *hope* to get through this ordeal in the best possible way and celebrate when the crisis is over. Is that all? What is actually the thing we should celebrate?

I would like to propose an ‘extended pragmatics’, based on wider observation and reflection. For this purpose, a coupling of present and future is necessary, which will disclose another dimension of the past. To the best of my knowledge, the real challenge of this situation is not what we are experiencing right now on a human level, but what will happen on the level of interaction – not only between humans, but more particularly between humans and non-humans. The real challenge is future consideration of what we call

“Nature”, even before we think about how the inter-human realm will look. Such consideration demands going back to a point of time far beyond what attracts attention today: the transfer-point of Coronavirus into the human realm. This *other past* concerns a world-configuration from a distant past and/or place, which nevertheless potentially pervades every human attitude – even today – when it comes to dealing with non-human agency (animals, plants and viruses, to which we could add: spirits and gods). If I may re-frame the situation: Coronavirus (Sars-CoV-2) is an unknown entity from the non-human realm of viruses irrupting into the world of humans and causing a drastic change in their behaviour owing to the threat it represents. Its unknown status is due to the impossibility of science’s getting hold of it. In this sense, human fear is the recognition of radical impotence when it comes to dominating non-human agency (hence the false prognoses of some renowned epidemiologists and virologists leading people astray, simply because they cannot say – especially before a TV camera - “I don’t know”), and the whole point is precisely there: in the dominance patterns exercised by humans. It is by considering those patterns that we can learn what Nature is trying to teach us, but in order to consider those patterns in such a way, we need a real change of perspective.

What follows is a consideration from quite a different point of view, which is one of the reasons why the mere attempt to get this message across to readers is a risk. For the parameters of our post-modern, secular and

globalised context, Yuval Noah Harari is right in affirming that, in times of crisis, we face two particularly important choices: between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment, and between national isolation and global solidarity<sup>6</sup>. This is doubtless one of the crucial aspects that inter-human action will have to face when the financial crisis sets in after the Corona epidemic (we will see that the financially-related apocalyptic scenario could become even worse than the images circulating today in the most sensationalist newspapers). However, his diagnosis presupposes a line of development in human history based on the Western idea of ‘progress’, which places (in a perfect continuum with monotheistic religions and their split between Nature and Spirit) human beings at the centre of creation. We are the ‘crowned species’, we decide on the life and death of all other beings, and that is the way it should be. Such is our horizon of perception, its interactions and expectations reduced to the human sphere – irrespective of the fact that the category of ‘human’ in former centuries did not extend to the indigenous folks of America and sub-Saharan Africans. Indeed, we have even taken it upon ourselves to detach humans from Nature to the point of affirming that not only can we produce a second (urban and mechanical), but also a third (virtual and intelligent) Nature. This implies systematic deforestation, intensive animal farming, urbanisation and habitat fragmentation with the logical consequence of zoonotic and other non-human-related diseases passing over to the human sphere. We seem to have exhausted

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our God-complex to the point of no return upon the forms of Life we are essentially related to, that which we call 'biodiversity'. This is why we cannot see what Nature is trying to teach us, even with a clear picture before our eyes: human beings in a state of reclusion, and Nature capable, for the first time after centuries of systematic destruction by human agency, of breathing again. This consideration, crazy as it may seem from the optics we are used to, is in fact more urgent and central than the socio-political questions mentioned by Harari.

Let's put it this way: it is as if the forces of Nature had woven a gruesome hit-back strategy, taking air from our lungs through the action of Covid-19 to re-establish a shared breathing-rhythm with the other species of this globe. The results are visible: skies and waters are becoming clear, the air is regaining some of its pristine purity, the urban cosmos is being emptied of its human content, reduced as it were to the connotative image of *a buried earth*. The message becomes slowly intelligible despite our obnoxious blindness: *we cannot bury the earth without burying ourselves*. Culture, which could be defined as the prolongation of Life on the level of the Spirit, can also become the tomb of a Spirit forgetful of its Life-roots. It is high time for us to understand that learning is not only a human self-referential process, but is integrated within a very complex and interconnected realm where it is necessary to learn unfamiliar means of communication and codify experiences in another way.

### Reverse-Side of Certainties

In his book *Shiva and Dionysus* (1979)<sup>7</sup>, Alain Daniélou, who had long lived and learned in another culture (*Hindu dharma* before the independence of India) the basis of what he considered an alternative world-configuration (Shaivism), ventured some unexpected reflections on what for him was the only form

of life-philosophy that may prevent human self-destruction. This life-philosophy was built – upon Daniélou's return to Europe – from elements of the Shaivism he had learned in India, that is, mainly from oral transmission and within complementary parameters of scholastic Pundit-related teachings and local (marginal and restricted) Tantric *sampradāya*. What seems to be the book's weak point, that is, the extension of Shaivism beyond the Indian subcontinent (which is scholarly untenable), its relationship to the Dionysian cult in ancient Europe (an old-fashioned form of religious comparatism), and an opening of the horizon from the restricted setting of orthodox (initiation-based) transmission to a trans-culturally oriented religion of Nature (which can be easily related to superficial New-Age movements), is in fact a visionary aspect that needs to be emphasised beyond any possibility of distortion. *Shiva and Dionysus*, as Daniélou himself writes, is not a treatise of comparative religion, but the result of a life-long experience. Many of Daniélou's theses on Shiva find support in Tantric and Purāṇic literature, but most important of all is the fact that the God he found in the 1930s in Benares - Shiva - was already known to him from his childhood in the woods of Brittany. Shaivism, says Daniélou, is a religion of Nature. Shiva is an ambivalent God humans must deal with by developing extraordinary intellectual and practical abilities: an appreciation of beauty without ignoring gruesomeness as an essential part of it; an acceptance of violence without contributing to its expansion; a relativisation of human knowledge to step outside our own self-infatuation and learn from other forms of Life; and a realistic appreciation of social life with all its contradictions and challenges.

According to Daniélou, variants of this religion of Nature are found all over the world, and humans need to return to that religion as the unique source of whatever cultural





Human action in retreat, new possibility for ecosystems. An emptied Piazza Ippolito Nievo in Trastevere, Roma (photo by Marta Casalini)

(or spiritual) expression comes afterward. Daniélou wrote *Shiva and Dionysus* in the hope that humans would not become oblivious of Nature – which they bear within themselves, albeit on a conscious level fully detached and alienated from it. Rather in the programmatic line of Mircea Eliade (despite many conceptual differences), he declares the possibility and the urgency of a *new humanism*, the main condition for which is of fairly difficult realisation: humans must renounce the conviction that they are the crown of creation if they wish to gain true wisdom. A return to Nature is something very different from the superficial forms of eco-sophical community-thinking or shallow and individually-oriented spiritual surrogates of institutional religions. For Daniélou this means regaining forms of wisdom related to cultures unsevered from the powers of Nature and the operative knowledge to deal with them in the best possible way. This is why the Shaivism of Daniélou is a construct, but a

faithful and promising one. It is the result of knowledge and experience transplanted from an Indian to a European setting, opening itself to the rest of the world (through a new form of humanism). The key issue today is neither the metaphysical quest for the transcendent unity of phenomena (which is in most cases a self-sufficient veil of ignorance rather than a transparent expression of elite-knowledge), nor a scientific and technical quest for the unlimited extension of human power over *all forms of Life* (which reveals among other things a self-destructive tendency, at present concentrated on the project of *trans-humanity*), but the reintegration of human agency in a context of inter-relatedness, including many other forms of Life with which humans can communicate.

The certainty of truth-dogmas (monotheistic creeds), of metaphysical categories (potentially refined in a few schools of philosophy, utterly crass in almost every esoteric group or institution), as well as of science and technology (in



Desert urban landscape. Tor Lupara, Northeastern periphery of Rome  
(photo by Valentina Barnabei)

their devious and dangerous amalgamation of method and content), share a common presupposition as to the place of human beings in the world. These intrinsically different trends (from which different world-perspectives have historically arisen) affirm the superiority of spirit over nature due to a qualitative difference between the interiority (and profoundness) of the human and the exteriority (or shallowness) of so-called ‘natural life forms’. Daniélou affirms, on the contrary, the inter-relatedness of humans and non-humans, the non-duality of body and soul, as well as the presence of an energy-source encompassing all Life forms – not as a reductive unity, but as a self-expansive diversity. The expression ‘body of Shiva’, which Daniélou uses in *Shiva and Dionysus*, is in this sense to be seen as a never-fully-grasped field of forces – a small part of which we know; a great part of which we don’t know. What is the message of *Shiva and Dionysus*? Humans should make a humble but vehement effort to

understand, as far as possible, this immanent field of forces before jumping to any other (abstract and often quite irrelevant) level of reflection aimed at reducing this same field of forces to something secondary, irrelevant or illusory. In this respect, the lesson of the XX century was given by quantum physics, since this science shows that the objectifiable category of matter (and therefore also of spirit as homogenous subjectivity-pole) is relative, and that its variability depends rather on the pragmatic function we can extract for human life than on any fixed (that is, *meta*-physical) parameters of cognition. The lesson of the XXI century belongs without doubt to the field of anthropology, since we are witnessing (at the end of the previous and beginning of the present century) the far-reaching results of serious research on non-European cultures, inevitably leading to a modification of our own world-view. What we thought of as ‘universal’ (the truths of our own culture) turned out to

be merely local; what we thought of as ‘primitive’ (tribal religions and shamanic knowledge) was revealed as elaborate and complex; and what we saw as mere ‘objects’ (natural beings) are in fact pluridimensional subjects requiring another kind of attention and treatment. Our knowledge of Nature should not be reduced to modern scientific methods and a technological-ly-oriented determination of life (as useful as they may be for our pragmatic existence) but should open itself to variants that usually find expression in marginal or repressed movements of our society. This is what Daniélou terms “the animistic attitude”<sup>8</sup>. It is no argument to point to an incompatibility of different world-views, since in each world-view there are potentially many other variants, and in our globalised world practically no corner remains untouched by the permanent interaction of all the others. Forgotten and valid traditions aim at saving life forms – preserving the bond with the ultimate source of Life – from human blindness, ignorance and greed.

#### Final Cut and Challenging Coming-to-Life

Modern authors long thought that prehistoric peoples did not provoke environmental change and degradation. Now, however, it is proven that anthropic erosion existed at a time on which our technological mind has mainly projected either good savages in a natural paradise, or troglodytes ruled by atavistic instincts. The Munda epic *Asur Kahani*, popularly known as *Sosobonga*, speaks of the iron technology of the Asurs and their infatuation with it to

the detriment of the environment (hence the analogy of iron smelting and black magic)<sup>9</sup>. In 1986 French anthropologist Philippe Descola wrote a book called *La nature domestique*, which put an end to the simplistic determinism still accepted by scholars dealing with the concept of ‘adaptation to the environment’<sup>10</sup>. Based on fieldwork on the tribal culture of the Achuar (on the border between Peru and Ecuador), Descola showed the complex interaction of this tribal culture with its non-human neighbours of the Amazonian forest. He demonstrates that humans do introduce (at *every stage* of their cultural development) strong mediation in dealing with their environment, the opposing poles of which are a feeling of being devoured by the mighty powers of nature and an increasing will to expand human control with its ensuing reduction of the field of living presences to an array of dead objects. The turning point of modern technology lies in the shock wave of innovation and the massive exploitation of natural resources. What makes this turning point a potential point of no return is – before even considering the material devastation of what we call ‘Earth’ – that the condition making massive exploitation possible is the extinction of any link with natural forces that preserve the aspect of ‘living presences’ related to non-human agency. The problem for modern man has been falsely posed in terms of religion or atheism. This is not the problem, however, since the basis of the major religions that have made their way into modernity is the same as that of atheism: the elimination of any modality of being-in-the-world that

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contemplates inter-connectedness with non-human agency (pagan religions do not sever gods and spirits from plants and animals). Once this complexity of life-forms has vanished from human perception (and any concrete cognition elaborated from it, as found for example in Shamanism<sup>11</sup>), our world-view tends to cut itself off from the source of Life from which any meaningful idea of the Divine may arise. Daniélou expresses a similar idea in these words: “Due to a strange and evil perversion of values in the modern civilizations and religions [...] man has renounced his role in the universal order embracing all forms of being or life”<sup>12</sup>. *Kali yugānta*, that is, the limit point of the age of conflicts, is the period of the final cut, the point of no return.

If we meditate on the status of a virus, the question of life poses itself. Viruses are purported to come to life in the host organism they cling to and seek to destroy. The link or connection between the non-living and the living, the coming-to-life and growth of microorganisms to the detriment of the host cell’s mechanism seems to be the reverse of the process I have called the ‘final cut’ in the attitude of humans towards their life source. Anyone watching pictures of the city of Wuhan can immediately associate it with nightmarish landscapes of dystopic films about the end of the world. Wuhan was a landscape of devastation already, before the irruption of Covid-19 among the population, for reasons that, according to accounts by different indigenous traditions, lead to the kind of pandemic reaction we are experiencing at present: humans’ absolute disregard of Nature, which also means disregard of themselves. I am not saying that Coronavirus is a divine punishment for our actions, since that would be an excuse to introduce moral precepts veiled in theological categories of the type that may ensue from the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in the *Old Testament* – or the way Islamic fundamentalists behave

today when they speak of a punishment of God on the infidels. My purpose is to show that the type of threat that Coronavirus represents today is intrinsically related to the destiny of a world-configuration in which life is taken to the limit point of its own extinction, and that this world-configuration assumed a universal character in the historically-proven continuum of imperial ‘evangelisation’, colonialism and global capitalism. The problem is not the irruption of a virus that is now attracting the world’s whole attention, but the lengthy environmental devastation process leading to it, the roots of which lie in the loss of an essential human bond with the deepest forces of Nature.

It is also easy to misinterpret the conception of Nature that can be deduced from this text, which makes us rely on Alain Daniélou precisely to emphasise the fact that Nature is neither good nor bad, and that it is misleading to think in those terms. Nature is *the only source of Life we have and are immediately aware of*, with all its ambiguities and contrasts, and it must be our ethical pledge to deal with it in the best possible way, creating an *art of transformation*. The most important aspect of this art of transformation does not lie in measures stemming from the very ideology that is destroying life on the planet. It lies rather in human capacity to open itself to the entire field of natural forces, extracting the best out of them, that is, learning from them through a relativisation of the modern, technologically and profit-oriented world-conception. One way of doing that – the way I am concerned with – is by means of an unprejudiced dialogue with traditional cultures<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, the irruption of Coronavirus (with all the economic, political and social consequences it will have on the human sphere) and the inevitable battle we are consequently forced to embark on can be seen as a challenge to rethink and reshape the destiny of humans on this planet.

### Re-Extension of the Animated

In the last part of *Shiva and Dionysus*, Daniélou speaks of a possible return of Shaivite conceptions in the Western world. If we consider his own particular view of Shaivism as the integration and re-enactment of an ancient religion of Nature in a ‘de-natured’ context, the main point does not lie in the (re-)creation of esoteric groups claiming to possess ultimate Gnosis by means of (pseudo-)initiation-chains, but rather in re-educating perception beyond the sphere of what has been built by humans to isolate themselves from other living entities. “The instinct of survival in a threatened world”, writes Daniélou, “can be seen in spontaneous trends such as ecology, the rehabilitation of sexuality, certain Yoga practices, and the search for ecstasy through drugs”<sup>14</sup>. Survival strategies on an instinctual level take place even when the practices mentioned by Daniélou are not monitored by well-delineated traditions with the specific knowledge required to re-educate mind and body in that direction (just as Daniélou himself became the witness of Shaivism). Without denying their risks, we should say they are in any case more promising that artificial reconstructions of so-called traditional lineages (which are usually the product of phantasmatic projections rather than of any inner affiliation), because what is artificial is ultimately detached from life forces. Behind ecology, there is a profound philosophy of Nature that can be re-enacted, from tribal religions in India (the Munda and Dravidian groups mentioned by Daniélou, which are

being increasingly considered and integrated into the complex picture of Indian culture) to Amazonian shamanism (which has been forced to step out of the forest owing to the threat of industrial expansion in their territory). Behind sexuality (in the vulgar sense of genitally-oriented intercourse) lies the whole tradition-line of sacralised eroticism – for example in the Greek, Sumerian and Indian cultures –, whose heterogeneous dynamics reveal specific ‘technologies of the self’ leading humans to discover an expansive indwelling cosmogonic power (the real scandal is that instead of delving into research on such sources most people resort to so-called ‘sexologists’). As to Yoga, we live in times when serious research on the subject could finally attract people’s attention beyond the commonplaces of wellness, fitness and individualistic spirituality, to a way of life based on a systematic enhancement of natural powers – conceived as divine entities – in the practitioner and their expansion on a collective level. The search for ecstasy is perhaps the most interesting topic mentioned by Daniélou to change attitudes towards animism, not only in *Shiva and Dionysus*, but also in other essays such as *Les divinités hallucinogènes*. In the latter, Daniélou explains how ritualised use of psychotropes may help human beings connect with invisible entities, thus broadening the scope of knowledge: “profound awareness of the continuity between the subtle world of spirits and their incarnation in living entities is the basis of Shamanic knowledge”<sup>15</sup>. Just as the transcultural challenge for the Western spirit in the XX century was the importation

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Corona virus as the force of Nature piercing the alienating masks of human beings (photo by Joao Luno)

of Hindu Neo-Vedānta, the main challenge of the XXI century seems to be Neo-shamanism. The reason is simple: the message of Neo-Vedantic gurus revolved around the possibility of finding and realising God within ourselves, that is, without the mediation of an institution (the Church) that had lost much of its binding spiritual power for most followers. Neo-Shamanism is mainly the reception of indigenous traditions in the context of an uprooted and eclectic spirituality. But its scope includes the new efforts of Western science (from ethnology to psychiatry) to change its parameters of understanding and action through an open dialogue with tribal cultures. Both aspects of this phenomenon have been triggered by a collective perception of the terrible situation in which human beings find themselves after being completely severed from all forms of wisdom based on knowledge of and relations with the non-human environment (from plants and animals to spirits and gods). If the

spiritual ideal of the XX century was that of *mokṣa* (release from the constraints of human existence and finitude), that of the XXI should be *saṁbandha* (connection) or *anonya* (one-another-ness), the integral vision of the inter-connectedness of all beings. If the spiritual ideal of the XX century ended with a proliferation of self-proclaimed *illuminati* and the invention of initiatic chains, that of the XXI century should begin with a thorough combination of shared learning and experiencing, enabling us to change our perception and understanding of Nature (around us and in us).

This vision of inter-connectedness is in no way equated either with the famous ‘all is One’ (shared by vulgar metaphysicians and commonplace spiritualists), or with the abstract postulate of a harmonic order of being in which the forces of Nature should ultimately respect our cosmic centrality (whatever we do). The order and the dynamics of Nature cannot be fully grasped, but if human beings develop

– as Daniélou proposes – an embodied and relational spirituality (which he calls an ‘animistic attitude’), they will be able to avoid the unnecessary chain of reciprocal damage caused by the drastic discontinuity between human and non-human agencies, at the same time gaining other means of tackling so-called natural calamities instead of technological development. At this time of Covid-19, we must clearly realise that if we sit and wait for science and technology to deliver us from this epidemic through vaccination, without taking other measures already known by our ancestors (for example: strict physical isolation to prevent the spread of the disease), the whole world will be infected and there will be millions of deaths. If humans advance more and more in their re-education of perception, as Daniélou points out, awareness of the forces of Nature will extend to the domain of non-human subjectivity on interaction levels: for the post-modern, ultra-secular and seriously benumbed man this would seem to belong to the realm of phantasy and fiction. In reality, interaction with Shamans, or even reading ethnographic material about such interactions, would suffice to reconsider

*La chute du ciel* is not only the documented exchange between a Western ethnologist, Bruce Albert, and a Yanomami Shaman, Davi Kopenawa, but also the testimony of the Yanomami ‘ethnologist’, Davi Kopenawa, on his (Shamanic) interaction with another culture<sup>16</sup>: the milieu of invisible, micro-corporeal and humanoid entities of the forest, which he calls *xapiri*. Why is this testimony so important? Because it shows the need to manage relations with the forces of Nature in tribal cultures and the consequences of doing so. Kopenawa speaks of the possibility of understanding the universe of the *xapiri*, of learning from them and being accompanied by them – mainly through ritualised use of entheogens. But he also stresses their ambivalent character, the possibility of ontological predation and the measures taken to avoid it. It is this permanent exercise of interaction with non-human forces that prevents humans from detaching themselves from their Life source and makes them face its complexity on an individual and collective level. For this reason, Kopenawa’s exchange with the *xapiri* is also the premise for a possible look from the outside at the

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such prejudices and open to us another dimension of perception and sensitivity. An extraordinary example illustrating my point is that of Davi Kopenawa and the *xapiri*, the testimony of which is contained in the book *La chute du ciel* (2010).

intelligence of the ‘white man’. Kopenawa’s denunciation of one-sided and almost obsessional concentration on technical growth and production of merchandise characterising the modern Western project goes hand in hand with his defence of the local cultural forms that

are being progressively devastated – precisely as ‘natural resources’, that is, their whole non-human and *intelligent* life. Kopenawa insists on Western destruction of indigenous populations, not only through forced evangelisation and systematic deforestation, but also by means of epidemics. They carry abstract religion, alienating urbanisation and an army of invisible entities within themselves. Such entities relate essentially to the context of devastation, a kind of perverse mutation of life-forms which eventually turn against their own carriers. Since the latter fully ignore the subjective mechanisms of these micro-entities, they rely exclusively on external measures corresponding to a technocratic (shallow, external and mechanical) understanding of such ‘alien cultures’. This can only lead to a regular, cyclic repetition, with intensifying repercussions, since the solution lies not in any technical means employed to counteract the irruption from outside, but in an understanding of the complex dynamics of such beings from the inside – as well as the ensuing change of attitude restituting true relationality.

In the short story *Tagès*, published in the book *Les contes du labyrinthe* (1990), Alain Daniélou relates the encounter of his alter-ego, Gwen, with the spirit of an Etruscan oracular prophet, Tages, at the ancient village of Zagarolo. It is Gwen’s unusual imagination that opens the door through the image of a fountain towards

a parallel world reputed to have existed in a distant past, whose forces guide his thoughts, actions and decisions. The short story is part of Daniélou’s own foundational myth of the Labyrinth, the place where he spent the last decades of his life, trying to dig out the forgotten strata of Pagan culture in the Italic peninsula and relating it to his Shaivite philosophy. Daniélou’s character experiences a re-education of perception and a re-enactment of his active imagination, to the point of condensing entire layers of historical chronology within his own private experiential field. A natural setting reveals itself as ‘souled’ and deeply transforms the humans involved in that process of discovery. It is in this context that the Etruscan ancestor (for Daniélou a bridge to Dionysus and Shiva) announces a kind of Shamanic reversal of certainties: “Gwen, I am your friend and I would like to free you from absurd beliefs veiling the spirit of humans at present”<sup>17</sup>. The ‘absurd beliefs’ of humans in Daniélou’s short story reflect the same attitude denounced by Davi Kopenawa in *La chute du ciel*. If the (magic of the) earth is devastated, the sky will fall. This is an image of asphyxia, which translates not only the present threat of Sars-CoV-2, but its immediate correlate: the increasing narrowness of view concerning the living world around us. It is high time human beings renounced their self-proclaimed ‘crown’ and began to breathe again, following the rhythm of their source. •



- 1 Basically in three articles written on 26 February (*L'invenzione di una epidemia*), 11 March (*Contagio*) and 17 March (*Chiari-menti*), in which he deems the Covid-19 an utter invention and warns against a possible excuse to declare a state of exception beyond any limit (26 February), he doubts the factual danger of the virus and denounces the transformation of each individual in a potential incubus (11 March) and finally (having accepted that the virus is a fact) he condemns the reduction of freedom as a security reason of state – due to the measures taken by the Italian government. These texts can be consulted at Quolibet: <https://www.quolibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>
- 2 In an interview in *The Spectator/USA* on March 14: <https://spectator.us/like-about-coronavirus-slavoj-zizek/>
- 3 The first video that attracted attention was shown on February 10: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/video-how-dr-wolfgang-wodarg-sees-current-corona-pandemic/5707298>, but he sticks to this opinion *bis dato*, cf. <https://www.wodarg.com>
- 4 Cf. the following presentation of his case: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/sciences/chloroquine-l-infectiologue-dider-raoult-genie-incompris-ou-faux-propete-20200323>
- 5 <https://tinyurl.com/y8v8yo8g>
- 6 Cf. Yuval Noah Harari: the world after Corona virus, published on March 20 in the *Financial Times* online: <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>
- 7 I shall opt for the literal translation from the French (*Shiva et Dionysos*, as was done in the first English edition of 1984) in mentioning the title, although my quotations will be based on a later edition, the title of which has been changed to *Gods of Love and Ecstasy*.
- 8 Alain Daniélou, *Gods of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionyisus*, Rochester: Vermont, Inner Traditions, 1992, p. 26.
- 9 Cf. K. S. Singh, *The Munda Epic: An Interpretation*, in: *Indian International Center Quarterly*, Vol. 19, N° 1-2, pp. 75-89, here p. 82-83 and 87.
- 10 Cf. Philippe Descola, *La nature domestique*, Paris, Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2019, p. 8.
- 11 Concerning this topic, see among others Charles Stépanoff, *Chamanisme : rituel et cognition*, Paris, Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2014.
- 12 Alain Daniélou, *Gods of Love and Ecstasy*, p. 14.
- 13 An unprejudiced dialogue implies in this sense giving up both the superiority complex of Western epistemic thinking and the blind idealisation of the 'other', typical of post-modern spiritual movements (both of a progressive and a traditionalist kind).
- 14 Alain Daniélou, *Gods of Love and Ecstasy*, p. 234.
- 15 Alain Daniélou, *Les divinités hallucinogènes*, in : *Yoga, Kâma : le corps est un temple*, Paris, Kailash, 2005, pp. 121-125, here p. 122.
- 16 Cf. in this respect the remarkable article by José Antonio Kelly Luciani, "Kopenawa Davi et Bruce Albert, La chute du ciel. Paroles d'un chaman yanomami (traduit par Philippe Erikson)", in: *Journal de la société d'américanistes*, 97-1, 2011, pp. 1-17.
- 17 Alain Daniélou, Tagès, in: *Les contes du labyrinthe*, Monaco, Rocher, 1990, pp. 13-65, here p. 59.



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**Alain Daniélou**

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## THE MEANING OF GAṆAPATI

This text is part of a longer essay by Alain Daniélou published in the Adyar Library Bulletin (Vol. XVIII, part 1 § 2) in 1954. In what follows, the chosen passages on the famous deity Gaṇapati or Gaṇeśa (the origins of whom should be traced back to Shiva's companions, called Gaṇas) have been edited bearing in mind Daniélou's unpublished notes and variations in typed and handwritten form, which have also necessitated minor changes concerning grammar, spelling and style.



The young Alain Daniélou in India around 1940  
(photo: FIND Archive, Zagarolo)

### The Lord-of-the-Numbered

The elephant-headed god is one of the most prominent deities of present-day Hindus. He is worshipped at the beginning of every enterprise. His image is seen at the entrance of every temple and house. Gaṇeśa represents one of the basic concepts of Hindu mythological symbolism, the identity of the macrocosm and the microcosm, which among other things reaffirms the idea of a divine aspect of man. This notion of human divinity and the immanence of the god's power should be in our mind whenever we begin anything, hence Gaṇeśa is the first to be saluted.

The identity of macrocosm and microcosm can be observed in the permanence of certain relations that are the substratum of all the aspects of the perceptible universe. These relations can be best expressed in terms of number. Hence, number is easily seen as a common element,

the all-pervading consistency of manifestation. It is the essence of the nature of Gaṇapati, whose name means 'Lord of the Numbered'.

Like every other Hindu deity, Gaṇapati can be represented through different symbols, hence there is a mantra or sound-representation, a yantra or graphic-representation and an icon or image of Gaṇapati.

The *Maudgala Purāṇa* says: *gaṇeśasyāpi pūjanaṃ caturvidhaṃ caturmūrtidhāratvāt* ("The worship of Gaṇeśa [as that of the other gods] is of four kinds, according to his four symbolic representations"). The mantra or 'sound-image' of Gaṇapati is the monosyllabic AUM uttered at the beginning of every rite. Its meaning is also expressed in the sacred formula *tat-tvam-asi*, "Thou art that", which represents the fundamental identity of the macrocosm and the microcosm.

In the *Gaṇapati Upaniṣad* we read: *tvameva pra-*

*tyakṣaṃ tatvamasi*, that is, “Thou (the living being) art the visible form of That (the supreme essence)”.

The swastika is the graphic symbol of Gaṇeśa. It is a cross representing the development of the multiple from the basic unity, the central point. But the four branches are bent to form a square, symbol of the Earth. This is intended to show that through the outward forms of the Universe we cannot directly reach their basic unity. Hence the principle is said to be ‘crooked’. There is also a more elaborate diagram called Gaṇeśa, a yantra used for ritual worship. Another symbol of Gaṇapati is the stone Svarṇabhadra.

The image of Gaṇeśa has a man’s body and an elephant’s head. The elephant represents the macrocosm, the Great Being, and the man the microcosm, the small universe. The identity of the boundless, all-powerful Cosmic Being and the bounded, powerless human, of the elephant and the man, would seem an eternal impossibility. The image of Gaṇeśa constantly reminds us of the reality of this apparently impossible identity. Man is truly the image of the cosmos, so all realisation lies in a certain sense within himself. By studying our inclinations, our inner structure, we can understand the mystery of the Universe.

### The Number Principle

Everything which our senses can perceive, or our mind grasps, can be expressed in terms of quantity, of relation, of number. Thus, it is logical for us to consider numbers the fundamental elements underlying existence, as the following passages of the *Gaṇapata Upaniṣad* clearly illustrate:

*gaṇyante buddhyante te gaṇāḥ*

“All that can be counted or comprehended is a quantity (*gaṇa*)”.

*gaṇaśabdaḥ samūhasya vācakaḥ parikīrtitaḥ*

“By the word quantity is meant any collection of things”.

We see that the principle of number through which the relations between different quantities or orders of beings can be understood is of the same nature as the relation between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

*gaṇānāṃ patiḥ gaṇapatiḥ*

“The ruler of all that can be numbered, Gaṇapati”

Here Gaṇapati can be identified with the Divine Nature in all its aspects.

*om laṃ namaste gaṇapataye tvameva prat-  
yakṣaṃ tattvamasi | tvameva kevalaṃ kartā’si  
tvameva kevalaṃ dhartā’si tvameva kevalaṃ  
kartā’si tvameva kevalaṃ khalvidaṃ brahmāsi |  
tvam sāksādātmā’si*

“I bow to the Power of the Root-centre (AUM-LAM). I bow to the Lord of the Numbered. Thou alone art the visible form of the principle. Thou alone art the Creator, thou alone art the Sustainer, thou alone are the Destroyer, thou alone art unmistakably the principle of all, the real Self”.

According to this passage, number transcends intellect. The presence of the god becomes nevertheless very concrete and encompasses the different aspects of the cosmic process (creation, preservation and destruction).

*mahatattvādītattvagaṇānāṃ patiḥ gaṇapatiḥ*

“The Lord of the Numbered rules over Universal Intellect (*mahat-tattva*) and the principles of the elements (*tattva*) derived from it”.

Gaṇapati, identified with Bṛhaspati, is already mentioned in the R̥g Veda, as the following passage indicates:

*gaṇānāṃ tvā gaṇapatiṃ havāmahe kaviṃ ka-  
vīnāmupamaśravastamam |*

*jyeṣṭharājaṃ brahmaṇāṃ brahmaṇspata ā naḥ*



Swami Karpatri in the 1940s, on whom some of Daniélou's considerations on Ganesha are based (photo: FIND Archive, Zagarolo)

*śṛṅvannūtibhiḥ sīda sādānam* ||

“O thou who of all that is numbered art the Lord, the poet of poets, unrivalled in wealth, King of Elders, Lord of the Principle of Principles, hear us and take thy place bringing with thee all enjoyments” (*Rg Veda* 2, 23, 1).

Named indirectly in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (10.1.5) and in [an interpolated passage of] the *Maitrāyaṇi Saṁhitā* (3.12.20), Gaṇapati really appears in this present form only in the later parts of the *Mahābhārata*.

The *Agni Purāṇa* (Adhyāya 72, verses 1-8) and the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* (Adhyaya 1, verses 270-282) briefly describe a ritual of Gaṇeśa. In the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* he is shown as a demoniacal being, and he plays a significant part in Tantrism also because of the transgressive forces related to the Gaṇas. The *Prapañca Sāra Tantra* (Adhyāya 17) provides an elaborate image of him.

For followers of the Gāṇapatya sect, he is the

supreme deity. He is one of the five deities of the Smārta cult. Several Purāṇas place him above the Trimūrti. He is the favourite deity of the common man.

Gaṇeśa is the patron of letters, of schools. He is the scribe who writes down the scriptures. The Brāhmaṇas accept him as the god of learning. In *Māhabhārata* 1.1.77. we also find the same motif: *lekhako bhāratasyāsyā bhava tvaṃ gaṇānāyak* (“Be thou, Leader of the Numbered, the scribe of the story of this war”).

[Description of Gaṇapati based on the Gaṇapati Tattva by Swami Karpatri \(Benares, 1943\)](#)

[Thou art That](#)

In terms of the world, a man cannot be an elephant, yet this can be true in terms of Divinity, for Divinity is that where opposites unite. This becomes evident when we trace each symbol

to its essential meaning. The sacred utterance which represents Gaṇapati is *tat-tvam-asi*, ‘Thou art That’.

The pronoun ‘That’ is *satyam jñānāmanantam brahma*, the limitless transcendent principle which is truth and knowledge, aloof from all attributes. The pronoun ‘Thou’ (*tvam*) represents the principle qualified, whose form is the Universe. Both ‘That’ and ‘Thou’ are welded in an indivisible identity by the third term ‘art’ (*asi*), that is by Existence.

Existence is the co-ordination of the absolute and the relative, of That and Thou. True knowledge is the realisation of this unity including all concrete aspects of manifested being.

### Elephant and Man

The word ‘man’ (*nara*) is defined as meaning ‘qualified divinity’. Man is the progeny of the cosmic being, hence *narājjātāni tattvāni nārāṇīti vidurbudhāḥ* (“The beings born of the [Universal] Man are known to the sages of men”).

The word *gaja* (elephant) is taken to mean the origin and the end.

*samādhinā yogino gacchanti yatra iti gaḥ* 1

*yasmāt bimbapratibimbavṛtṭyā praṇāvātmakam jagajjāyate iti jaḥ* 11

“The stage reached by the re-integrated being, the Yogi, in his experience of ultimate identification (*samādhi*) is called *ga*, the Goal; while the principle is called *ja*, the origin, from which the syllable-of-obesance AUM is said to issue through a process of multifold reflection”.

The elephant is thus the *janmādyasya yataḥ*

stage (Brahma Sūtra, 1.1.4.) “whence existence begins”, and *yasmādoṅkārasambhūtiriyato vedo yato jagat* “whence the syllable AUM issues, from AUM the Universal law (the Veda) and from the Veda the Universe”.

The man-part of Gaṇapati, representing the Principle manifest, is inferior to the non-manifest, which is the elephant part. The elephant is therefore shown as the head. One should also meditate on the force of the animal and its spiritual meaning.

Gaṇapati in his totality is the indivisible blissful unity pervading all existence.

### The Representation of Gaṇapati

*ekadantaṃ caturhastam*

*pāsamaṅkuśadhārinam* 1

*amayaṃ varadaṃ hastairbibhrāṇam mūṣakadv-  
ajam* 11 ११ 11

*raktalambodaram śūrpasukarṇam rak-  
tavāsasam* 1

*raktagandhānuliptāṅgam raktapuṣṭaiḥ supūji-  
tam* 11 १२ 11

*bhaktānukampinam devaṃ*

*jagatkāraṇamacyutam* 1

*āvīrbhūtam ca sṛṣṭyādau prakṛteḥ puruṣātpar-  
am* 11 १३ 11

*evaṃ dhyāyati yo nityaṃ sa yogī yogināṃ varaḥ*  
11 १४ 11

“He has one tusk, four arms, two of his hands hold a noose and a hook, two other hands show the gesture of ‘removing fear’ and ‘granting boons’. A mouse is on his flag. Red, obese,

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Like every other Hindu deity, Gaṇapati can be represented by different symbols, hence there is a mantra or sound-representation, a yantra or graphic-representation and an icon or image of Gaṇapati.

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Gaṇapati, Destroyer of Obstacles  
(photo by Jacques Cloarec)

with ears like winnowing baskets, clad in red, his limbs are anointed with red sandal paste. He is worshipped with red flowers. Merciful to his devotees, he is the infallible deity, origin of the worlds. He appears in the beginning of creation beyond Nature, beyond the Cosmic Person. He who ever meditates on his form becomes great among the reintegrated” (Gaṇapati Upaniṣad 11-14).

### The Tusk

Gaṇeśa has only one tusk. According to *Maudgala Purāṇa*:

*ekaśbdātmikā māyā tasyāḥ sarvasamudbhavam |  
dantaḥ sattādharastatra māyācālaka ucyate ||*

“The word ‘one’ is the symbol of illusion; from it everything has sprung. The tooth (or tusk) is the support of existence, it is therefore the impeller of illusion”.

Gaṇeśa is one-toothed because in him are unit-

ed the qualified or manifest being which is illusion (*māyā*) and the non-manifest unqualified being who is the support of illusion, the illusion-giver (*māyī*). This also means that unity as consistency of being essentially corresponds to diversity as manifestation.

### The Trunk

Gaṇeśa’s trunk is bent: *vakramātmamukhaṃ yasya* (“his face, shape of the Self, is crooked”). While the outward form of the world appears intelligible to mind and words, Divinity cannot be directly understood and is therefore said to be crooked.

*mastakaṃ brahmavācakaṃ | vakrākhyam yona  
vighneśāstenāyaṃ vakratuṇḍakaḥ ||*

“His head, image of the Principle is crooked. His trunk is also said to be bent because he is the master of obstacles”.

The trunk of Gaṇeśa is represented as bent

sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left. These directions correspond to the two ways in which obstacles can be got round and the supreme goal – that is, the realisation of the path free from obstacles – can be reached. These are the right- and the left-hand ways. This meaning also applies to the swastika, which is the yantra of Gaṇeśa and can be bent to either side.

### The four Arms

As universal ruler, Gaṇeśa has four arms. It is he who established the four kinds of beings. It is he also who instituted the four castes and the four wisdoms (*vedas*):

*svargeṣu devatāścāyaṃ pṛthvīyaṃ  
narāṃstathā'tale |*

*asurānnāgamusvyāmśca sthāpayisyati bālakaḥ  
|| १ ||*

*tattvāni cālayanviprāsthasmānnāmnā  
caturbhujāḥ |*

*caturṇām vividhānām ca sthapako'yaṃ prakīrti-  
taḥ || २ ||*

“In Heaven this child will establish the predominance of Gods, on Earth that of men, in the Nether World that of the anti-gods and serpents. O priest, he causes the four principles of the elements to move and is therefore called four-armed. There are many kinds of quaternary. He has established them all”.

One of the four hands holds a noose, another an elephant-hook (*aṅkuśā*), another hand grants boons, another allays fear. To catch delusion (*moha*), the enemy of all seekers, he holds the noose. The driving-hook is the insignia of the ruler of the universe, and the giving hand shows him as the fulfiller of desires. The hand allaying fear shows that Gaṇapati is beyond the realm of time and death, to which pertains all fear.

### The Mouse

The vehicle of Gaṇeśa is the mouse (*mūṣaka*). The mouse is the master of the inside of everything. The all-pervading Ātman is the mouse that lives in the hole within the heart of every being, and is the real enjoyer of the pleasures of all creatures. This Self is also a thief, because, unnoticed, it steals all that people possess. It hides itself behind the inscrutable shapes of illusion, and no one knows that this inner ruler takes for himself the pleasures people believe they enjoy. “It is he also who is benefited by all penance” (*bhoktāraṃ sarvat-  
apasām*). The word *mūṣa* comes from the root *mūṣ-*, to steal. Although it steals from people the things they enjoy, the mouse has no concern as to whether those enjoyments are virtues or vices. Similarly, the inner ruler of everything, hidden beneath inscrutable illusion, enjoys the pleasures of all, but remains unaffected by vice or virtue.

### Gaṇeśa is obese

Gaṇeśa is obese because all manifestation is contained in his belly; yet he himself is not contained in anyone: *tasyodarātsamutpannaṃ  
nānāviśvaṃ na saśyaḥ* (“Many vast universes were born from his belly, of this there is no doubt”).

### The winnowing Ears

The ears of the God resemble winnowing trays because he winnows the words that men address to him. He throws away the dust of vice and virtue. Real values alone then remain to be apprehended.

*rajoyuktaṃ yathā dhāryaṃ rajohīnaṃ karoti  
ca |*

*śūrpaṃ sarvanarāṇāṃ vai yogaṃ bho-  
janakāmyayā || १ ||*

“Only by winnowing does corn, dust-mixed, become dust-free for every man to desire it as



his food”.

*tathā māyāvikāreṇa yutaṃ brahma na labhyate |  
tyaktopāsanakaṃ tasya śūrpa-karṇasya sundari  
|| २ ||*

“Thus, O lovely One! He who neglects the worship of the winnowing ears will never find the Absolute buried under the changing forms of appearances”.

*śūrpa-karṇaṃ samāśritya tyaktvā mala-  
vikārakam |*

*brahmaiva narajātistho bhavetena tathā smṛtaḥ  
|| ३ ||*

“Men seek the protection of the winnowing ears, and reject the impurities of all that changes, in order that the Great Being may establish

inherent in times and duration”).

### The Lord of Obstruction

The *Skanda Purāṇa* and the *Maudgala Purāṇa* tell the story of Prince Pleasing-to-all (Abhinandana), who organized a vast sacrifice to the Gods, from which, however, he excluded Indra. Hearing of this, Indra became angry; he summoned Time and ordered him to stop the sacrifice. Time took the shape of the genie Obstruction (Vighna-asura) to put an end to the sacrifice.

The genie Obstruction killed Prince Abhinandana and then wandered hither and thither, sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, obstructing all rites. Bewildered, Vaśiṣṭha and the other sages went to the Creator Brahmā, seek-

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**The image of Gaṇeśa has a man's body and an elephant's head. The elephant represents the macrocosm, the Great Being, and the man the microcosm, the small universe.**

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himself in their midst, and they become one with him”.

Gaṇeśa is also ‘king-of-the-elders (*jyeṣṭha rāja*): he is first among the Great and presides over the assembly of the gods.

### The Remover of Obstacles

The Lord of the Numbered is the destroyer of obstacles. In this sense, the *Gaṇapati Upaniṣad* (15) reads: *vighnavināśīne śivasutāya varadamūrtaye namo namaḥ* (“I bow to the son of Shiva, to the embodiment of the giver of gifts, who destroys obstacles”). Explaining the previous passage, Sayāṅcārya writes: *samayakālātmakabhayahāriṇe amṛtātmakapadapradatvāt* (“He it is who, by giving immortality, removes the fear

ing his protection. He ordered them to pray to the Lord of the Numbered who alone is beyond Time, whom no other deity has the power to conquer.

Vanquished by Gaṇeśa, the genie Obstruction placed himself under his protection and served him obediently. Thus, it is that Gaṇeśa is also called “The Lord of Obstruction (*Vighnarāja*) and, if any good work is undertaken without praying to and worshipping Gaṇeśa, obstacles will inevitably occur. Henceforth Obstruction lives under the protection of the All-Powerful Gaṇeśa. Being the nature of Time, Obstruction, too, is an aspect of Divinity: *viśeṣeṇa jagatsāmarthyam hantīti vighnaḥ* (“An obstruction is that which prevents the realisation in the world of

the apparently possible”).

That which restricts the power of even Brahmā and the other gods to create, sustain and destroy is verily called obstruction. Hence, in an auspicious invocation preliminary to all sacrifices (*puṇyāhavācana*), we hear the following: *bhagavantau vighnavināyakau prīyetām* (“May the two gods Obstruction and its masterer, be pleased!”).

None but Gaṇeśa can control obstacles; the *Yoga-Vaśiṣṭha* relates how, when the sage Bhṛgu was on the point of cursing Time, the latter took the shape of Obstruction and said:

*mā tapaḥ kṣapayābuddhe! kalpa-*

*kālamahānasaiḥ I*

*yo na dagdhe’smi me tasya kiṃ tvaṃ śāpena dhakṣyasi II*

*brahmaṇḍāvalayo grastāḥ nigīrṇā rudrakotayaḥ I*

*bhuktāni viṣṇuvṛndāni kva na śaktā vayaṃ mune II*

“O fool! Do not waste the merits acquired by thy penance! I who could not be burnt in the furnace of the ages, could thy curse destroy me? O Sage! I who have devoured the eggs of all Universes, swallowed the lords of Destructions (*rudras*) by the million, and feasted on all the Pervaders (*viṣṇus*), what can be beyond my power?”. •



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## VIOLENCE AND EROTICISM IN EARLY MEDIAEVAL TANTRA AT KĀMĀKHYĀ

In this essay, Paolo Rosati discusses one of the numerous factors that contributed to the emergence of the Tantric cult of the Goddess Kāmākhyā: the relationship between death imaginary and sexual symbolism. Mythological sources reveal that when Naraka—the first mytho-historical king of Kāmarūpa—ascended to the throne of Prāgjyotiṣapura, the cult of the Goddess Kāmākhyā was institutionalised within the folds of Brahmanism. The Kāmarūpa kingship, through the legitimation of Naraka as the royal ancestor and his related symbols of sexuality and death, integrated and justified the Tantric cult of Kāmākhyā centred on blood sacrifices and sexual rites, while the ritual violence of shedding blood emerged as the prescribed ritual in acceding to the kingship of Kāmarūpa.



Mother feeding her child (Kāmākhya, 2016, photo by the author)

### Introduction

The north-eastern offshoot of the Indian subcontinent is a peripheral region that connects India with Indochina sharing, indeed, its borders with the modern state of Myanmar. The temple of Kāmākhya is located on top of Nīlācala (Blue Mountain), in the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam). The Brahmaputra plain has been the socio-religious centre of north-eastern India throughout its mediaeval history. More specifically, since the early mediaeval period, the valley has emerged as a place of cross-cultural encounter and interchange between the Brahmanised kings of Kāmarūpa (the land of desire)<sup>1</sup>—who ruled from Prāgyotiṣapura<sup>2</sup>—and the local inhabitants of the hills and forests surrounding the plain.

During the mediaeval period—approximately around the end of the seventh century—Kāmākhya emerged as a Tantric Goddess who presides over Nīlācala, also well-known as the *yoni pīṭha* (seat of the vulva), a religious centre

where she is worshipped in her non-anthropomorphic form of a *yoni* stone. Her temple is surrounded by ten private Mahāvidyā shrines, a peculiarity in south Asian religious architecture.<sup>3</sup> The sacred *yoni* stone is preserved inside the temple's womb-chamber (*gabhagrha*), an obscure and claustrophobic sanctum that, today, is always crowded with pilgrims arriving mostly from West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and the states of northeast India<sup>4</sup>. The *yoni* is covered by the water of a natural underground stream, which prevents the sacred stone from being seen directly. As a consequence, it is necessary to touch it to experience the *darśana* (seeing).

Inside the womb-chamber the sexual symbolism related to the cult of Kāmākhya is extremely clear, although its superimposition over “the primeval death imagery of Nīlācala, which is supposed to have been an ancient tribal cremation ground” has been detected. While the water inside the sanctum is easily

read as a symbolic substitute for the sexual fluids of the Goddess and may be considered an explicit symbol of *eros*,<sup>5</sup> on the other hand, the death imagery is far more explicit outside the womb-chamber, where animals are still ritually slaughtered. However, the devotees, climbing down more than one hundred steps “to reach the *garbhagr̥ha*” symbolically “descend to the subterranean world”. The *yonī* is therefore not only the “matrix of the universe”, but “also the access point to the power of the ancestors”<sup>6</sup>.

This double symbolism is well-mirrored by the goddess Kāmākhyā and her related ritual praxis. In fact, on the one hand, she is a caring mother, related to the universe of love, sex, and desire; on the other, she is a terrifying mother, leader of the *yoginīs*,<sup>7</sup> who are a cluster of female deities, “angry” because “hungry” and “thirsty” for blood and flesh<sup>8</sup>.

### Naraka and the Legitimisation of Eroticism and Death

In order to trace back the roots of Kāmākhyā’s ambivalence, a glance at the origin of Brahmanised kingship in northeast India is necessary. The ethnic and cultural origins of the early kings of Kāmarūpa are obscure, although the *Kālikāpurāṇa*—an early mediaeval text compiled in northeast India in the ninth–eleventh century—preserves a myth that connects north-eastern kingship to Naraka—a hero revered as the founder of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa. According to the myth, Naraka not only conquered the northeast, but he also

united its population under his royal banner by adopting the cult of Kāmākhyā, already worshipped by local tribes (*kirātas*)<sup>9</sup>.

In spite of the fact that Naraka’s Puranic biography has no evidence of historicity, his story definitely underlines an ancient connexion between the cult of the Goddess Kāmākhyā—centred on the worship (*pūjā*) of her *yonī*—and the impurity of menstrual blood, a trait borrowed from the Earth goddess (Pṛthvī). Indeed, Naraka was conceived during her menstrual period by Pṛthvī—an element that relates the demi-god to the *universe of impurity*<sup>10</sup>—when she was assaulted by Viṣṇu in his Varāha (wild boar) form<sup>11</sup>. Thus, Naraka is widely related to *eros*, and particularly to the prohibition for menstruating women to have sex—while she is identified as an impure being by the Vedic and Puranic sources<sup>12</sup>. The menstrual blood contaminated Varāha as well as the embryo growing inside the Earth goddess’s womb.

Naraka, identified as an *asura* (i.e. anti-god), transmitted his asuric condition to his family (Bhaumas) and to the later early mediaeval royal families. Not only was Naraka therefore the hero who associated the Goddess Kāmākhyā with the Brahmanical universe, but he also endangered the Brahmanical power related to the Vedic tradition. In fact, Naraka is described as “powerful enough even to torment the ambrosia-drinking gods” on the Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman (v.2)<sup>13</sup>. However, Naraka’s myth shows a convergence of the

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The association of Naraka with a human skull, on a cremation ground, relates the future king of Kāmarūpa either to Śiva as the skull-bearer (*kapālin*) *par excellence* or to the ancestral magic powers linked to the handling of corpses and bones, later appropriated by the socio-religious milieu of esoteric Buddhist traditions.

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Preparation for the buffalo's sacrifice (Kāmākhya, 2016, photo by the author)

eroticism related to womanhood, sexual fluids, and specific sexual prescriptions (including their violation) with the death imagery. Indeed, when Naraka was born he was found by his step-father, the king of Mithilā,<sup>14</sup> Janaka, on his sacrificial ground, “lying and crying inside a human skull”<sup>15</sup>.

The king found the body [i.e. the child] like the blazing fire in his brilliance, like the moon in lustre and like the sun in splendour and picked him up remembering the promise he made to Pṛthvī in the past, the way the Fire god picked up Kārttikeya (son of Śiva and Pārvatī) from the midst of *sara* grasses<sup>16</sup>.

The association of Naraka with a human skull, on a cremation ground, relates the future king of Kāmarūpa either to Śiva as the skull-bearer (*kapālin*) *par excellence*—after he decapitated Brahmā, being thus guilty of Brahmanicide—or to the ancestral magic powers linked to the handling of corpses and bones later appropriated by the socio-religious milieu of the esoteric Buddhist traditions, which David Gray termed as “the cult of the charnel ground”. States such

as “awakening” or “gnosis of awakening” in the Buddhist context are widely associated with death—“meaning that death provided an opportunity for awakening that is difficult to achieve in normal states of consciousness”<sup>17</sup>.

Hence, Naraka—the king who subdued the populations of the Brahmaputra Valley and its surrounding hills and forests, and then united Brahmanised and non-Brahmanised people in the cult of Kāmākhya—can be described as a socio-religious tool used by the compiler(s) (*paurāṇika*[s]) of the *Kālikāpurāṇa* to explain the fusion of values belonging to non-Sanskritic culture with the Brahmanical tradition. Naraka, as the first (mytho-historical) king, legitimised the incorporation within Brahmanism of traits that were perceived as polluting and impure by the Vedic-Brahmanic culture. Consequently, because Naraka’s biological mother was menstruating when he was conceived, menstrual blood assumed a prominent position as a powerful albeit dangerous element at Kāmākhya. Death imagery was also incorporated within the Kāmākhya cult

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The sexual rite is usually considered more powerful than blood sacrifice, although both methods, by different paths, reach the same goal, which is power, either religious or political.

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mainly, but not only, through the practice of blood sacrifices to nourish the Goddess.

On the one hand, Naraka transmitted the sexual traits of the Earth goddess to Kāmākhyā; on the other hand, he transmitted the death imagery of the cremation ground to the Goddess. In fact, the Naraka myth seems to equate the Earth goddess to the Goddess Kāmākhyā, the former being the biological mother of King Naraka and the latter *the mother* of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa<sup>18</sup>.

### The Intersection of Sexuality and Death in Tantra

The early mediaeval dynasties of Kāmarūpa—the Varman (fourth to seventh century), the Śālastambha (seventh to tenth century), and the Pāla (tenth to thirteenth century)<sup>19</sup>—are the first historical dynasties of northeast India. They all traced their roots back to the Bhauma dynasty—the mytho-historical royal family founded by Naraka<sup>20</sup>. The early mediaeval kings of Kāmarūpa, in tracing this link to Naraka, thus accepted the divine powers derived from Viṣṇu/Varāha as well as the dangerous asuric powers represented by menstrual blood and the charnel ground.

Sexuality and death imagery were symbolically integrated within the cult of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Her earthly abode was constructed on a hilltop which in the past was a tribal sacrificial ground, inside which is preserved the *yoni* stone—the icon of the Goddess. Two are the Tantric methods of satisfying the Goddess Kāmākhyā: 1) nourishing her with the blood

and flesh of sacrificial victims; 2) worshipping her *yoni* either physically or symbolically.

Offering blood and flesh was thus clearly connected with the imagery of death and violence, whereas the *yoni pūjā* was linked to the universe of desire and sexuality<sup>21</sup>. Kāmākhyā is therefore a dangerous and dreadful mother, as well as a caring mother<sup>22</sup>. Her terrifying aspect is satisfied by her devotees through blood sacrifices. By nourishing the Goddess with blood and flesh, her energy (*śakti*) is empowered, so that once a year, when she menstruates, her *śakti* vivifies the earth<sup>23</sup>. Kāmākhyā's loving and peaceful aspect is linked to her *yoni* and its sexual fluids, which endow her devotees with supernatural powers (*siddhis*)<sup>24</sup>.

Offering sacrificial blood to the Goddess was the necessary act to become king<sup>25</sup>. Only the king, however, could command a human sacrifice<sup>26</sup>, a ritual act capable of releasing inestimable power<sup>27</sup>. This prescription gave the king control over who could obtain such energy (*śakti*). However, animal sacrifices could be officiated without royal interference. For the king, blood sacrifices were necessary to destroy his enemies and maintain his established power, while for other devotees they were needed primarily to reach liberation (*mokṣa*)<sup>28</sup>. Historically, Tantra has been a vehicle to spread religious and political ideas<sup>29</sup>, closely linked to the royal power, whereas the *śakti* “is also the material power that flows through the social body and the state as well as the physical body and the cosmos”<sup>30</sup>. This Tantric path related to the violence of bloodshed is called the “orthodox method”, as opposed to the “heterodox method”<sup>31</sup>.

The “heterodox method” is related to the worship of the *yoni* of Kāmākhya, by far the most secret ritual performed within the folds of Hindu-Tantra traditions. Devotees drinking the *yoni*’s water obtain liberation and supernatural powers. What do the texts mean by *yoni*’s water? On the one hand, the *Kālikāpurāṇa* states that one has to drink the reddish water flowing inside the sacred cave (*guhā*) of Kāmākhya in order to obtain supernatural powers<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, devotees also bathed in the sacred water in order to achieve liberation<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, later mediaeval sources—related to the Tantric Kaula school—transformed this symbolic ritual into the physical praxis of drinking the sexual fluids from a human *yoginī*’s vulva<sup>34</sup>.

The sexual rite is usually considered more powerful than blood sacrifice, although both methods, by different paths, reach the same goal, which is power, either religious or polit-

ical. Although by performing the most secret *yoni pūjā*, devotees as well as the kings could obtain a number of inestimable powers<sup>35</sup>, it was the offering of blood that allowed a person to become king. In this way, ritual violence emerges as the Tantric path closer to the Brahmanised kingship, a fact that also emerges in other south Asian regions with a high non-Brahmanic density<sup>36</sup>. The idea that Tantra is mostly an esoteric, sexual and ecstatic path towards salvation based on desire (*kāma*) in order to obtain enjoyment (*bhukti*), supernatural powers, and liberation is therefore flawed and only partially true<sup>37</sup>.

In conclusion, both the Tantric rituals performed in early mediaeval Kāmarūpa are an access-door to what Hugh Urban calls “the power at the margins”<sup>38</sup>, a cross-cultural power required to dominate a region mostly inhabited by non-Sanskritic people. •

1 The mediaeval kingdom of Kāmarūpa corresponds to the modern states of Assam, Meghalaya and part of Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Bhutan.

2 Present-day city of Guwahati.

3 At present, no other south Asian site is known where private shrines for each of the ten Mahāvidyās are preserved. On the other hand, there are a number of sites where the Mahāvidyās are worshipped as a cluster. See, D. Kinsley: *The Tantric Vision of the Divine Feminine. The Ten Mahāvidyās*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1998).

4 This group of states is also called Seven Sisters; further than Assam, the other six are Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura

5 This equation between water and sexual symbol is also affirmed by devotees, although

they do not consider the sexuality behind the symbol of worship a *yoni* and its sexual fluids.

6 P.E. Rosati: “The Cross-Cultural Kingship in Early Medieval Kāmarūpa: Blood, Desire and Magic,” in: G.A. Hayes and S. Timalina (eds.), “The Society for Tantric Studies Proceedings [2016]”, Special issue, *Religions*, vol. 8 (212), pp. 9–10. doi.org/10.3390/rel8100212. See, R.M. Davidson: *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 224–225.

7 B. Shastri (trans.): *Kālikāpurāṇa: Sanskrit Text with English Translation*, Delhi, Nag Publishers, 2018 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1991), 54.34; 63.44 (hereafter, *KP*).

8 D.G. White: *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in Its South Asian Contexts*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2003), pp. 3–4.

9 The biography of Naraka is preserved in *KP*:



Ch. 36–40.

10 However, according to F. Appfel-Marglin (“Female Sexuality in the Hindu World,” in: C.W. Atkinson (ed.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Boston (MA), Beacon Press, 1985, pp. 40–44), menstrual blood encompasses auspicious and inauspicious aspects, thus not being related exclusively to just one of these aspects.

11 *KP*: 30.34.

12 Regarding menstrual blood, see, J. Leslie: “Menstruation Myths,” in: J. Leslie (ed.), *Myth and Mythmaking: Continuous Evolution in Indian Tradition*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 1996, pp. 90–94.

13 M.M. Sharma: *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati, Dept. Publications Guwahati University, 1978, p. 20.

14 Mithilā was the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Vidheas, probably located between Bihar and southern Nepal.

15 Rosati: “The Cross-Cultural Kingship,” *op. cit.*, p. 6; see also *KP*: 37. 46–52.

16 *KP*: 37.53–54.

17 D.B. Gray: “Skull Imagery and Skull Magic in the *Yoginī Tantras*,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies (Third Series)*, no. 8 (Fall), 2006, pp. 24–25.

18 However, this reading could be considered reductive. Indeed, the intersecting, sharing, and encompassing process of such trans-cultural traits is far more complex. In fact, the sexual symbolism relating to the Earth goddess is encountered all over the world. Yet death imagery is also a transcultural element. Nevertheless, here I wish to point out how the compiler(s) of a Sanskrit text—who needed to spread Brahmanism in a region dominated by non-Brahmanic people—legitimised or tried to legitimise non-orthodox traits of the goddess Kāmākhyā and her Tantric cult.

19 They are the Pāla of Kāmarūpa, a different dynasty from the Pāla of Bengal.

20 P.C. Choudhury: *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam up to 12th Century A.D.*, Guwahati, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, 1959, pp. 139–147.

21 Both these traits connect Kāmākhyā to the cluster of *yoginīs*; see P.E. Rosati: “The Roots of the Two Sides of Kāmākhyā: Blending Death and Sex in Tantra,” in: P.E. Rosati (ed.), “The Blend of Tantra: Continuity and Discontinuity within South Asia Mainstream Religions,” Special Issue, *Religions of South Asia*, vol. 13, 2019 [forthcoming].

22 It is difficult to affirm whether or not Kāmākhyā always encompasses both these aspects, showing herself sometimes as a dreadful mother and sometimes as a loving mother, but never forgetting her other side.

23 Even today, once every year, the Ambuvācī melā celebrates, during the raining season, the menstrual cycle of Kāmākhyā.

24 According to early mediaeval textual Tantric traditions, just staying near the *yoni pīṭha* was sufficient to obtain supernatural powers; see C.P. Bagchi (ed.) and M. Magee (trans.): *Kaula-jñāna-nirṇaya of the School of Matsyendranatha*, Varanasi, Prachya Prakashan, 1986 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1934), 16.7–10.

25 *KP*: 84.79–81.

26 *KP*: 67.116–118.

27 *KP*: 67.18.

28 *KP*: 67.5–6.

29 C. Orzech: *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture of the Human Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, p. 8.

30 H.B. Urban: *The Power of Tantra: Religious, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*, New York, I. B. Tauris, 2010 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2009), p. 73.

31 *KP*: 74.139b–140.

32 *KP*: 62.88b–90.

33 *KP*: 80.31b–32a.

34 B.N. Shastri (ed.): *Kāmākhyā-Tantra*, Delhi/Varanasi, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashana, 1990, 4.22.

35 Such as the power to “see a buried treasure” (*guṭīkāñjana*), the “power of diving underneath the earth” (*pātālasiddhi*), “an ointment [...] enabling [...] to move anywhere undiscovered” (*pādālepa*), “the power of transmitting base

metals into gold or finding an elixir of immortality” (*rasāyana*), “a sword over which mantras have been uttered, so that success in battle is guaranteed” (*khadaga*), the power to become “invisible” (*antaradhāna*), the power “to fly up in the sky” (*khecara*), “the power to go swiftly everywhere on earth” (*bhūcara*), and “the power to make one’s enemy flee from the country with all attendant disgrace” (*uccātana*); see, K.R. Van Kooij, *Worship of the Goddess According to the Kālikāpurāṇa: A Translation with an Introduction and Notes of Chapters 54–69*, Leiden, Brill, 1972, pp. 24–25.

36 This is the case of rock-cut representations of the two self-decapitating and self-mutilating worshippers in the mediaeval art of Tamil dynasties of south India, such as the Pallava

and Cōḷa. The two devotees are depicted on either side of what is probably the tribal goddess Korravai, identified as the Brahmanic Victorious Durgā; see, J.C. Harle, “Durgā, Goddess of Victory,” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 26. nos. 3–4, 1963, pp. 237–246.

37 Cf. M. Biardeau: *L’Induismo. Antropologia di una civiltà* (trans. by F. Poli), Milano, Mondadori (1<sup>st</sup> ed. in French, *L’hindouisme, anthropologie d’une civilization*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995), pp. 185–193; A. Padoux: “Tantrism: An Overview,” in: M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religions*, vol. 15, New York, MacMillan, pp. 271–273.

38 Urban: *The Power of Tantra, op. cit.*, p. 26.



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## THE DRUIDS' RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

In this essay, which is an extended version of Bernard Rio's talk at FIND's Forum "Transcultural Encounters 2019", the author presents the world of the Druids from a historical and symbolic perspective, inquiring mainly into their relationship with Nature. From etymological speculations on the word "druid" to reflections on the organisation of society, as well as on the philosophical and religious conception of ancient Celtic culture, the essay deals with the complex issue of how the Druids managed to reach a highly elaborate cultural development without losing their bond with the sacrality of Nature.



Woodcut of the Feast of Beltan,  
Raffig Tullou, *Celticist Journal Kad*, 1959

### Preamble

Druidism had officially disappeared for over a thousand years when those then called “antiquarians” started taking an interest in the ancient Druids. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in France and in Great Britain, Druids became fashionable. In 1532, Jean Le Fève published *Les Fleurs en Antiquitez des Gaules, où il est traité des anciens Philosophes Gaulois appelez Druides*.

On the other side of the Channel, in 1680 John Aubrey identified as Druidic temples the megalithic monuments of Avebury and Stonehenge. John Toland launched his *History of the Celtic Religion and Learning Containing an Account of the Druids*, interrupted by his death in 1722. In 1750, William Stukeley published *The Philos-*

*ophy of Earthquakes, Natural and Religious, Or, An Inquiry Into their Cause and their Purpose*, London, C. Corbet, 1750. Then Henry Hurle set up “The Ancient Order of Druids” in 1781. In Wales, Edward Williams honourably reinstated Druidic ceremonies in 1792. In France, in 1729 Jacques Martin published *Religion des Gaulois tirée des plus pures sources de l'antiquité, Paris chez Saugrain fils, 1729*. He was followed on this path in Brittany by Jacques Cambry who associates Druidism and megalithic monuments in his *Monuments celtiques ou Recherches sur le culte des pierres*, Paris, chez Mad. Johanneau Libraire, 1805.

Today, numerous associations align themselves with the neo-Druidism dreamt up in the eighteenth century by certain scholars.

They celebrate Nature with festivals on the summer and winter solstices, as well as on the dates of the ancient Celtic festal calendar: May 1<sup>st</sup>, August 1<sup>st</sup>, November 1<sup>st</sup> and February 1<sup>st</sup>. Their connexion with the Druids of antiquity remains improbable. The lack of any initiation handed down from the ancient sacerdotal class of the Druids does not exclude the survival of pagan traditions in beliefs and practices in Brittany, Ireland and Great Britain.

The conversion of Ireland to Christianity by St Patrick at the end of the fifth century heralded the end of Druidism, mention of which persists in the annals up to the seventh century. The subject of this paper thus excludes neo-Druids and deals exclusively with ancient Druids through written sources, folklore, archaeology, as well as through Celtic Christianity.

### Temples in Nature

The number and distribution of the sanctuaries over the landscape of western Europe confirms an original territorial organisation corroborated by toponyms. Celtic sanctuaries were located on islands, estuaries, summits, plateaux, in forests, at the sources and windings of rivers, as meeting points in the landscape, places where sky, earth and water met. Such sites were not natural fortresses, but places apart, located on the border or outside farmed areas. These locations were less utilitarian than sacred. They determined relations with the world. By separating cult from habitat, Celtic society distinguished the sacred from the profane.

Before their classification by archaeologists, the distinction between the different types of Celtic sanctuaries is already found at Rome where, under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (121-180), *delubrum*, *fanum*, *templum* are mentioned, rather like the esplanade, chapel and church. Nowadays, archaeologists distinguish two main types of Celtic sanctuary: the *Viereckschanzen*

for the domain of the living and the *fana* or sanctuaries for votive offerings. Despite the uncertain destination of the sanctuaries, and their space-time division, it appears that *fanum* and *templum*, the small and large temple, had the same structure. The distinction seems to be merely one of scale. The centred architecture of the sanctuary provided a constant balance between the *cella* in the middle and its equidistant outer gallery, thus reproducing the central form over a surface area twice as large.

Neither did the ancient sanctuary need a monumental architectural structure. It could be delimited by the curve of a river, a natural height, a simple line traced on the ground by a priest taking into due account the rising and setting of the sun at the solstices and equinoxes.

Orientation distinguished Celtic sanctuaries from Graeco-Roman temples which faced west, as described by the architect Vitruvius in the first century BCE. Celtic temples, as a rule, faced east. Foundation consisted of separating the sacred area from the profane world by demarcation. The magic border separating it from the profane environment was then established by a ditch, a rampart, or a fence. However, the rampart located on the outside of the ditch was not a defensive work, but rather used for cultic purposes. Subsequent works served to delimit the space rather than to defend it.

The planting of an artificial forest around the sanctuary is borne out at Ribemont-sur-Ancre (Somme). The enclosing ditch actually contained pine pollen, whereas the sanctuary had been built on a non-wooded site in the third century BCE. Analysis has shown that, for two hundred years, the sanctuary was surrounded by a hedge of transplanted trees, up to its final abandonment during the Gallic wars. This fence of wooden poles or artificial forest transformed the sanctuary into a hermetic enclosure.

In the work which, in 1075, he dedicated to the Christianisation of Europe, the mediaeval chronicler and geographer Adam de Brême<sup>1</sup> underlines on the one hand the woodland nature of sacred places among the Celts, and on the other, their sacrificial destination. These sacred woods were equivalent to the *temenos* of ancient Greece. The *fana* of the Celtic world may thus have resembled groves that were part of the cultic monument.

A parallel may be made between descriptions of the ancient Celts and those of mediaeval gestures and Christian exegesis. Chrétien de Troyes (1130-1180) mentions an orchard in the romance *Erec et Énide*. "Around this orchard there rose neither wall nor fence. By magic was it closed on all sides by a wall of impassable air. None could enter but by flying over this wall.

By winter or summer, it produced flowers and ripe fruit. But the fruit could only be eaten in the orchard. It could not be taken away owing to a mysterious force forbidding anyone who had entered to approach the door and leave so long as he had not put the fruit back in its place. There sang everywhere in this garden all the birds that fly in the sky, all birds with the most beautiful songs"<sup>2</sup>.

In the Welsh Mabinogi of Geraint, the hero also ventures into an orchard whose "hedge rose as far as the eye could see in the air"<sup>3</sup>.

### Sacred Woods

About sixty toponyms relative to *mediolanum* - which can be translated as "centre of perfection" - have been listed on the continent. Their locations reveal the geographic isolation of



Woodcut of the Feast of Lugnasad, Euredlug, Raffig Tullou, Celticist Journal Kad, 1959

these ancient sanctuaries. Rather than isolation, however, it was a distancing or geographical demarcation of the territory, since Celtic sanctuaries were often located on the borders of the *pagus*.

The *locus consecratus* of the Gauls mentioned by Caesar in his *Guerre des Gaules* (The Gallic Wars), *De bello gallico*, also shares this meaning. “At a certain period of the year<sup>4</sup>, they [the Druids] hold their conference in a consecrated place, in the country of the Carnutes, which is believed to be the centre of all Gaul”<sup>5</sup>. This period may correspond to the feast of Samhain (November), which marks the beginning of the year in the Celtic calendar.

Its location in Carnute country (Chartres) seems surprising, since the centre of Gaul falls within the jurisdiction of the Bituriges, whose Gallic name means Kings of the World<sup>6</sup>. The Bituriges, whence the toponyms of Bourges and Berry, must therefore have possessed such a spiritual centre. Rather than Chartres, the *locus consecratus* should be located at Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire, on the northern border of Biturige territory<sup>7</sup>. This *locus consecratus* reproduced in Gaul a central sanctuary after the model of Tara, in the fifth province of Ireland. The central sanctuary transcends and embodies the territorial and religious oneness of the Gauls. It represented the middle, the centre that englobes all, and is a matter of sacred geography, not a geographical centre.

The Celtic sanctuary was a meeting place for several tribes. This cultic network appears to match the map of mediaeval Christianity in

western Europe, and could explain the innumerable sanctuaries and places of pilgrimage in France, as also the arrangement of parishes in western Brittany, comprising a central church, a web of outlying chapels and inter-parish places of pilgrimage... This mediaeval religious network would go back to the Iron Age, when the Gallic tribes established a cultic polycentrism over the whole country.

Moreover, the study of toponyms makes it possible to identify the original features of the country by determining the function of the sites. Thus, we may infer the notion of the *nemeton*, a sanctuary sometimes described as a circular space in the middle of a wood. In designating a sacred place as a *nemeton*, the Celts were not necessarily indicating the existence of a building, even if Venantius Fortunatus translates *nemeton* as temple, *fanum ingens*<sup>8</sup>, just as Strabo indicates that the Galatians held council in a *drunemeton*... a sacred oak-wood<sup>9</sup>.

While the *cartulary of Quimperlé* refers to, for the year 1031, a *Silva quae vocatur Nemet*, a mediaeval commentary also mentions *De sacris silvarum quas nimidas vocant*: “About the Sacred Places in the Forest called Nimidas”<sup>10</sup>. Originally, the *nemeton* may have been a wood before becoming the “park” of a temple, and later the temple itself.

The term given by Strabo to the Galatian sanctuary thus confirms the vegetal aspect of the sacred place, just like the Tasinemeton, sanctuary of the yew (from the Latin *taxus*) reported in Carinthia in the Peutinger table.

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Today, numerous associations align themselves with the neo-Druidism dreamt up in the eighteenth century by certain scholars. They celebrate Nature with festivals on the summer and winter solstices, as well as on the dates of the ancient Celtic festal calendar.

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### The Druid and the Sacred Tree

Historians systematically refer to a text by Pliny the Elder – author of the monumental *Natural History* – in dealing with the Druids of antiquity<sup>11</sup>.

According to Pliny, the word Druid comes from the Greek *drus*. In the Gallic language, *deruos*, oak, is derived from *dereu* wood, *dendron* tree, *drus* oak, *drumos* forest. The analogy with *dru*, “faithful” in Gallic, is clear. Indeed, in Celtic tongues the names of science and timber are homonymous: *vidu*, *fid* in Irish, *gwyd* in Welsh, *gwez* in Breton.

*Vidia*, “knowledge” in Gallic, is part of the compound *dru-vidia*, literally “true knowledge”, from which the word “Druidism” derives. The English language has also preserved the double meaning linking knowledge and Nature, notably in “tree”, “true” (faithful), and “truth”. Now the Druids, “those who know”, are like the trees of the pontiffs, which bind the visible and invisible, what is beneath with what is above. The Breton language also maintains this symbolism, thus *kelenn*, holly, means “lesson” and *kellenner* “teacher”, whereas in Irish Gaelic *dos*, literally “bush”, is used to designate a *fili*, meaning a bard of the fifth rank.

Inseparable from his forest matrix, the Druid lived and practised his priesthood under cover. In the nineteenth century, the Breton François-Marie Luzel noted a formula that he only partly understood, taken out of its historical context<sup>12</sup>. The expression “Escop Drew” (the oak bishop) could only be explained by the place assigned to this tree in the Celtic religion, the venerable oak being royal owing to its size, its longevity and its profusion, as illustrated by a line of the Irish tale “*The Tragedy of the Children of Tuireann*”: “I praise you like the oak above the kings”, meaning “as the oak is the king of the trees of the forest”<sup>13</sup>.

### The First Written References to Druids

The first mention of Druids dates from the end of the third century BCE, in a treatise by Sotion of Alexandria (The Successions). It is to this question that Diodorus Siculus refers when he says, “There are philosophers and theologians, most highly esteemed, who are called Druids”<sup>14</sup>.

Similarly, Diogenes Laertius followed Sotion, in writing “Some affirm that the study of philosophy began amongst the barbarians. The Mages practised it among the Persians, the Chaldeans among the Babylonians or the Assyrians, the Gymnosophists among the inhabitants of India, as also - among the Celts and the Gauls - those called Druids and Semnotheans”<sup>15</sup>.

In antiquity, commentators were divided into two camps: those who do not conceal their sympathy for the Druids, and in particular the Greek philosopher Posidonios who was the first to travel along the Atlantic coasts; and those who were hostile to them for political reasons, particularly Caesar, who took his inspiration from Posidonios, but whose commentaries on the Gallic Wars provide testimony against them.

### Druids, Bards and Vates

According to the ancient authors, Celtic society was divided into three categories: the priestly class, the warrior class and civil society composed of farmers, livestock farmers and artisans. The priestly class was also tripartite, with Druids, Vates and Bards. Besides religion and philosophy, the Druids taught and exercised judicial functions, the Vates were diviners and sacrificers, while the Bards were poets and satirists.

According to Strabo, “Generally speaking, among them there are three castes to whom extraordinary honours are paid: the Bards, the Vates and the Druids. Their Bards are cantors of hymns and poets; the Vates are sacrificers and



interpret nature; the Druids, over and above the science of nature, teach ethical philosophy. They are considered as the most just of men and, for this reason, the judgement of private and public disputes is entrusted to their hands, so that they arbitrate wars and separate those on the point of battle; they are also entrusted with judging murder cases. When such judgements abound, they deem it a sign of abundance for the country. These Druids and others like them believe that souls are imperishable, and the world also, but that one day however only fire and water will reign”<sup>16</sup>.

This classification established in Gaul by Strabo and Diodorus Siculus is corroborated by mediaeval Irish literature, in particular in the mythological tale *Cath Maighe Tuireadh* <sup>17</sup>. The organisation and hierarchy of the priestly class were identical throughout the Celtic world, both continental and insular. To the Gallic Druid, Bard and Vate correspond the *derwydd*, *bardd* and *gwad* in Wales; the *druí*, *file* and *faith* in Ireland, as also their female counterparts: *bandruí*, *banfile* or *banfaith*.

### Teachings and Philosophy

A parallel between the doctrine of Pythagoras and Druidism has been established by various authors, some considering that the Druids had influenced Pythagoras and others the opposite.

The existence of a strongly hierarchical and structured priestly class among the Celts was undeniable in the fourth century BCE. There is, however, no proof of its existence in the sixth century BCE, just as no works of Pythagoras have come down to us, their existence being known solely through later writers.

Rather than engage in controversies as to which came first, it is best to emphasise their relatedness. The texts describe the Druids as philosophers and theologians, who shared with Pythagoras the same vision of the world and

of teaching: the immortality of the soul, a life devoted to the search for knowledge, teaching (astronomy, physics, mathematics) that was strictly oral, and obscure for the profane: “In their conversation, their speech is brief, enigmatic, proceeding by allusions and hints, often hyperbolic”, states Diodorus Siculus<sup>18</sup>, corroborated by Diogenes Laertius: “The gymnosophists and druids make their predictions using enigmas and obscure phrases, teaching the need to worship the gods and maintain a manly attitude”<sup>19</sup>.

Julius Caesar relates, “They are of the opinion that religion forbids it [the teaching] to be entrusted to writing, as can be done with all the rest, public and private accounts for which they utilise the Greek alphabet”<sup>20</sup>. Pomponius Mela repeats Caesar’s assertions<sup>21</sup>. He describes the “nobilissimos gentis”, meaning the élite, the druids and their pupils.

In ancient Celtic society, there was no reason to facilitate the learning processes of reading and writing, meaning the apprehension and comprehension of the world, hence of knowledge, for those who were not intellectually and/or spiritually worthy. There was no refusal, but an impossibility of transmission.

The oghams, which constituted the Celtic alphabet, were only used by Druids for cultural purposes. Diffusion, communication and popularisation were concepts alien to the Druids. Writing conceived as a means of transmission could only concern the profane. When the Druids passed from speech to writing, they embodied a magical function and conferred on their texts a sacred dimension. The writing of the ancient Celts cannot be understood as a vehicle, but as a fundamental act. At the same time, reading the ogham cuts was sufficiently complex. It marked a cultic approach and a metaphysical doctrine. The oghams were not meant to last through the centuries. Most of them were traced on vegetal matter or on

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The Druids, “those who know”, are like the trees of the pontiffs, which bind the visible and invisible, what is beneath with what is above.

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the ground. It is significant that the primacy of speech over writing – even going as far as forbidding the writing down of secret teachings – lasted up to the Christianisation of Celtic society.

#### A Sylvan Archetype: Merlin

The figure of Merlin can be understood as an archetypal Druid. Since the twelfth century we have many versions of the figure of Merlin. Robert de Boron, Thomas Malory, Gautier Map, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gaston Paris, Chrétien de Troyes, Robert Wace, have all given him the guise of the enchanter and the magician.

Composed by different authors, at different times and in different kingdoms, the “*Roman de Merlin*” merges inextricably with the story of the Graal and the Arthurian poems. He is consequently identified with the forest of Brocéliande (*Estoire de Merlin*), the forest of Calydon (*Vita Merlini*), the forest of Darnantes (*Lancelot-Graal*) and is, turn by turn, Breton, North-Cambrian, Scottish, Welsh, Armorican: Merlin’s identity is not a matter of geography or history. Of the Armorican *Merlin*, the Welsh *Myrddin*, the Irish *Suibhne* or the Scottish *Lailoken*, which was the earliest chronologically? Indeed, an archetypal figure is a model whose symbolism lies beyond the scope of any particular time.

From his very conception, the figure we commonly call Merlin belongs to the wild. The *Estoire de Merlin*, the sequel of the *Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, explicitly mentions his birth in a wood<sup>22</sup>.

Even though he intervenes at the Court as King Arthur’s counsellor, this demiurge comes from the forest, not from the city. Born of a virgin and a demonic incubus, Merlin is endowed with prophetic powers. He knows what is going to happen before his contemporaries. And because the seer knows, the magician acts to influence the course of time. His clairvoyance and foresight are accompanied by powers over the elements: he raises the rocks of Ireland, releases a tidal wave, he spreads fog... But such gifts of prophecy and tricks of magic, related to the powers of the old Druids, are merely the external manifestations of knowledge. Just like the Druid speaking before the king in ancient Irish society, Merlin ranks above the king, beyond the kingdom. This is why he regularly escapes to meditate in the woods.

Various mediaeval works attest a sylvan omnipresence in Merlin’s life. It is to the forest that he constantly returns, as indicated in the first lines of the *Estoire de Merlin*<sup>23</sup>.

His propensity to go under cover is particularly clear in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s version. As he declares in the *Vita Merlini*, “I prefer the forest and the vast oaks of Celidon rather than the high mountains above the verdant meadows”<sup>24</sup>. A Merlin who is not a forester would lose his knowledge and his nature, because his legitimacy depends on his knowledge of *Mater Natura*.

In his *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts that he acquired this knowledge in the sacred forest, where he lives as a hermit and reigns in harmony with the wilderness: “There

was a spring on the peak of a hill, surrounded on all sides by hazelnut trees and dense vegetation of shrubs. There did Merlin sit<sup>25</sup>. The spring on the hilltop is clearly a sacred place. Merlin fasts for three days, then nourishes himself with acorns, blackberries and apples.

Refuge in the forest, stressed by climbing a tree, signifies realisation. Climbing the tree means biting the apple, the fruit of knowledge and immortality of the Celts; perching in a tree is also a ritual posture. In Ireland, the text *Buile Suibhne* mentions the king fleeing from the Court and isolating himself at the top of a tree. In another Irish text, the *Senchus Mór*, literally “the monument of ancient wisdom”<sup>26</sup>, dating from the eleventh century, the hero Finn discovers the sage Derg Corra in a tree, busy cracking nuts, which he fed to a blackbird on his shoulder, cutting up apples which he gave to a hart at the foot of the tree, and drinking water from a cup in which a trout was swimming. Thus, having climbed the tree, the wild man shares the fruits of knowledge with the

animal world.

### The Triple Tree

The three fruits that nourish Merlin refer to the triple tree of Irish mythology. The god Dagda, surnamed Trefuilngid Treochair, the god who “fights with the yew”, brought to Ireland a branch bearing three kinds of fruit: nuts, apples and acorns (Book of Lismore, Christian Guyonvarc’h, *Textes mythologiques irlandais*, Ogam, Rennes, 1980, page 161). In the Celtic pantheon, the Dagda embodies the “Druid-god”. His attribute is a magic cauldron, mentioned in “*The Book of Conquests of Ireland*”<sup>27</sup>. The Dagda’s cauldron could be related to the horn of plenty but, beside nourishment, it also dispensed fecundity and riches. The Dagda was simultaneously the god of eternity and the god of time, the sponsor of contracts, the guarantor of the given word and peacemaker. He ruled the seasons and watched over the order of the universe. Another of his attributes was a club which he used to guarantee equity and punish



Celtic sanctuaries were built on exceptional sites: islands, estuaries, summits, plateaux, forests: here, the steles of Gaulish deities on Mont Donon, in the Vosges (photo by the author)

the disloyal. In the Irish text *“Forbuis Droma Damhghaire”* the Druid Mog Ruith chants a specific prayer addressed to the Dagda: “De dhruadh, mu dhe tar gac nde”, “God of the Druids, my God above all gods”<sup>28</sup>. The formula reveals a specificity of the priesthood. Just as all the gods were Druids, so all Druids were priests. The priests worshipped all the gods but, of all the priests, the Druids ranked their god above all the other gods. The principle of immutability was and remains subtle: the Dagda was the god who guaranteed universal harmony and the concept of impermanence.

The god founded the Kingdom of Ireland and divided it into five provinces by planting a yew branch. Five refers to the centre, the circle inscribed in the square, which identifies the centre of the world. This partition has always been the administrative division of modern Ireland.

The original tree, sheltering a thousand people and producing three harvests annually, does not distinguish three functions, but unites three appearances of the same sacerdotal function. Indeed, the acorn, the nut and the apple are the three symbols of this first function.

While acorns are eaten by wild pigs, which symbolically belong to the priestly class, the hazel nuts that fall into the sacred spring are also swallowed by the salmon of knowledge, another creature belonging to the first function, and lastly the apple can be identified perfectly with the name of the Other World, also called Avalon, which may be translated as the Isle of Apples.

The yew unites the three conceptional and organisational functions of Celtic society, represented by the three fruits. It gives structure to society because it nourishes body, mind and soul. With a triple appearance and vouchsafing a triple harvest, the founder tree is, in reality, unique, because the three varieties it bears are

inseparable, just as body, soul and mind are inseparable. Although its appearance is triple... the variety itself is single!

### The Yew of Immortality

With the toxicity of its seeds and red flesh of its berries, the green of its foliage and its ever-green boughs in winter, the yew presides over cemeteries in Celtic countries. Tree of the dead and tree of immortality, the yew is the symbol of the other world. In Brittany, a ritual associated with the yew is performed at Plougastel-Daoulas, on All Saints’ Day<sup>29</sup>. The ceremony of *Gwezenn an anaon* “tree of souls” takes place in the graveyard of the chapel. Members of the *breuriez* (chapel brotherhood) together with some outsiders gather to auction a small yew-tree with its bark stripped, on which red apples are hung. The purchaser of the previous year prepares the tree, hanging on it as many apples as there are families in the village, and provides the *bara an anaon*, the “soul buns”.

The tree consists of a bark-stripped yew, ornamented with red apples... Yew and apple-tree both symbolise the tree of the other world. At All Saints’ tide, at Plougastel-Daoulas a ritual is performed aimed at gathering the living around a tree to share the fruits of the other world, since the apple is the fruit of the Isle of Avalon.

### Avalon: the Isle of the Other World

*Enez Avallon* ... The isle of apple-trees is omnipresent in Celtic mythology. Located in the west, there where the sun sets, this paradise is the land of eternal youth.

In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth identified the Isle of Avalon as a land of women and an orchard<sup>30</sup>. In an Irish tale, the *Book of Fermoy*, the Other World is also located on a wooded island. Seduced by a fairy, King Conn follows her to this wonderful island: “This is

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how the island was: with many scented fruit-trees, many beautiful wine fountains, and a beautiful shining wood ornamented with hazelnut trees overhanging the fountains, with pleasant golden nuts, and little bees always humming marvellously over the fruits, which let their flowers and leaves fall into the fountains”<sup>31</sup>.

Planted with fruit-trees, peopled with birds and fairies, this Other World is perceived as a paradise. During his journey sailing “around the world”, St Brendan reached an island where white birds entirely covered a gigantic birch. The tree and the forest, like an axis and centre linking man to the universe, are the privileged places where worlds meet.

The apple-tree, the tree of love and eternal youth, represents the world mind and the oblivion of time. Passion blinds and inebriates and great knowledge is required to evade its traps, to return the lovers and the mad to reason and to their home, since they are too easily led astray on this wonderful isle. The Irishman Condlá fall literally under the enchantment of a fairy from the Other World: to dispel the enchantment, the King had recourse to a counter power, that of the Druid<sup>32</sup>.

### The Battle of the Trees

Each letter of the ancient Celtic alphabet (ogham) corresponded to a variety of tree. The Druid wrote and read the wood, like the Irish Druid Cathbad in *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*<sup>33</sup>. On the eve of an important encounter, ogham was used to “dictate” the outcome of the

battle. When the Irishman Amergin asks: “Who is it that divides the splinters of wood?” he is told: “It is the wise enchanter”<sup>34</sup>.

A Welsh text best illustrates ogham symbolism: the *Kad Goddeu*<sup>35</sup>. This tale mentions 30 distinct varieties of tree, which compose both a song and a sacred wood. Trees, shrubs and flowers symbolise the three functions of society: the sacerdotal, royal and medicinal varieties. Arranged in three concentric circles, these trees could form a triple enclosure.

This botanical description contains a rule and its principles of organisation. At the same time a seasonal calendar and philosophic manual, the battle of the trees illustrates recourse to the forest which conceals the words and secrets of Druidism.

The Battle of the Trees can also be related to Celtic computation, and particularly the Gallic calendar of Coligny (kept at the museum of Lyon) which divides the year into twelve sequences called “prinnioi”, “tree diagram”. Its tabulation provides matches for months, tree varieties and current zodiac signs. This parallel of months and trees leads to another series of matches between tree varieties and the seasons.

### Conclusions

The last “historic” mention of Druids goes back to the reign of King Diarmait, by whom the two Druids Frachan and Tuathan were beaten in 561 at Culdreimne, in Ireland, by the magic of St Colomba. Several popular customs in the contemporary Celtic world can only be

understood, however, by referring back to the pre-Christian period, like the rite of the apple tree at Plougastel-Daoulas or the *troménies* (pilgrimages) at Locronan and Landeleau in Brittany. Christianisation, the major event in the Celtic world, did not mean the Latinisation of society and has not erased traces of the ancient religion, of which cults and beliefs survive. In many respects, Irish, Breton and

Armorican saints behave like Druids, in both sacrificial and magical practices.

The most significant heritage of Druidism thus consists of three elements that are coherent throughout western Europe: the network of holy places, the calendar of feasts, and rites, which support the theory of a sacred geography and a continuum. •

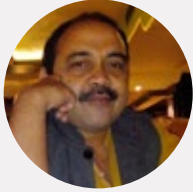


The writing of the Ancient Celts cannot be understood as a vehicle, but as a sacred act. The Druids used writing only to transmit their knowledge. Stone with oghamic inscription at Kilmakedar, Ireland (photo by the author)

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## ***KALI YUGA, CORONA AND ALAIN DANIÉLOU***

How will Corona impact the future of humans? The planet earth, the physical universe, will not end but chances are that the post-World War II lifestyle will. In this essay, Sunandan Chowdhury prods the reader to wonder whether Corona is modernity's *karma*, a wake-up call to stem the unending expansion of industrialism, capitalism and consumerism; natural justice meted out for the viruses once exported unwittingly from Europe to the Americas 500 years ago, decimating seven hundred cultures. Drawing among others on the ideas of Alain Daniélou, this essay attempts to show that the 'American Dream' that so many people in the world take as a model has proved a nightmare to civilisation.



Juan Lepiani, Capture of Atahualpa, around 1920-1927 (source: Wikipedia)

### Preliminary Remark

2020 will probably go down in human history as the year of the Corona virus. A microbe that is invisible to the naked human eye has brought man's world to its knees. As I write this essay, India and a large number of countries across the globe are in total/partial lockdown. Economic activity, which is what capitalism lives by, has come to a halt in several places and in some it is being severely hit: in India and in most developing economies. I suspect that the pattern may be nearly the same as in developed Western economies, and it is always the poorest strata of society that are hit the hardest by economic disruption. However, the virus is attacking the health of rich and poor alike; it is not making any distinction on race, religion or on any other count. Britain's royals and members of the Saudi royal family have also been infected by the virus. Many are asking, "Are we approaching the end of the world?"

The planet earth, the physical universe as we understand it, will not end because of the Co-

rona virus. It is rather the post-Second-World-War lifestyle that large parts of the world have come to take for granted in the last seventy-five years that will probably come to an end. Fewer people will drive fewer cars and SUVs, airlines will drastically reduce their traffic, luxury five-to-seven-star hotels will have less occupancy, the frequency of rave parties will go down, the price of oil on the global market will sink – it has already nearly touched the bottom. Man's coveted and self-flaunted lifestyle will be the victim of the next phases of the Corona crisis. But the planet will breathe better: less CO<sub>2</sub> emission, the snowcaps continually melting over the past twenty years or more will melt less, the rivers that look black, yellow or red today owing to industrial effluents will turn blue, the green landscape cover that humans are continually axing, will grow again.

### Karma of Capitalism, Colonialism and Globalisation

The concept of Karma, enunciated in the *Bhaga-*

*vad Gītā* (II, 11-53), has gained popular currency globally today. There are several strands within the rubric of Karma. One is that, as humans, we should understand that we have the right to act but not to the fruits of our action. In other words, I as an individual should be happy with my life as long as I can put my labour to use and I should not be concerned with what the fruit of that labour brings me. This philosophical premise can limit man's greed. We humans often work with a goal, a result in mind. I am writing this essay with the hope that it will be published. However, the *Gītā* tells us that I should not have that attachment as the goal of my action. I should write the essay only for the joy, the involvement, the engagement of doing

a pattern of belief is prominent among almost all inhabitants of Hindustan, whatever religion they belong to. It is this meaning of Karma that has gained global currency. Often one hears friends say, 'this is my karma'. I suspect that many people in the globalised world of today, when they reflect on the general situation in this time of Corona crisis, are probably thinking: 'This is our collective karma. Our materialist greed nurtured by capitalism has brought this deadly virus upon us'.

I often feel that despite the good deeds a human does, she or he is not rewarded for it in the course of her/his lifetime. It is rather his/her daughter or son that reaps the reward for the virtues of the previous generation. The karma

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**A huge factor that contributed to the death of the native peoples of the Americas was certainly the new diseases that Europeans brought to the continent, apart from the disease of conquering land for the sake of material power, as if it were a gold trophy.**

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it. This philosophical premise not only limits greed but also brings peace and happiness. The goal-oriented economic and social reality is precisely what is questioned by the *Gītā*, which puts forward a different way of living and being in the world.

But that is not the most popular currency that the term 'karma' has generated. In popular global lore, it is believed that the kind of work you do, and more specifically its intrinsic moral value (good or bad), will determine the nature of the results. In other words, if you do a good deed, you will obtain auspicious results, and if you do evil things, then ill omen will befall you. A belief like this is prevalent in vast swathes of Hindu society and has been probably going on for centuries. One may even say, that such

cycle extends beyond one's mortal end. This thought has lately led me to recall an event in my life that goes back to the summer of 2006. I had gone to Washington DC to participate in a symposium on Islam and Tolerance in Europe. After the symposium, a friend kindly offered to show me some important sights of the city. On a fine morning, we went down to the Washington Mall, where all the Smithsonian museums are located. My friend asked me which museum I would like to visit. I chose the most recent addition to the cluster of museums, the one called 'Museum of the Americas'. Created by an initiative of two US native-American parliamentarians, this museum is a repository of the culture of the native peoples of North, Central and South America before the advent of Europeans five hundred years ago. My

friend and I entered the museum and were assigned a guide, a man from Peru who wore his hair in a beautifully plaited braid and had a peaceful expression on his face. As we were walking around the museum and admiring the works of native-American peoples, our guide recounted in a soft voice quite a startling fact: before the Europeans arrived, from Alaska in the north to the southernmost tip of Argentina, there were seven hundred different indigenous cultures. In his place, I would talk (as a Bengali) about a Muslim culture and a Hindu culture in Bengal. I know only two cultures in my homeland. Contemporary Europe may ascribe to itself between eighty and one hundred cultures. In that scheme of things, seven Europes existed on that landmass before the arrival of present-day Europe. Our guide went further and said: 'Now nearly nothing is left of those seven hundred cultures'. The decimation of those many hundreds of cultures was effected not only by means of colonial war. A huge factor that contributed to the death of the native peoples of the Americas was certainly the new diseases that Europeans brought to the continent, apart from the disease of conquering land for the sake of material power, as if it were a gold trophy. One Europe reduced seven Europes. Such a great conquest has rarely happened in human history. That war, in which the microbes of Europe, among them viruses, fought at the side of the invading Europeans, a war fought and won five centuries ago that has permanently re-shaped the world map of civilisations, has met its reversal in the virus that now strikes the world in 2020 and haunts the descendants of the Europeans who won five hundred years ago. In that sense, there is a structure mindful of a karmic cycle in this story.

At this time of Corona world-crisis, I have turned to Alain Daniélou. Daniélou was a thinker who deeply opposed imperialism: the empires of Christianity, of Islam, of Marxism, or

of industrialism. Daniélou was also a Western thinker who knew India very well, especially the India that emanates from the polyphony of Sanskrit texts written some four to two thousand years ago.

There is an understanding of the world that Daniélou discusses, his resources deriving from the thought world of classical Sanskrit texts. In *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, Liberation: The Four Aims of Life in the Tradition of Ancient India*, he writes:

*"The cycles of day and night, of the seasons, of growth and decline, of life and death are those which are most apparent to us, but life itself – the development of species, races, civilizations – also present the same cyclic character, of which the broadest aspect for us is the cycle of four yugas, or four ages of humanity. ...*

*...Within this general cycle, other shorter cycles develop, which see the rise and fall of civilizations as their peoples progress and decline with ineluctable regularity.*

*For mankind as a whole we are now in the Fourth Age, the Age of Decline, which the Hindus call the Age of Conflicts (Kali Yuga). This age will head increasingly toward the disruption of all values and will end in a catastrophe which will destroy mankind. ...For five thousand years, we have been living in the Age of Conflicts that began at the time of the Mahabharata war, which saw the autochthones fight the Aryan invaders. The end of mankind therefore appears to be relatively near.*

*The mankind we know, however, is not the first. Humanity has already appeared six times on the earth, developed, and reached the highest levels of technical and scientific progress, only to be destroyed in a general calamity. After us, mankind will rise and fall seven times more before the earth itself becomes an uninhabitable desert.*

*As we advance through the Age of Conflicts, our virtues deteriorate and are replaced with irresponsibility, corruption, and egoism. The sciences,*

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Now that the Corona crisis has raised its head, one reads Daniélou in a completely different way: his words, drawn out of the ancient wisdom of India's Sanskritic reservoir, can be taken as a sombre reminder of the limits of man's civilisation and the type of ego born out of civilising success.

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*originally the preserve of those who knew how to use them wisely, are given over to men who have not the discernment necessary to avoid their misuse. ...*

*The interior and spiritual life becomes separated from knowledge, while religion becomes blind belief and an instrument of persecution. All the religions born during the Age of Conflicts have the same social revolutionary character, and their often aberrant dogmas serve as an instrument for the dominion of the temporal power. Only mystics, by isolating themselves from the world, know by intuition how to reestablish contact with eternal realities, but they are usually ignored or persecuted”<sup>1</sup>.*

Elsewhere he has written, “*Kali Yuga, in which we are now living, is marked by standardization, the prelude to death, and by the will to destroy an infinite variety of vegetable, animal, or human species that characterize the beauty of the divine work*”<sup>2</sup>.

If one had read these words of Daniélou a year ago, one would have most likely glossed over the text and thought: ‘Yes, it is a view of the world among others’, without giving it much thought. But now that the Corona crisis has raised its head, one reads Daniélou in a completely different way: his words, drawn out of the ancient wisdom of India's Sanskritic reservoir, can be taken as a sombre reminder of the limits of man's civilisation and the type of ego born out of civilising success. In the last quote above, he talks of the destruction of an ‘infinite variety of vegetable, animal

or human species’. My Peruvian guide has already noted the pain of losing seven hundred human cultures from Alaska to Argentina. Scientists are constantly reminding us that thousands if not hundreds of thousands of plant and animal species have disappeared from the planet in the last fifty years. A recent study has shown that in India, between 2011 and 2019 the amount of land cleared of forest is six times the size of greater Calcutta. In other words: every one-and-a-half years, a forest the size of greater Calcutta is being devoured by the greed of global Indian industrialism. In this age of ours, Christian-ism or Islam-ism or Marxism are lesser isms, the greater being industrialism, consumerism and ego-centrism.

When Daniélou discusses the features of the Age of Conflicts (*kali yuga*), he says that we will “*head increasingly toward the disruption of all values*” and “*our virtues deteriorate and are replaced with irresponsibility, corruption, and egoism*”<sup>3</sup>. Doesn't that seem all too familiar in the times we live in? He also makes an important point about science and political power: “*The sciences, originally the preserve of those who knew how to use them wisely, are given over to men who have not the discernment necessary to avoid their misuse*”<sup>4</sup>. Doesn't that seem to fit the ever-increasing arms industry, military spending skyrocketing in a large number of nations and a super-power waging a war almost every minute in the post-1945 world of global peace and prosperity?

Equally powerful is what Daniélou writes

drawing upon Sanskritic sources: *“the interior and spiritual life becomes separated from knowledge, while religion becomes blind belief and an instrument of persecution”*<sup>5</sup>. For the India of today, as also for many other societies with varying sets of dominant religion, nothing could be truer. Religion has become a blind belief and an instrument of persecution. Relying on the repository of Indian classical texts, Daniélou adds that mystics could reach realities outside our notion of space and time and learn from them. While the contemporary world seems to be in need of such mystics, the market is wide open for fake or self-styled mystics, especially those generating massive financial profits. The kind of mystic Daniélou talks about is by definition excluded from the public space.

The Kali Yuga might have been all around us for centuries, but it is only when Corona overtakes our speeding car of industrialism and modern civilisation that we pause to reflect on our past deeds. The karma of those European ancestors who discovered the New World and wiped out seven hundred cultures comes back to haunt us. Daniélou, with his deep understanding of ancient Indian knowledge, offers us a template to take stock of this Age of Conflicts, the Kali Yuga that we live in.

### Age of Conflicts, Age of Empire

In his book *The Age of the Empire*, the famous British Marxist historian E.J.Hobsbawm refers to the time starting in the late eighteenth century, spanning the entire nineteenth century and

ending in the first half of the twentieth century, as a time when European empires (British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and others) covered nearly eighty percent of the globe. This notion of empire was not only physical, geographic and economic. It was fundamentally an empire of the mind, an empire of ideas. European-rooted Western civilisation conceived a world-view and convinced other societies and cultures around the world that ‘progress’ lay in the way/s that Europe devised for itself and for the entire world. Even now, most non-European societies and cultures in the world are governed by adhering to this idea of ‘progress’ enshrined within modern Europe and consequently extended to the present global super-power: the United States.

Daniélou questioned this idea of ‘progress’. In his book *India: A Civilisation of Differences*, he writes:

*“All conquests and colonialism, all religious, ideological, linguistic, and cultural (i.e. ethical) propaganda are fundamentally destructive, as is the unilateral notion of progress. The missionary fanaticism of Christians, Muslims, and Marxists has always been and still is a tool of the over-powerful to depersonalize and subject both peoples and individuals. With rare exceptions, we are witnessing the gradual disappearance, beneath the steamroller of so-called Western egalitarianism, of the plastic arts, dance, music, traditional sciences, and even the languages of Africa and other continents.*

*Up to the middle of the twentieth century, the su-*

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An apocalyptic image of Nature turned into an industrial garbage can (source flickr.com)

*periority of the white race, its civilization and religion, was considered as an indisputable fact in Europe. It needed the excesses of Nazism to challenge this assumption.*

*... What is termed antiracism today as a rule implies reducing the human species to the Western way of life, which Westerners deem to be the best and most developed. The antiracist ideal is to clothe the Congolese, Chinese, or Indians in a suit, as can be seen at international meetings. Otherwise they find no audience, have no right to respect, are considered to be primitive, the subject of amused interest. An African is 'civilized' if he wears a Cardin suit and speaks 'excellent French or English'. You never encounter antiracists who speak excellent Swahili or Bengali and wear a boubou or a dhoti, except as a carnival disguise. A female Breton member of parliament who wears her headdress in the Chamber will be treated as a native country girl. Soviet egalitarianism speaks Russian"<sup>6</sup>.*

The mono-culturation that Daniélou discusses, the process of universal Westernisation that

has characterised most of the last three centuries or even more, should not be considered separate from the human tendency to ravage the natural world. Both the natural world and the social world are reshaped by European/Western industrial modernity. Here it is important to note that Daniélou's descriptions of both Western capitalism and Soviet communism share important features. I would ascribe the common denominator to the larger rubric of 'industrialism'. Both American capitalism and Soviet communism can be located within the wider sphere of industrialism as a world-phenomenon. Daniélou also points to the homogenisation of human experience in the corporate Western business suit. In this sense, capitalism and communism do not differ greatly.

In a short essay entitled *Monster Anglopolis: The English Language in India*, first published in 2014 in *Planet The Welsh Internationalist* and later included in an essay-collection of mine<sup>7</sup>, I discussed – as Daniélou also mentions the crushing power of English or French – how

the use and abuse of the power of the English language by a small minority of Indians turns large numbers of Indians into pygmies and that minority 'power' class of Indians 'empowered' by English continue as pygmies at the cultural altar of their Western masters. The incessant process of mono-culturation goes on and has been going on since Europeans fanned out across the rest of the world some five hundred years ago. Colonial expansion, development of nation states, growth of industrial economies and global corporations, global languages including political languages such as democracy and communism: these have all contributed to this global Western order.

And this monochrome covers not only the human space, but also includes a devastation of nature, whereby biodiversity is the greatest casualty. It is evident that industrial modernity, which characterizes the Western/European project, levels the human universe and devastates the natural world. That is the price paid for what has been called in the second half of the twentieth century 'the American dream'. As the Corona crisis unfolds, as more and more storms and hurricanes rage through human habitats, as the polar icecap melts, as forests recede and desertification takes over large swathes of the planet, humans will scramble for resources to buy water, air and ultimately... life.

### By way of conclusion

The fact that seven hundred cultures on the American continent were erased is a catastrophe. The sombre look on my Peruvian guide's face may hide the remnants of pain that his forgotten ancestors suffered at the hands of colonial Europe. Those seven hundred cultures cannot hit back, but the same is not true of Nature and Planet Earth. The natural world has its ways of hitting back; it is doing that today and may do it with even more vengeance tomorrow.

Such a spectre should make us turn to the thought of Daniélou and other thinkers who questioned and criticised the cultural supremacy of the Western monologue. Danielou's voice remains an exceptional Western voice pitched against a five-hundred-year-long aggression of European modernity aimed at the rest of the human species and Planet Earth. With Corona today or with another wave of natural destruction tomorrow, the human race may be annihilated. If we could only awake from the slumber of our 'American dream' and realise that it may well be the longest nightmare of human civilisation! Delving deep into Daniélou's thought and the heritage he based his wisdom upon, we may be able to reconsider our choices, in the assurance that the 'American dream' is civilisation's nightmare. •

1 Alain Daniélou: *Virtue, Success, Plesure, Liberation: The Four Aims of Life in the Tradition of Ancient India*, Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1993. pp 20-21.

2 Unpublished statement of Alain Daniélou found by Jacques Cloarec in 1998, cf. Alain Daniélou: *India. A Civilization of Differences. The Ancient Tradition of Universal Tolerance* (Foreword), Rochester: Vermont, Inner Traditions, 2005, p. xiv.

3 Alain Danielou: *Virtue, Success, Pleasure, Liberation: The Four Aims of Life in the Tradition of Ancient India*, p. 21.

4 Alain Daniélou: *Ibidem*.

5 Alain Daniélou: *Ibidem*.

6 Alain Daniélou: *India. A Civilization of Differences*, pp. 39 and 35.

7 Sunandan Roy Chowdhury: *West and East in Rabindranath Tagore and Other Essays*, Calcutta, Sampark, 2000



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