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# The Coronavirus Came with the (One of the) World

What the Ritual Treatment of Coronavirus in a Himalayan Valley Can Teach Us

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- 1 I had hoped to hear no more about the Coronavirus when I left for Nepal. In France, the news of this mysterious epidemic had been spreading for several weeks and the first cases had already been diagnosed. I was glad to be getting away from this anxiety-inducing atmosphere. I left on March 3, 2019 to conduct a new investigation in India, preceded by a short stay in Nepal. Specifically, I was headed for the village of Bung in the Hongu Valley at the foot of the Everest Massif in Kulung Rai country where I have been going regularly for over twenty years.<sup>1</sup> A quick trip has been possible since 2018 when a track brought this region, previously accessible at a cost of 5 days on foot, to about 15 hours by jeep from the capital. A few days after my arrival in Katmandu I learned that India was closing its border and this meant that my main survey project had fallen through. A few days after my arrival in the village I learned that Nepal, too, was imposing a lockdown. I was stuck there for an indeterminate time...
- 2 Even in this remote village, everyone was aware of the epidemic: this was indeed a worldwide event. I was then measuring the impact of television that had spread with the arrival of electricity in 2012. If the region has never lived outside of time, the remoteness of all network communication has meant that the tremors of the world have not reached it so quickly. In the valley, where no cases were reported, the virus had spread very fast, not from body to body but through the airwaves. All the programs were saturated with the subject.<sup>2</sup> There was talk of the number of sick people and the hospital situation in countries which, until then, no one in the village may ever have heard of. Never before had I had such a strong feeling of living in a globalized world.
- 3 In addition to the televised announcements there were rumors: every headache, sneeze, or worse, death of an old person was suspected of being caused by the virus. The epidemic seemed all the more dangerous as it had no reality other than its invisible threat.<sup>3</sup> In this situation I could not even conduct field investigations. People were

afraid, especially of me: it was said that the disease came from abroad, and I was the only representative foreigner. No one said anything but sometimes I could read in people's eyes that I was the incarnation of this virus. I tried to minimize the danger I represented on the basis of what I had heard about the virus before I left: the one-week incubation time, the not very dangerous effects, etc. My host listened politely to me but gave no more importance to what I said than he gave to reports that seemed quite far-fetched to me; our interpretations obviously differed.

- 4 All I had to do was to take advantage of this imposed retreat to work on my old data. The plus point of being a permanent non-project-funded researcher was that I was free to change my plans as opportunity arose. One morning I was awakened by sounds of preparation for a ritual and learned that it was to ward off the threat of the epidemic. Jumping at the chance, I started filming with my phone. The situation had several advantages. As the ritual was a public event my presence was not problematical and justified the discussions, as well as the more formal interviews of the main protagonists I conducted afterwards. Above all, I could, for once, talk about a topical issue and at the same time give a voice to the people of this valley. Since my days were given over to writing with only the care of the buffaloes and the weeding of the fields as pastimes, I had time to try my hand at editing the filmed material. That is how I came to focus on the epidemic situation I had wanted to disregard.
- 5 With my long writing sessions and my work on the film I had the unexpected experience of editing data while collecting them and of working on theoretical articles while surrounded by the very people I was talking about so abstractly. My posture as a field investigator (who tries to blot out his opinions and representations so as to record as closely as possible the ways of thinking and of living of his hosts) and that of an analyst (who dissects, cross-checks and compares the information collected and thinks about it in terms of the problems of his discipline), which had previously been separated, if only by the temporality and methodological requirements of the field, found themselves telescoped here. Added to this was my status as a citizen, with his opinions, beliefs and values: the situation concerned me as much as it did others and my opinions had consequences. On this occasion it was hard for me to take refuge in a comfortable neutrality linked to my exteriority. That is why it is more difficult for me, in writing this article, to hold the same overarching posture of the impersonal author addressing a supposedly universal public that, in fact, resembles him.
- 6 The event impacted me and modified my relationship with the field, which in turn impacted my view of the event. An epidemic is, by definition, shared and thereby connects. This feeling of the shared experience of a single global event took me even further from the feeling of exoticism that was so strong during my first stays. It contributed to making more salient the uniqueness of the world for which the various human collectives are trying to provide solutions. We were facing the same problems, we were enmeshed in the same story, trying at the same time to understand and act in view of this unknown threat. This stronger sense of proximity paradoxically made the differences even more striking. The difficulty I had in convincing my host of the facts I thought I knew about the virus, as well as my incredulity about much of what I could hear being said in the village, came to bring into question our way of sticking to patterns of understanding and action faced with the uncertain. In the same way, the response to an epidemic in the form of a ritual took on a new dimension: why do the ritual when it was clear to me that it would have no real effect on the epidemic? On

what basis may a virus be associated with a spiritual entity—and what’s more, an entity as specific as the goddess Sansāri?<sup>4</sup> It is these questions for which there was no place in the film that I would like to address here.

- 7 This film, which was released online at a timely moment (May 2020 with the epidemic in full swing around the world) roused some interest.<sup>5</sup> This was a source of astonishment mixed with pleasure and annoyance: seeing that this small filmic document, which seemed to me only to touch on things, was of much more interest than any of my learned writings. This is the power of the “reality effect” of audiovisuals with a narrative structure embodied by living characters that appeal to our sensitive dimension. But if a film seems to speak for itself, let us remember the obvious fact that it, too, is a construction, a selection made by the framing and editing of what there is to see and hear. It may, therefore be useful to outline the premises. Above all, the feeling of immediacy may be misleading because of the implicit meaning of the words. What is supposed to be known and heard when my hosts and friends speak to me is not necessarily shared by the viewer unfamiliar with this society. This is why it may be useful to contextualize these words, to put them in their social, historical, religious and political context. Finally, there are all the things that go without saying, things that are so integrated and naturalized that they never even come to mind. Only the different view of someone who has not been socialized in this culture gives us the opportunity to illumine it. This is for me the entire interest of the ethnology. It allows us, in our turn, to see ourselves through the prism of the other and thus to question our own evidence, our own world. I have thus sought an intricate balance between two objectives. The first is a desire to carry out a dialogue with the responses triggered by this epidemic in the western world from which I come. The second is to account for and interpret a way of thinking and acting according to its own logic and problems; that is, by looking behind the responses of my hosts to find out what their questions and concerns are. This is why, even if many elements oddly echo what has been said and done elsewhere in the world and, by contrast, highlight our own choices, I will often leave it to the reader to make the comparison.
- 8 The following reflections are thus intended to complement and to shed a different light on the situation evoked by the film: the question of the impact of the pandemic on the Kulung and, through that, the impact on these procedures of interpretation and integration of the new and the foreign into the local system of knowledge and defense. Consequently, it is advisable to see the film before reading this article; unless otherwise indicated the quotations in the article are taken from the film.

- 9 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/8235>

## Ritual and healing

- 10 Questioning the relevance of performing a ritual action to repel an epidemic implies that we see in it a mixture of separate fields: medical and religious. But in the Kulung tradition, ritual and healing are co-substantially linked. Most ritual actions, whether curative or preventive, are justified by the desire to ward off disease and other misfortunes. If one were to translate terms such as barrier gestures, containment, disinfectant, viral transmission, etc. into Kulung one would find terms in the ritual

register without too much difficulty. If ritual is healing, this is because ailments are frequently attributed to invisible entities, ritual being a particular way of addressing and acting upon them. This is not necessarily a proto-scientific pseudo-explanation, resulting from a lack of knowledge of biological mechanisms, as a doctor working in the village put it. No explanation of the disease itself is given but simply the possible reasons for its occurrence. For, although verbal shortcuts may suggest that there is a relationship of equivalence (“I got it”: Sansāri: the virus), the disease is but one aspect of the spiritual entity, which is, therefore, not a form of personification of the disease. As attributed to one or more intentionalities, the epidemic rather becomes a motivated act, taking on meaning and allowing for action.

- 11 This action allows one to regain control in the face of adversity. Anxiety produced by the uncertainty of the situation is to be taken into account: we hear in the words of Bakhat Dhan, one of the two main figures in the film, about this important emotional dimension of the action. But the nature of the action, and its effects, has yet to be understood. The ritual action consists of an exchange: satisfying with offerings so as to qualify to formulate a request. The exchange involves especially seeds, central for their nutritive dimension and as a product of the household.<sup>6</sup> During the ritual, the seeds are passed over the bodies both for cleansing of misfortunes and to mark them as substitute for the bodies of those making the offering; they are then deposited on the altar of Sansāri. Food is given to the one who “seeks to eat,” food is given to oneself to divert the devouring action of Sansāri from oneself. The importance of food fits more generally into an energetic or vitalist pattern of Kulung ritual logic. Because food and emotional satiation are seen as going hand in hand, the gift offered is a sign of love (and Sansāri “is looking for love”). As for the purpose of the ritual, it is, as expressed by Lambote (officiant of the ritual and the film’s second main figure) to persuade Sansāri to leave, to go back where she came from, “where the flowers bloom.” She is chased away after having been given food, much as a beggar or a dog might be chased away. “Spirits are like dogs, we give them food so they won’t bite us,” Parsuram, a village elder told me. But, he continued, “Once they get into the habit they come back and if we don’t give they try to bite us again!” The idea would be to give to them in order to be rid of them. But giving creates a dependency, which cannot be broken. The exchange that is ideally meant to be circumstantial is ultimately endless. Yet, it is not done entirely at a loss. Once established the relationship can become positive and Sansāri is also solicited for defense, protection, mercy (*bar-pichā*, *rakṣāchīmā*) and life/longevity (*āyu*) or, in more pictorial form, “protective shadow” and “coolness” (*chāyā-sital*). This reveals the ambiguous nature of the invisible entities with which the Kulung interact, both sources of evil and protectors from that same evil. We are far away from the concept of a “war against the epidemic,” as announced by the President of France and closer to the diplomatic approach, looked for by V. Despret (2020): we must deal with the virus as we deal with the world at large.

## Continuity and changes

- 12 This first reading concerns ritual action in general and might therefore be applied to most Kulung rituals. What is it exactly about this specific Sansāri ritual? And who is Sansāri? To what aspect of the world does she refer and what kind of diplomacy is, therefore, taking place here?

- 13 Let us start by trying to understand why the Kulung attributed the Coronavirus specifically to Sansāri. There may have been a windfall effect: at the time the lockdown was imposed the time of the Sansāri ritual was approaching: the dry season, when the wind is said to raise the dust and bring epidemics. Besides, what name could have better suited this epidemic than Sansāri, which literally means “Worldly,” “the One of the World.” The association was, however, mainly made through the symptoms and the epidemic nature of the disease (“Sansāri causes epidemics. Coronavirus is an epidemic”). Sansāri is particularly associated with smallpox, which, moreover, has some elements in common with the Coronavirus. In addition to the original transmission of both from animals to humans, the two epidemics are characterized by fast transmission through spit.
- 14 Lambote, faced with the arrival of a new disease, decides to perform a ritual that has been performed for a long time. We may be familiar with the theory that ritual has the effect of integrating a singular event into a known framework (Levi-Strauss 1971:597–603). This seems to be confirmed here by the main protagonists: “we must continue to honor ... the traditions that we have respected from the beginning”; we’ve always had this cult and if we stop now it will make us sick.” Everyone may read this as they wish. Some will see it as a rather conservative idea that suits such an elderly man: do as you have always done and, in so doing, maintain the social order tradition supports. Others may perhaps see in it the personal interest of the actors—for Lambote, for example, to activate Sansāri is also to activate his status as a *pujāri* officiant of this cult. Others might argue that respect for tradition is not solely motivated by reassuring conformism and will see in Lambote’s willingness to honor the gods an attitude of humility, of decentering before the powers that animate the world.
- 15 Associating an old ritual with a new event is, in any case, already innovative. Moreover, we see in the film how, even in a minor way, adaptation to circumstances changes the course of the ritual. It would be easy to perceive these adaptations as being a very contemporary sign of globalization and the rapid standardization of the world. This idea would be readily supported by the words of the elders, presenting tradition as immutable to the young people of today who no longer respect anything (forgetting that their fathers and grandfathers said the same thing about them). But if we leave the generalized discourse on tradition, we can only note a world in constant evolution. Digging into the past, I discover there was an earlier form of the Sansāri ritual performed to chase epidemics away. This ritual, called Hetete, persists in some of the valley’s villages. It is performed in a significantly different way: it is mostly done in the Kulung language with offerings that are less brahmanical, such as cow’s meat, and is addressed to a notably different collective of entities, see below. If Sansāri has, as Lambote says, been honored since the time of the Sen kings, it has not been so honored in its present much more recent form. In 1965, around the time the WHO launched its global smallpox eradication campaign, and ten years before the last recorded case of smallpox in Nepal, a wave of it hit the valley (Shestha et al. 1978). It was then that scholars (*baidyak*, doctor and, by extension, scholar) or other government officials (*sarkāri*) would have performed this ritual in the valley. This explains, among other things, why it requires sacrificial animals hitherto unknown to the Kulung, such as the pigeon. This apparent immemorial tradition thus turns out to be a very recent imported technique.

- 16 These changes do not come out of the blue but are the work of individuals, some of whom may be seen as real entrepreneurs of change. Lambote has instigated two cults, which would have appeared to him in a dream. One caught on, the other did not. It is interesting to compare the ways in which the origin of these cults is recounted, according to whether they were accepted or not. With the institutionalization of the one that was adopted, the recounting of the origin of the cult takes on the forms of an exemplary, atemporal story. The one that did not take is presented in a different way: the intentions of the author, the conflicts of the stakes, interests etc., are added and the contextual procedure is put into perspective and brought to the fore. It is only when there is a consensus that the contextual issues turn into superfluous details and the exemplary story alone is retained. Validation through a dream is, therefore, not enough. While the knowledge and election transmitted by the dream are highly valued they are also perceived as the elements most subject to manipulation. If the ritual innovations pertaining to Sansāri persist (only time will tell), I assume their pragmatic origins will fade. All this makes it clear that ritual must be presented as a source of authorless authority, but that, *de facto*, it is the subject of history and politics. Given the trend towards the ethnicization of politics in Nepal, even leaving something unchanged is an especially political act. Not insignificant either is the fact that Lambote is the elected head of the Committee of Elders with the (somewhat theoretical) function of carrying the voice of tradition within the Kulung ethnic association (Mahakulung Sangh, founded 1999). Like all traditionalists Lambote innovates.

## The many facets of the (One of the) World

- 17 The individual singularity of innovators is well worth considering, but the fact that some innovations catch on and are perpetuated by a community is also explained by their being in tune with the spirit of the times and connected with the changes happening in the world. Let's go back to the different aspects of the world and their evolution that Sansāri may refer to and, in so doing, look at who Sansāri is. This is not an easy task. Sansāri ("One of the World"), also named Kali-Kalo, "Black-Black," or Māi, "the Mother" is, as we learn at different moments in the film, three or seven sisters who died bad deaths and/or 16,000 cowherd girls seduced by Krisna and/or Forest Virgins and/or beggar strangers. There are, as well, her friends who "come into her hands": king and queens of Tibet and China, ophidians... not to mention her vehicles: wind, air and water. It is therefore a collective, and this accumulation of identities suggests a complex, evolving history that allows Sansāri to be connected to multiple dimensions of the world.

## Environment and ecology

- 18 In view of the importance of the natural elements mentioned in connection with Sansāri, let's start by noting the environmental dimension of the cult. The direct association between air and water and the gods ("we cannot be greater than the gods! We cannot be greater than air and water") as well as the *formula* "the water, the wind, the stones, everything we are used to honoring" would seem to be emblematic of the ecological dimension of what is often defined as animism.<sup>7</sup> Bakhat Dhan's mention of a kind of personification of the world of which the epidemic is said to be the result ("it is

the earth itself that brings these diseases”) may, too, echo statements that explain the root cause of the pandemic as a reaction by Gaia, the earth organism, to the overexploitation of resources and the collapse of biodiversity (see, for example, the works of Viguié 2020, Taylor 2020 or Harding’s blog 2020).

- 19 We must, however, be careful not to over-project our concerns and the terms of our debates. I am not sure that we can talk about a strong sense of ecological crisis among the Kulung. Much as they are aware of the scarcity of certain resources, the transformation of the climate or the shrinking of wooded areas, I have never heard these facts attributed to over-technicity or over-consumption, which are, moreover, very far from characterizing this society. And when there is no idea of a clear separation between humanity and an objectifiable nature, there can be no ecology in the sense that we understand it: without an idea of nature (this notion is untranslatable in Kulung) there can be no idea of its protection. As for the entities that we would qualify as belonging to nature, such as the deities of the forest, the idea is, rather than protecting them, to protect *ourselves* from *them*. It seems to me more relevant to summarize the Kulung’s vision of relationship with the environment as a problem of cohabitation. Relations between humans and between humans and deities are difficult; between humans because many of the ecological changes mentioned are associated with the ever-increasing population. The main affect is a lack of arable land, the primary cause of concern for these farmers in desperate need of land, and a major source of conflict in society. Moreover, humans, by their mere presence, make places impure and disturb the entities, lords of the places. This is why one must apologize to them by making offerings through rituals. For, contrary to what Lambote says above, which is in fact a shortcut, there is no worship of what we would call natural elements; it is not these elements that are honored but the masters of these elements or the powers that take up residence there (and they may be former humans). These conflicts of co-ownership that population growth only exacerbates often end in disputes, in mutual predation: human cut down the forest, deities steal their souls and men sue each other. A moral dimension is often added, especially when there are extraordinary signs (felines coming into the village, hail, earthquake). We hear talk of this in the film about the Coronavirus: “In this village there are many faults; this is why people are selected. Because of their selfishness people will die like chickens.” This moral dimension does not necessarily concern the relationship with the natural world. It is rather perceived as a breach with the social order that maintains the community’s cohesion: incest, trials, witchcraft etc. In this view, a relationship with the environment and social relations appear to be inextricably linked.
- 20 As with Gaia, we have here the idea of a world totality that can be linked to the vitalist vision we have mentioned: all the actors would be interconnected in an energy circuit. Above all, is the idea of superior forces, in relation to which we humans cannot think of ourselves as higher, that call for respect, restraint and modesty. Finally, there is the idea that catastrophes may be seen as punishments. But the reading of the world remains humano-centric and even kulungo-centric. The focus is not on other species, nor on the idea of their interdependence, but on the individual’s inclusion in local society in its local environment, centered upon surpassing oneself through exchange and altruism.

## Space and society

- 21 Some of the terms that might be defined as environmental reflect not so much, or not exclusively, a natural dimension as the circulatory aspect. The importance of this may be measured by the frequency of verbs of movement used by our protagonists. Epidemics are forces that circulate, notably by the elements of air, water and earth. The nourishing earth, lifted by the wind, is said to cause diseases. Air and water, which appear in the myth as the elements that have fertilized the world, refer here to the winds and rivers specific to each place, and it is said that the “wind-water” (*hawa-pani*) of places one does not usually frequent are quite likely to make one ill. These three elements that are sources of life but can make you sick, also share the fact that they are constitutive of the different territories, while circulating amongst them.
- 22 The circulatory dimension reveals, as well, the importance of the units amongst which this circulation takes place. These units are spatial but also social. The ritual is centered on a division between interior and exterior: the houses and their families, the village and the neighbors (*ghar-ghra*, *gāū*, *char-chimek*) versus the outside world. It consists of eradicating the virus from bodies, houses and the village, to send it away and prevent it from returning. This logic of centering upon one’s inner space has been one of the most globally shared effects of this pandemic. Ritual action begins at the household level, which forms the basic cells (of habitat, worship, production) of Kulung society. In ritual discourse, a household is defined as a collective composed of its human members, the structure of the house and the livestock. The master of the house, who represents it, passes the seed mixture—which we have seen serves as an offering and a substitute—over all members of the household, in hierarchical order: himself, his wife and his children from the eldest one. In the second stage, the action takes place at the village level. The officiant collects the substitute seeds of each household and mixes them all together to make up an offering to Sansāri before expelling her beyond the borders of the village. On the following day, everyone must observe a day off and stay in the village. We may see behind this call for synchronization of the action of all the households and the offering from each of them, thus forming a whole greater than its parts, an attempt by the ritual to articulate these two socio-spatial units at the foundation of the community: the household and the village. But the village unity that the ritual calls for is fragile. This may be due to the end of the collective ownership system, called *kipaṭ*, which ended around 1940 for agricultural land and around 1990 for forest land. Collective discussions about the distribution of land have given way to competition amongst small landowners, sometimes leading to lawsuits between neighbors. This weak village cohesion does contribute to the low participation in the ritual, as the officiant complains.

## Kings and beggars

- 23 The ritual emphasizes the households and the village versus an elsewhere, where the diseases come from. We hear mentioned in the film, to the east, the Subba beggars (another name for the members of the Limbu ethnic group). To the west, there is Dolakha, a Newar kingdom that bordered the Kulung country and, farther away, Katmandu and its valley, for a long time the only region designated by the name Nepal. Then there is the north, with Khumbu, and especially Tibet and China with their kings and queens, and their beggars too. Finally, there is the south, with the plains and the



Sen, the Hindu kings who exercised a loose suzerainty over the mountains surrounding their kingdom; and farther still, India. Here we have a kind of cartography of the cultural worlds of this Indo-Tibetan interface known to the Kulung, and above all of the political entities they came into contact with. These areas of “elsewhere” are embodied by kings and queens, omnipresent in the speeches of the film’s protagonists (the former King Sen, king of Tibet and China, which are part of the epidemic, the king of Nepal who was chased out in 2006, etc.), but also by beggars.<sup>8</sup> This association of the weak with the powerful is surprising. Does it reflect ambivalence towards the foreigner, and the fact that they both a drain (some beg for food, others collect taxes)? Or does it refer to a historical reality, as epidemics may have spread more rapidly during periods of increased contact amongst populations, such as times of war or of greater control of marginal regions (Nicolas 1981)? In any case, epidemics seem to be associated with the surrounding actors. The fact that the rituals employed to ward them off evolve with them takes on its full meaning.

- 24 The Hetete ritual (an onomatopoeia punctuating the incantations of the ritual) which may have preceded the Sansāri ritual, addresses several female entities: Samko and Wade, thought of together (*Samkowademang*: “the Samko-Wade spirit/disease”) and Kali-Kalo, “Black-Black.” Samko is a Sherpa or Tibetan woman (Sam in Kulung) given as second wife to Mapa, an ancestor of the neighboring Khaling Rai group, to seal the first contact between Rai and Tibetans (thus inaugurating the salt trade), but whom her stepchildren murdered. Wade is said to be a Chinese woman married to a Newar prince from “Nepal.” As for the Black-Black from the plains, “she is a high caste, an ārya; we do her with Samko-Wade because they have joined together to give diseases” explains old Partilung, who briefly describes the ritual to me. Each householder prepares substitute offerings to Samko-Wade (beer and cow’s meat, a Tibetan diet) and to Black-Black (water and fish, a plains diet) that officiants collect from house to house, shouting, in a symptomatic mixture of languages, *gyalba raja gyalba rani*: “king” and “queen” (*rājā, rāni* in Nepali) “victorious” (*rgyal-ba*, in Tibetan). Then, in his house, with the offerings gathered, the officiant sends Samko and Wade back by a ritual journey: he chants the names of the various stages of the journey from his home to their place of residence and then, with his speech, he builds a barrier to block them there. Samko is sent back northwards to Khumbu, Sherpa country that is also a gateway to Tibet, while Wade is sent back southeastwards to Nepal. I don’t know what happens to the Black One (I forgot to ask...), but the name of this honored entity suggests that she is connected with Nepalese and Indian divine figures such as Bhairav and/or the goddess Kali (Kali Kalo Bhairav is one of the names of the big statue of Bhairav, the wrathful form of Siva, near the old royal palace in Katmandu). In this ritual, epidemics carried by female entities associate with external powers are spread by relations of alliance. The disappearance of the figure of Sam and Wade and their replacement by Sansāri might be seen as representative of the weakening of Tibetan power in the region, as well as that of Dolakha, to the benefit of a growing influence from the plains and from India (Sansāri is predominantly associated with the south, from whence come “her spices in great numbers, areca and betel”).

## Otherness and Religion

- 25 Much as the ritual has evolved along with the political transformations of the region, it has also been transformed by the borrowing of new techniques. This should not be seen

as a form of passive assimilation; this type of borrowing is symptomatic of the openness to the Other of Kulung rituals. In a pragmatic and open ritual logic, it seems normal that ritual techniques circulate amongst groups. Sansāri has, in fact, become a pan-Nepalese deity.<sup>9</sup> Also accepted is that healing techniques emanating from the places the ailments are said to come from are likely to be especially efficient; in some incantatory discourses, reference is made to healers (*ojhā, baidāṅgi*) who, like Sansāri, come from the plains. It, therefore, seems logical to address Sansāri in her language, the *lingua franca*, the language of the outside world, Nepali (Schlemmer 2010). Along with language and ritual techniques, though, different conceptions also infiltrate. We see, for example, in the ritual to Sansāri, an entire devotional vocabulary from the Hindu register (*sewā, bhakti*, etc.) not found in Kulung rituals. Adapting to evils from elsewhere has the effect of bringing the Kulung into a much wider world. Sansāri must be considered in continuity with Sitalā (“the Cool one”), a female deity who plays the role of village deity (*grāma devatā*), and, more generally, with this set of female forces stemming from the śākta and tantra and widespread in popular Hinduism, especially in northern India.<sup>10</sup> The logic of associating evil with foreign powers that entails the borrowing of techniques and concepts in order to keep them away is part of the integration of the Kulung into a form of regional religiosity which is expressed in the dominant language of Hinduism. This is a form of hinduization but not one that follows the high caste model (brahmanization, sanskritization). It is a form of Hinduism from below and of acculturation through evils (Schlemmer 2018).

## Long term dynamics and new transformations

- 26 Let us now read the small innovations related to the Coronavirus in the ritual to Sansāri in the light of the developments I have just described. This will help to place them in a long-term dynamic while, at the same time, to see them as reflecting new transformations. The desire to substitute cow butter for rhododendron leaves as incense may be read as one more element in a process of hinduization (the cow, according to brahmanical criteria, is the pure animal par excellence). It should, however, be noted that the substitution is justified in this case by the wish to be in line with the medical precepts of the “scholars.” In that vein, there is the borrowing of new terms such as oxygen which, in Lambote’s words becomes quasi-synonymous with the god and vehicle of Sansāri: “we cannot be greater than the gods ..., than air and water, and oxygen. Oxygen, we breathe it. Life is born of oxygen. And Sansāri comes through oxygen.” Here Lambote expresses his own views, but he is drawing on a linguistic register associated with the new authorities of knowledge.
- 27 Even if this were a pious wish, the will to respect the rules of distancing relied, too, on the discourse of the “scholars”, and also of the police, that presence of the State within the village, whose orders must be taken into account. We find here the logic of borrowing from, and opening up to the other and, in particular, to the dominant powers. To Hindu values are added two new authority figures, the policeman and the scientist, all linked, one way or another, to the State. May we also see those people who, having gone to work in different parts of the country were cut off by the lockdown, as a modern type of beggars? Over one weekend, the government allowed movement across the country so that all those workers in precarious situations could return home. The announcement of this movement of people caused some fear in the village: wouldn’t this bring the virus? It gave rise to a striking scene: a cohort of people walking along

the roads with the villagers watching from afar, in a curious silence. The epidemic had made these workers strangers in their own country, illustrating the fragility of their status. Finally, there is the rumor that a lama in China had, through his powers, sent a medicine against the Coronavirus in the form of a kind of coal that would have landed under the doors of all the houses. This may be connected to the idea that epidemics are linked to the dominant powers and of taking the remedy from the source place of the evil. These ideas have circulated a great deal in the West, especially regarding the attribution of the origin of the Coronavirus to Chinese and American laboratories, and the role of those powers in the development of a vaccine.

## Belief and authority

- 28 In conclusion, I would like to return to the differences of opinion I had with my host concerning interpretations of the virus, even though I'm being both judge and defendant, which does not make the task any easier. Let's ask ourselves on what basis he and I attribute credibility to information and how we manage the plurality of sources of information about a new and unknown phenomenon.
- 29 It seems to me that it is neither critical thinking nor the search for tangible evidence that separates us. For example, the arrival of a kind of medicine under the doors of houses was the subject of a critical process on the part of my host. Chance, he told me, may have led to its being found under some doors, but not all—so we went to check. That the suggestion highlights a fact (the presence of coal under all the doors) and gives an account of it contributes greatly to its power of conviction. The critical process, on the other hand, did not concern how the medicine arrived under the doors. This sort of extraordinary event, outside the usual course of things (matter does not fly), is a possible consequence, or one at least sought for, of many rituals. The logic of ritual techniques is rather particular since it allows for things to happen that would otherwise be impossible, and moreover without our ever really knowing how it operates, the technical link between the desired effect and the means used being always obscure. This is a first divergence.
- 30 A second divergence, which I would like to emphasize, concerns the selection of the information. I tried to sort out the sources of information, retaining only what seemed to me to come from the authorities that I considered competent (medical research) and to compare them in order to identify the points of convergence. It seemed to me that my host, on the contrary, multiplied the sources of explanations: those of journalists, of the State, and of the scientists of the country and of neighboring countries via radio and television, as well as those of the shamans, lamas, neighbors, and all other sources of information he happened to hear about. In short, my search for a single discourse, expressed by experts, was responded to by an accumulation of hypotheses from people of various statuses. A political reading, in the broadest sense, could be gained from these divergences. If we agree that to believe is to adhere to an assertion that does not result from experience, this means trusting the source of the assertion, conferring upon them an authority status. It is thus a form of delegation of power. But Kulung society is not very hierarchical in character and there is firm control over specialists: access to their position is not validated by induction, their authority can be questioned at any time and they act under the control of the elders. It is to be wondered whether the multiplicity of information brought about by the search for a great diversity of

sources might not in some way dissolve the very idea of a single truth (rather as the multiplicity of gods reduces their respective transcendence).<sup>11</sup> It is not only a question of counteracting the otherwise weak power of the experts, but also of authorizing one's own readings, and changing them as one wishes. What happens here may be compared to local diagnostic methods. It is said that the ideal is to call upon three officiants (different shamans or even lamas or pandits) with the idea that the truth must emerge from the singleness of the diagnosis. Aware that a divinatory diagnosis always points to multiple causes, this approach, in fact, leads to the opposite effect: facing us with a multiplicity of possibilities. People seem to be coping well with the situation, taking in the different interpretations, valuing or discarding them according to circumstances (Sagant 1988). If the idea seems to be that a true story would emerge from the multiplicity of stories, the facts reveal something else. The ideal of the consensus of experts is matched by the observation of a multiplicity of interpretations manipulated by the interested parties.

- 31 As a logical consequence, the multiplicity of possibilities is accompanied by a certain detachment from representations and by an important place left to uncertainty. This is reflected in the frequent use of the mark of reported speech ("they say that") and of formulae that relativize the commitment made in the remarks (the many occurrences of "maybe", "I think"). Nothing is further from the truth than the idea of a people stuck in their beliefs: doubt, which allows distancing, plays an important part. This prevalence of doubt may explain the apparent versatility in people's adherence to their own assertions. It was surprising, for example, given the excitement over the discovering of the medicine from the sky, that a few days later it was hardly mentioned at all and, what's more, no one thought they were completely protected by it.
- 32 Kulung thus have a relationship with knowledge that is less sensitive to contradiction because of a particular logic of uncertainty, and open to a multiplicity of interpretations and actions ("We try everything. We'll go to the hospital. And we're already doing the ritual to Sansāri"). This may be so because these interpretations are not at the service of a technique or a philosophical system, but of a global vision of the world anchored in concrete relationships with that world. It is this holistic approach that gives us the feeling that there is a mix of genres in the Kulung approach to things.<sup>12</sup> In a feebly specialized society there can be only a feeble specialization of knowledge; there is therefore no luxury of understanding a disease only as a disease. The logic then is not so much to isolate an array of phenomena in order to analyze its mechanism as it is to link phenomena of various kinds together, to connect them, according to the situation. This may be ineffective in addressing the biological dimension of diseases, but it is effective in the search for meaning and for societal effects of illness. And it is perhaps partly this demand for unifying thought between fields often separated from one another, as for example politics, economics, the environment and medicine, that has favored the emergence of so many rumors in the West, and even of conspiracy theories. These sometimes reach a fanaticism commensurate with the rejection of political, economic and media forces. This would be very perplexing to the Kulung, who moreover expect little from the distant authorities of their country.

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## NOTES

1. The Kulung (about 30,000 people) form an ethnicity or nationality (*janajāti*) Rai and Kirant, a set of Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups in eastern Nepal. To introduce them quickly, let's say that they traditionally occupy about ten villages, mostly mono-ethnic, in the Hongu Valley, but they have also spread to different parts of Nepal and India. The basic social units are the localized clan and the household, where the main economic activity is practiced: agriculture, with some livestock rearing. There are no sharecroppers or landowners, so the differences in wealth are relatively small, and society is not very hierarchical. The main specializations are ritual: they concern the religious officiants, who implement the *ridum*, the tradition bequeathed by the ancestors, as well as the more recent cults that are part of popular Hinduism.

2. Television played an important role in this crisis, especially as a source of information, but also in keeping children from playing elsewhere—as dropping-out from school was one of the first major impacts. A comparative version of the situation in different countries and within Nepal was broadcast—helping to reinforce the idea that Nepal was a poor country, and the Kulung Valley at the ends of the earth.

3. As of April 2021, there were 278,210 cases and 3,036 deaths in Nepal, including 200 cases and 4 deaths in Solu-Khumbu district, where I was staying. When I was there, only five cases were officially recorded. It was only in May that the number of cases exceeded 1,000, and then increased progressively (and strongly) from August to December (from 20,000 to 250,000), mainly in the plain bordering India. In August, Bakhat Dhan, my host, explained to me by phone that the virus did not appear until the beginning of the summer of 2021, when the vaccination process began. By then it had spread like wildfire (he estimated that two-thirds of the village population had been affected) but that, since no one had died (except for two young people living in the city), the fear of the epidemic had completely subsided. Several writings have attempted to make an initial assessment of the impact of Coronavirus in Nepal. See Koirala and Acharya (2020) or the 2021 issue of *Applied Science and Technology Annals* 1(1). There are also works developing the impact of the Coronavirus by sector: on education: Dawadi *et al.* 2020, on the domestic economy: Regmi *et al.* (2020), on health: Singh *et al.* (2020), on tourism: the 2021 issue of *The Gaze* 12(1), and for socio-cultural impacts: Gyanwali (2020).

4. The fact of worshipping a kind of Coronavirus goddess, was also attested in different places in India, and gave rise to Indian and foreign newspaper articles (Amlôt 2020; Sanchari 2020), rather anecdotal but sometimes more in-depth (Srinivas 2020; Roychowdhury 2020). One can also read the blog of Lorea 2020; Lang 2020 and, in general, the many interesting blogs on the links between Coronavirus and religion, hosted by NUS university.

5. The CNRSS and EHESS presses agreed to distribute it, I was asked to use it as a teaching aid and to present it in a seminar and a colloquium, and it was the subject of several university lectures. It was the subject of a press article (Guedj 2020), of a note in a specialized journal (Gros 2020) and received a prize from the *Fondation des Sciences de l'Homme*.

6. The offerings named in the incantations that I was able to record on another visit are "rhododendron incense from the Kailas, incense from domestic and wild cows from the plain, a

pole and pennant" (in fact, a branch with a small piece of cloth hanging off it), a bag with "vermillion, areca, betel and spices in number, a piece of metal," and "the seven seeds that have sprouted on the earth under the sun." Of these offerings, cow incense, areca, betel, and spices, though mentioned, were not actually offered to Sansāri in the ritual.

7. This category of 19th century religious anthropology has made a significant comeback. It has been revived by works that define it less as a form of religion than as a relationship to the world that does not involve a break between nature and culture, but attributes interiority to what we would call natural entities (Descola 2013). It has also been taken up by the general public, who tend to see it as a form of ecological spirituality, of deep communion with the world, linked to the origins of humanity and the so-called "indigenous peoples" or "first nations."

8. The existence of beggars, or more precisely of people coming to beg for food (*ngokpa* in Kulung, "those who ask") may seem surprising in this environment where everyone produces what they eat. However, the phenomenon is not totally absent: we know some people suffering from madness who had no parents and lived in this way; villagers remember the Khampas, these Tibetan warriors who came in large numbers in the 1960s to flee the Chinese army, armed only with their rifles, and some of whom stayed in the valley for a while; people also evoke the yogis, who until recently sometimes came to the valley, asking for a place to sleep in exchange for small rituals to the spirits of the cremation sites (*māsan*) or for a divination.

9. She is found honored among other rai groups, in different forms (as linked to cattle, as a forest entity associated with Durga, or as linked to rain; Allen [1976:532]; Nepali Folklore Society [2009:10, 60]; Gaenzle [2004:777]; Ghimire [2006:56, 150]), but not exclusively. Dhimal, Tharu, Magar, Indo-Nepalese also honor her, at least in central Nepal as far as Darjeeling, and even as far as Manipur and Tripura (Gaborieau [1978:41]; Singh [1993:169]). As a goddess of epidemics, her cult is often collective, village-based. She even has her own temples, such as the famous Dakshina Kali Temples, or that of Dulikhel, in the Kathmandu valley and one in Morang, the access road to the plain of the rai country.

10. In Turner (1980:606), *sitalā* (from *śītal*, cool) is translated as "refreshed" and as "smallpox", as is *māi* (specifying additionally for *māi*: "lit. "mother," epithet of the goddess Devī or Sītālā who sends smallpox"). In some parts of India, the name Sansāri Māi is sometimes associated with Kali (Risley 1902:100; Negi 2020:8), who is very important in northeast India (Orissa, Bengal, etc.), although similar figures are found elsewhere: the Buddhist Hariti, the South Indian Mariaram, or the Tibetan Ritod Loma Jonma, the Noble Lady Tara of Mountain Retreat, according to The Shang Shung Institute (2020). The figure of seven sisters formed by the Sansāri sorority cannot but evoke the "seven divine mothers" (*sapta mātṛkā*), important figures of the Tantric and Shaktic movements, which have strongly influenced popular Hinduism, especially in northern India. These figures may have circulated via the west and the Kathmandu Valley, or via the Maithili country in the south, and more generally from the Bengali cultural area. Many points of comparison both with ethnography and from the point of view of its reading can be found in the inspiring work of Nicolas 1981 and Marglin 1987, centered on Sitalā.

11. There is certainly an ideally singular referent: tradition, and the word of authority: the incantatory discourse of rituals and myths. But this does not belong to an institution: it is the work of elders and ritual officiants, competing with each other; and, like Lambote, all of them claim, if only out of modesty, not to know the ritual and myths well.

12. Recourse to ritual may seem normal to us in situations such as, for example, honoring the dead. No one in the West has been heard questioning the effectiveness of drawing hearts on a wall for the dead that we have not been able to honor, as was done on what is now named the Covid Memorial Wall in London. If this does not raise questions, it is perhaps because the practice falls within a domain separate from technology, particularly medical technology; we do not wonder if the dead are really there to see the candles and hear the prayers.



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## ABSTRACTS

April 2019. In an indigenous community in the Nepalese Himalayas, a ritual is performed for Sansari, “the One of the World,” to ward off coronavirus. Why respond to an epidemic with a ritual? On what basis do we associate a virus with a spiritual entity? How do we articulate anchoring in tradition and innovation? What does all this tell us about the relationship of this population to the world? In addition to a film on this ritual, this article proposes avenues of analysis and reflection on procedures of interpretation, of integration of the new and the foreign into a local system of knowledge and defense.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Nepal, ritual, popular Hinduism, disease

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