

TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUES

ISSUE 10 • MAY 2022

SPRING EQUINOX

Adrián Navigante
Henning Christoph
Gesileu Ninawa
Gioia Lussana



ALAIN
DANIÉLOU
Foundation



INTELLECTUAL
DIALOGUE

Table of Contents

- 3 **Adrián Navigante**
ALAIN DANIÉLOU'S "FLIP": THE
NARRATIVE OF A REVERSE-SIDE
- 20 **Henning Christoph**
THE SECRET OF THE
PUTCHU GUINADJI
- 26 **INTERVIEW**
GESILEU PHASPY NINAWA: A
MASTER OF THE AMAZONIAN
MEDICINE OF *RAPÉ*
- 41 **Gioia Lussana**
SPIRITUAL EXERCISE
OR THE PATH OF JOY



Adrián Navigante

Director FIND Research and Intellectual Dialogue

ALAIN DANIÉLOU'S “FLIP”: THE NARRATIVE OF A REVERSE-SIDE

Contrary to what the reader may think, Alain Daniélou's tales are not fictional inventions or even an allegorical processing of 'real' experiences. If considered in the light of Daniélou's work as a whole, they are narratives that reconsider the limits of perception and cognition: they reveal a fascinating and sometimes disquieting 'flip-side'. Daniélou's openness to what he calls 'unseen realities' is not merely a metaphysical postulate; it is rather testimony to the broader dimension of perception and cognition he experienced in his life, not only in India, but also in contact with nature from his early childhood until very late in his life. This essay attempts to pick up traces of his tales and read them as passages to new modes of experience and relation.



Etruscan ruins at the Labyrinth, Zagarolo, where Alain Daniélou spent the last years of his life. Photo by Amanda Viana.

The 'no-longer world' of epistemic reduction

The year 1936 saw the publication of one of the landmarks of logical positivism: Alfred Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. In the face of the equation 'fascism-irrationality' that took shape from that decade onwards, the scientific materialism of logical positivism entertained the ambition – beyond its intended purification of the previous "anarchy of philosophical opinions"¹ – to become a stronghold of rationality and even a promise of survival for what was deemed 'civilization'. The problematic territory, as shallow as it may retrospectively seem if we consider the worldwide warfare and racial extermination that took place less than a decade later, was language, and the promise consisted in a clarification of the use of language. With the philosophy of logical positivism (or rather the world-vision it reaf-

firmed and radicalized), rational communication would regain the upper hand in a Europe threatened by the demons of a superstitious and pathological imagination.

The bedrock of logical positivism was sense-experience, its theater of operation the articulation of sense-experience in language. What do we express when we formulate sentences? Or perhaps more precisely: why do we usually formulate sentences which have no correlate whatsoever in *real* sense-experience?² Alfred Ayer was in a way reformulating Kant's predicament: the human understanding tends to exceed the limits of its possibilities and incurs an uncontrollable inflation. As an island of light surrounded by a stormy ocean of darkness, it tends to madly embrace the ocean of mere appearance (wild imagination) instead of securing its earthly limits³. If we replace the complex 'reason/understanding' (Kant) by

'language' (Ayer), the quest turns out to be even more strenuous. Ayer establishes a drastic division between the subjective (or purely arbitrary) and the objective (or universally valid) realm in order to propose a collective orientation of 'meaning' by an attachment to 'facts' – as opposed to the flight of 'fiction'. Meaningful are only those statements which can be (strongly or at least weakly) verified⁴ from sense-experience.

As opposed to Plato's ideal society, artists are not banished from Ayer's logical world, but their language is deprived of any 'truth content'. Since 'truth' is not deemed a scientific construction but a mirror-expression of a purified, sense-experience-based reality, artistic expression is basically reduced to a prison-house of subjective phantasmagoria excluded from real contributions to knowledge and the progress of humanity⁵. Poets are therefore re-placed and disempowered; conversely, *misplaced* poets (that is, metaphysicians)⁶ are dangerous, since they desire to expand the realm of experience (and *eo ipso* the horizon of true statements) by means of contaminated or phantasmagoric language. They break into the territory of epistemic rationality and inoculate a superstitious semantics of inclusion concerning the dead, spirits, angels, gods or even 'the Absolute'⁷. If they happen to produce emotional reactions, the confusion between the real and the emotional, fact and fiction, can be intensified, and the world risks becoming populated by subjective projections disguised as real entities. The conclusion one may draw is that, for the world-configuration of logical

positivism and regardless of a partial integration of non-verifiable statements in the corpus of a culture, 'factual reality' is equated with the 'observable' by means of parameters established in the modern West as 'objective'.

Can the world of today, in which different cultures (and therefore different practices and ways of understanding reality) are considerably intertwined, still accept the parameters and the world-configuration of logical positivism? Can we clearly sever the cognitive from the emotional, the factual from the fictional, and the meaningful from the senseless? Not only Ayer, but also other positivist authors like Frege, Carnap and Russell, reduced reality to the parameters of modern materialism and declared such parameters 'universally valid'. Human qualities became tokens of mere arbitrariness; rigid and quantifiable facts, on the contrary, appeared as emblems of truth. Such an attitude did not consider the fact that any sensory experience is mediated by the symbolic (or cultural) framework used to make sense of it, and that no observation is made from the perspective-less void of a neutral and disembodied world-eye. After all, neutrality is mainly the projection of a dominant perspective inclined to invalidate all others. The depurated objectivity of radical empiricism turned out to be the secular version of Schopenhauer's pure subject of metaphysical cognition⁸. In both philosophies, as opposed as they may seem from a historical point of view, the world is no longer one in which experience and meaning broadly exceed the subjects and permanently reshape the objects, but a 'no-longer world'

In the conception of logical positivism, the 'outside' world
becomes a vivisection table for cognitive experiments and
technical extraction of resources.

devoid of its living substance and gripped by the *vacuum* of a-cosmic metaphysics or the *rigor mortis* of flatland materialism. That the 'logical construction of the world' (in Carnap's sense of the phrase)⁹ is still the dominant tendency even in the field of human sciences should incite us to opposition and challenge, not because there is any use in preaching chaotic meaninglessness, but rather because cross-cultural approaches to other forms of experience and thinking have ended up proving how narrow-minded and even tendentious our objectivity criteria and logical certainties are.

An antidote against 'shrunk heads'

No method can be properly analyzed without bearing in mind the world-configuration supporting it. A method is 'the unfolding of a way [Greek: *meta-hodos*]', but no way is without its corresponding landscape. The fact that each world-configuration has manifold dimensions does not blur its dominant tendency, on which cultural coherence and cohesion depend. Modern science (of which positivism claimed to be its most radical expression) is characterized by the elimination of sensible qualities from the non-human environment and the projection of an objective (that is, neutral or empty) 'nature' as quantifiable *res extensa*. This is not something 'given', but the result of a complex historical (modern) and local (Western) operation. Sensible qualities are not only sense-impressions; they literally constitute the realm of living subjectivity, from passions and emotions to conscious volition and cognition. They are – already at ground-level – impregnated by (inherited) cultural features. Pre-modern world-configurations in the West ascribed a 'souled character' to different parts of the world (*daimones* of Nature) and even to the world in its totality (*anima mundi*)¹⁰. This quintessence of a qualitatively rich, dynamic and unfathomable field of forces was also an object of human inquiry – based on another method. The project

of modern science took the 'souled-character' away from nature and enclosed it in the interiority of humans; it rationalized part of it to re-shape the world and condemned the rest to mere arbitrariness. Only its objectivation of the *ratio* in a World-Spirit¹¹ could fertilize the dead soil of a nature deprived of its intrinsic life and intelligence. The world 'outside' became a vivisection table for cognitive experiments and technical extraction of resources.

But the most significant step was taken in the very constitution of the field, namely when the 'objective reality' of scientific knowledge was methodologically severed from any social conditions and effects, as if the subjective dynamics of a culture (including arts, religion, ethics and other codifications of human behavior) contaminated 'pure observation'. Pragmatically speaking, this split facilitated many technical advantages for an ever-increasing urbanization process, and it fed the illusion that industrialization was the ultimate expression of man's divine empowerment. As Auguste Comte wrote (almost a century before Carnap and Ayer), God must not only be eliminated but replaced by the religion of Humanity¹², which means that human beings are to be regarded not only as the crown of creation, but as the Creator himself. They have acquired absolute (rational and instrumental) power over objective reality, but they have no real interaction with it. The so-called 'disenchantment of the world', even if it remains a partial process, consists in the restriction of human creativity and relation to a specific and very limited scope – that of flatland materialism. This materialism has its own postulates: 1. The world is empty (or soulless), 2. Nature is merely a bunch of resources, 3. There is no invisible realm of beings and forms of intelligence beyond human projection, 4. What is called 'consciousness' rests and depends on (brain-) matter, 5. The epitomes of cultural development are not art and religion, but science and



Sandstone etruscan relief excavation. Source: brewminate.com (Creative Commons).

technology. European Enlightenment created a culture of shrunken heads (detached from the body, the emotions, the environment, as well as from human and non-human expressions of ‘otherness’) that believed themselves to be purified sparks on the long road of evolution.

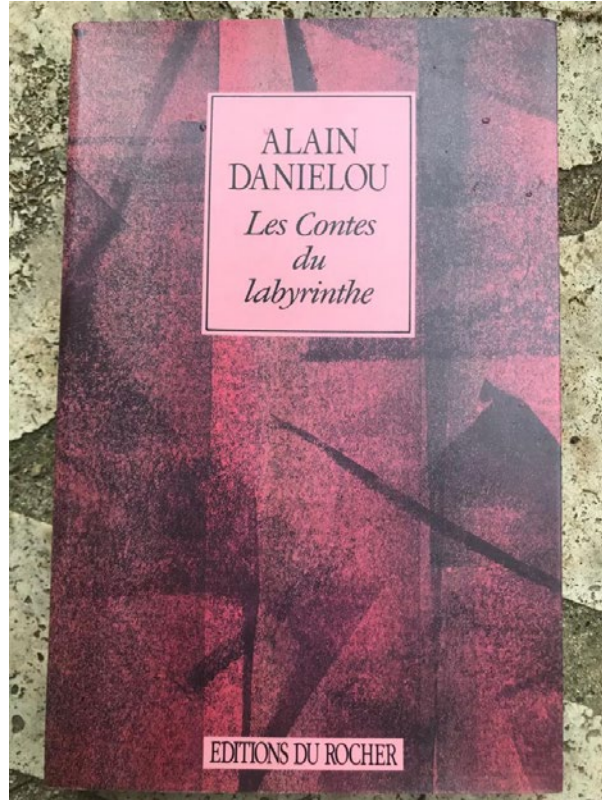
A powerful antidote against the shrunken heads of Enlightenment was produced when an antinomic expression of colonial expansion, Western ethnology, became symmetric enough to inquiry into ‘the other’ without getting carried away by the typical and not so commendable extremes of fascination and horror. Philippe Descola spent three years doing field work among the Achuar, an Amazonian tribe reputed to practice head-

hunting, pejoratively called Jívaros (‘people who shrink heads’). The culture of the Achuar, earlier reputed to be the epitome of barbarism, inspired Descola to attempt, among other things, what he himself called a restoration of animism¹³. The term ‘animism’ had been defined as a belief in spirits (or non-empirical beings) and a confusion about life and death on the grounds of an erroneous interpretation of dreams¹⁴. For Descola this term could be used to describe a mode of being in a world impossible to define through parameters of perception, cognition and socialization typical of modern, industrialized Western societies. In other words: animism, in Descola’s eyes, does not have to do with hallucinatory percep-

tions, cognitive errors or imaginary confusion (as it was thought in the XIX and the early XX century), but with a modality of behavior and relation which compels us to rethink our own certainties. Is modern Western culture – with its secular, atheistic and materialist drive – the product of an evolution of thought going from magic to religion and from religion to science? Is it ‘universal’ (that is, indisputably valid and superior to all others) as opposed to the ‘ethnic’ (that is, local and therefore deficient) cultures of other peoples? Is it the first culture that discovered ‘nature’ by means of scientific inquiry, whereas all other civilizations keep mystifying the environment? For the meanwhile ‘naturalized’ Eurocentric thought, Descola’s answer to these questions is not only negative, but also upsetting: the Achuar have evolved throughout the ages exactly like us, but in a different way. There is no universally valid world-configuration¹⁵ from the very moment that others *are also working* as a collective organization. Nature is not something that human beings discovered at a certain point in history, but something that certain human groups constructed out of their (historically and culturally conditioned) tendency to objectification. In fact, for the Achuar, nature is also culture, or in other words: there is culture in nature, since the beings taking part in it are perceived and conceived in quite another way. These beings are not merely organisms, inanimate beings or biological indicators, but *subjects*, environmental agents endowed with interiority and personhood¹⁶. If a shaman can summon the spirits of animals or plants to cure ill people, if a hunter can trace the presence of a prey not only by following its footprints but also through telepathic communication with the animal clan (sometimes effected by means of magic songs), if dreams articulate social behavior more coherently than many instances of waking life, this is not something that can be quickly explained away as super-

stition or regressive belief. It is a mode of behavior that supports, nurtures, consolidates and even expands the life of an ethnic group, and it may serve to attempt an amplification of our horizon and a critical reflection on our own cultural limits – or limitations.

Limitations remain full convictions if the ordinary steps are not retraced to the breakpoint of the ‘given world’. Non-humans can become subjects if they are granted interiority, personhood, volition and subtle influence upon humans, but this is only possible if nature (as a kind of no-man’s-land alien to humans) is no longer conceived in opposition to culture (as the territory shaped by human intelligence and action). Bruno Latour characterized that retracing of steps as ‘symmetrization’¹⁷. Within that framework, the long-standing dichotomy between an ‘outer reality’ of nature (where an unbiased, objective knowledge resides) and an ‘inner space’ of societies (where a proliferation of different ‘beliefs’ takes place) loses its validity. Post-modern ethnology has managed to break into the territory of a *contaminated epistemology*. No positivistic reduction is possible any longer; instead, hybrid-objects (from immaterial beings to artifacts) occupy the scene, and the distinction between natural and cultural, genuine and artificial, immanent and transcendent, becomes blurred and calls for another method of approach. Is it enough to leave the library armchair and even the missionary tent to engage in “participant observation” and be able to “grasp the native’s point of view”¹⁸? As participatory as the observation may be, it remains subjected to scholarly principles of description. Such principles reveal a kind of disguised objectivity whose function is to draw the line between ‘staying sober’ and ‘going native’. Since going native means sacrificing critical thinking (at least the way it has been conceived for centuries¹⁹), it must be excluded from the field without hesitation. But its mere existence poses a problem, namely



Daniélou's short story collection *Les contes du labyrinthe* (Monaco 1990).

the problem of the parameters and limits of critique. Can *self*-criticism reach its own foundations and risk the paradox of its own death and rebirth? What level of contamination can epistemology tolerate before it ceases to be (considered) a form of knowledge? Should every form of 'knowledge' – especially in the human sciences – be the result of epistemic procedures and their quest for 'objectivity'?

The flip-side

Scholarly critique of the identification phenomenon contained in the expression 'going native' has mainly focused on the emotional and romantic posture of so-called 'cultural brokers' in dealing with foreign cultures and especially transmitting them to others²⁰. From the

standpoint of the critics, such processes do not enrich the cross-cultural exchange but reduce and impoverish it by means of stereotypes and the reproduction of exotic pseudo-identities (American gurus, European shamans, New-Age tribes, etc.). This form of critique presupposes that the synthetic – or syncretic – identification, even when claiming a re-enactment of concrete experience, is after all more abstract than a sober analytical approach. That may be true in some cases; however, one should distinguish two moments: 1. The degree of identification in learning (from) the other culture, 2. The degree of self-proclaimed authority in reproducing the learned contents. The problem lies in the second moment rather than in the first, but not all of those who have delved into another world-configuration and experienced

a reformulation of their own mode of being end up embarking on a wild proselytism or an exotic re-enactment. One might rather say the contrary: a mechanical and rather unresourceful appropriation of a ‘native model’ reveals a fragmentary and rather shallow learning process.

Precisely for the reasons given above, one wonders what can be so severely criticized in the learning process of authors like John Woodroffe, Alain Daniélou, Eric de Rosny, Pierre Verger or Claude Planson. At face value, all of them can be said to have ‘gone native’²¹, but there is no doubt that they took the ‘cultures of the other’ seriously by detaching themselves from the typical prejudices of their time in order to open another horizon of experience. Perhaps they went too far in their tendency to attain a specific kind of understanding: *sub specie interioritatis*²². Did they lose critical focus, or were they trying to modify the very notion of ‘critique’? They studied central aspects of South Asian cultures (Woodroffe and Daniélou) and African(-based) cultures (Verger and Planson) without separating theory and practice, individual and society, belief and knowledge. Their aim was to surpass such oppositions, to work on a synthesis, to counteract the fragmentary tendency of one-sided analysis and specialization. And most important of all: they tried to adapt the learned contents (with understandable tension towards scholarly transmission) to the contexts in which they thought such insights could be useful to enrich, enhance, adjust or change the dominant trends of their own culture. In embracing ‘native knowledge’,

they overstepped two limits: with regard to the other(s) and with regard to themselves. After all, ‘their culture’ was – precisely because of the process in question – no longer so rigid, stable, root-like, and indisputably theirs. Some of them (Daniélou and Planson) even developed a certain antipathy to it.

Paradoxically enough, it is the lucid persistence in an unsettling *anti-pathos* that prevents the emotional component from falling back and drowning in stereotypes. Lucid persistence avoids rigidity and over-simplification. It (re-) educates the passions. New elements come to the fore and strive for expression. *Anti-pathos* is the result of an internal break with the dominant world-configuration. With the break comes the irruption, and with the irruption the awareness of the breach and the disclosure of a doubled reversal. I want to call that reversal the *flip-side*. It is ‘doubled’ because the break is not only with the dominant trend in the culture being transcended, but also with the adopted configuration, that is, that which provides complementary, contrastive and even revolutionary elements. Ultimately, if one goes ‘native’, it is only to come back ‘alien’, but the second foreignness, as unsettling as it may be at first, is productive and may even turn out to be prophetic, hence the difficulty of embracing it with full awareness. It is as if something – at the same time ancient and new – were talking through the human vessel and transforming, to a greater or lesser degree, genres, registers and frameworks of experience.

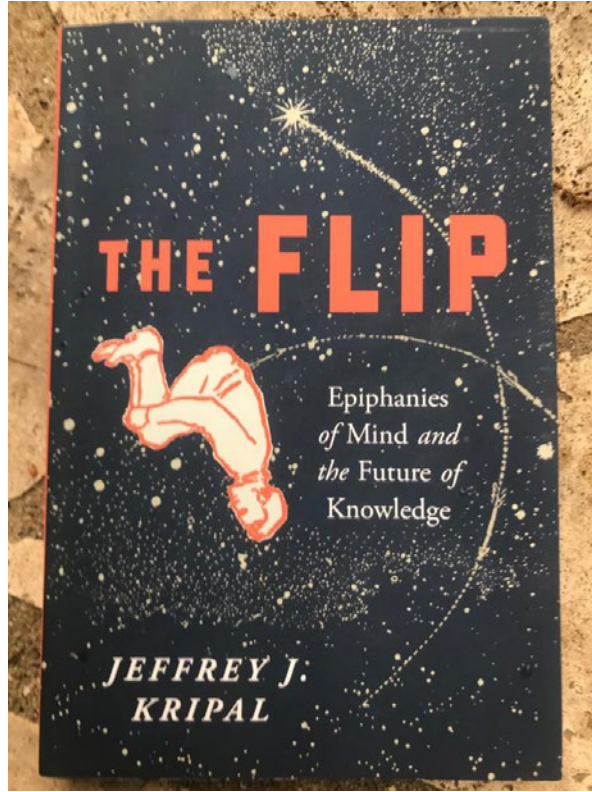
Jeffrey Kripal has dealt with the “radically new real” that appears “with the simplest of flips”.

Authors like Daniélou sought to adapt the contents learned to contexts in which they thought such insights could be useful to enrich, enhance, adjust or change the trends of their own culture.

The flip is a reversal of perspective, “from the outside of things to the inside of things”²³. Before it reveals the reverse-side of the reality we take for granted, it presents itself as an irruption, the irruption of *the impossible*. What is the impossible but the unassimilated other, i. e. that which violates the epistemological boundaries of standard Western empiricism and compels one “to think off the page”²⁴? Interpreting it *properly* implies a considerable deviation from the accepted truths about the world and reality in general. According to Kripal, terms like ‘psychical’ and ‘paranormal’ reality need to be reconsidered from the point of view of an extended hermeneutics of the subject. Both terms point not only to a supplementary dimension of human existence (situated beyond arbitrariness and individual contingency), but also to a deeper, paradoxical and not-fully-explainable aspect of what is called the ‘natural world’. This dimension can be called ‘the sacred’, that is, “a palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment [...] at once subject and object”²⁵. Subjective experience opens the way to a form of subjectivity that is not human²⁶, which nevertheless interacts with us in ways that lend themselves to mythical rather than to scientific discourse, not because they are irrational, but rather because their framework is utterly different and requires other forms of intelligibility. With the flip, the human imagination “becomes temporarily empowered and ‘zapped’, and functions not as a simple spinner of fantasies (the imaginary) but as a very special organ of cognition and translation (symbolic), as a kind of supersense that is perceiving something entirely different”²⁷.

Alain Daniélou’s *Les contes du Labyrinthe* (*The Tales of the Labyrinth*) is one of his last books. It is considered part of his ‘fictional production’, very much like the *Contes Gangétiques* (*The Tales of the Ganges*) and in contrast to books like *Yoga: The Method of Re-Integration*

or *Hindu Polytheism*, in which the ‘factual dimension’ prevails in its manifold aspects, such as in the historical sources and articulations of the discipline of yoga or in the cohesive structure and dynamics of the Hindu pantheon. As a token of rebellion against the taken-for-granted distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, Daniélou’s book begins with a note to the reader in which he announces a surprising displacement, inversion and even fusion of these seemingly dichotomic categories: “All characters and events evoked in these tales *are real* [...] I have tried to envisage history from another plane than that of appearances, and I remain convinced that *this vision correlates with an unseen reality that never ceases to be present*”²⁸. In fact, *Les contes du labyrinthe* contain different paths leading to other worlds, worlds unseen to the ordinary perception of the modern individual (severed as he is from the living and mysterious dimension of Nature). Daniélou’s narrative actively works on a rehabilitation of those paths impelling the reader in unforeseen directions. Tusco, the boy at the fountain at Zagarolo in the first tale of the volume, turns out to be an Etruscan deity and diviner, Tages, who guides Gwynn, the main character of the tale, in his journey of mystical self-discovery. Silvana, the beautiful red-haired woman in the tale “The Sibyl of Veii [La Sibylle de Véies]”, reveals her real self to Marco, the young student who severely criticizes the condescendence of university professors who talk about gods and nymphs “as if they were mere fables”²⁹. She is *in fact* Vegoia, the Etruscan sibyl who laid down the sacred laws of her people over twenty-five centuries ago³⁰. These tales tell us that the limitation of sight in making out the so-called ‘normal parameters of perception’ is the result of a long process of repression and increasing reduction of the field of human experience, beginning with the rise of monotheistic religion³¹ and its suppression of the sacred in Nature and ending with



Front cover of Jeffrey Kripal's book *The Flip* (New York 2019).

the complete elimination of divine agency in the hands of secular rationalism and materialism³².

In Daniélou's vision, the uniformed and impoverished world-configuration that thinks itself universally valid is an estrangement and a flaw, and it is the reverse-side of it that permeates his tales. In this sense, they are a kind of plea for an amplification of perception whose correlates are the disclosure of divine presences as well as the imaginal collapse of historical chronology: "Time" [...], says Tages to his beloved human friend Gwynn, "is only an illusion. The past, present and future are very close to each other"³³. That Marco is initiated by Vegoia into the mysteries of the rites and the worship of the gods inherited from the Etruscans³⁴ is a clear example of the rela-

tivity of historical distance and the possibility of re-enacting ritual or liturgical intensities by manipulating the two-way mirror of an out-of-joint fantasy³⁵. If the line of the psychical and the physical blurs, if time and history cease to be absolute references for human orientation, if the category of intelligence is extended to encompass non-human forms and repopulate the environment with mysterious subjectivities, the paradoxical tends to reach a point of self-implosion and the *flip*-side reveals itself in that process. Alain Daniélou, who in his writings on Hinduism emphasized the importance of tradition as a collective support of individual experience and a source of unquestionable authority, takes a decisive step towards individual empowerment through expanded perception, enhanced imagination or acute

sensibility for a paranormal twist and radical mutation of the spatiotemporal environment. There is sufficient evidence in *Les contes du labyrinthe* to state that, according to Daniélou, the gods are favorable to those that seek them and make the effort to reintegrate them in their lives, and that the companions of the gods are not always alone in this world – even if they belong to a culture that has neither eyes nor ears for that dimension. The tales transmit the deep conviction of their author, namely the possibility of an *expanded life* that surpasses inherited empirical (de-)limitations, providing human beings with a surplus of meaning and reintegrating forgotten aspects and dimensions. Their setting is not traditional India. There are practically no *paṇḍitas*, no *sādhus*, no initiatic chains or appositional titles of religious authority, no socio-cosmically-articulated *dharma* to guide the seekers within a collective setting. The main reference is the Labyrinth, a place where Nature preserves the aura of its own living memory and shares it with some humans who have decided to live otherwise. These humans are visionaries. They have rediscovered the ‘empowered imagination’ that once fed the Hindu *mūrtis* with concentric wheels of unbounded energy, a modality of empowerment that in our present culture has no place. Still, it *does* survive, even without uninterrupted institutional transmission (and therefore without structured visibility). The transcendently disclosed fracture of time and space enables humans to jump over barriers and receive the (hitherto secret) contents of a broader reality, but the revealed secret is not cut off from the world in which they live. It would not be exaggerated to say that, in

Daniélou’s tales, the empowered imagination of visionaries is ultimately Nature claiming the recognition of its own *flip-side*: “Images, works of art, are means of communication with the subtle world of spirits and gods. By creating divine images [...] we can attract the presence of the spirits towards them and in this way have access to the invisible through the visible”³⁶. Perhaps the last version of the ‘divine image’ in a fully secularized culture is the double energy-mirror between the body of the artist and the work of art – only if the latter is uncontaminated by instrumental objectification.

A Narrative of Restitution

The passage from Daniélou’s *Contes gangétiques* [*Tales of the Ganges*] to the *Contes du Labyrinthe* [*The Tales of the Labyrinth*] reveals the loss of a thoroughly structured world – Traditional India with its well-established institutions of knowledge – supporting magical, esoteric and mystical experiences. As a result of this, the *Contes du Labyrinthe* face the challenge of re-enacting and preserving those experiences in a world where individuals are socially isolated and disoriented. But this passage is not characterized by a mere contrast. There is a guiding thread that cuts across the opposition between tradition and modernity, between religious initiation and artistic sensibility, or between continuity and discontinuity in the transmission of a certain form of wisdom. In the *Contes gangétiques*, the door to other dimensions of experience and reality is not opened by Brahmins³⁷, that is, by the carriers and preservers of institutional knowledge, but by *sādhus*, who

In Daniélou’s tales, the empowered imagination of visionaries is ultimately Nature claiming the recognition of its own flip-side.

appear as the embodiment of a special type of marginal, at the same time dangerous, and transformative power³⁸. Such power is for Daniélou indistinguishable from a very rare form of freedom, which has little to do with the kind of individualism that characterizes modern Western societies. At the same time, if the reader observes the thematic architecture of the tales, a subtle connection appears between *sādhus*, devotional saints³⁹ and artists⁴⁰. All three of them, despite their specific differences, leave traces of what the empowered imagination (irrespective of the context) can do, namely change the human form, expand it, reshape it and twist it (even out of recognition) in order to disclose and assimilate unforeseen aspects of the living mystery called ‘Nature’ – or by extension ‘cosmos’ and ‘reality’. In *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, there are no carriers of a living tradition in ‘the real world’⁴¹, and the artists have become an isolated enclave of resistance against the social order – increasingly reductive, instrumentalized and profane. However, the ‘empowered imagination’ remains the leading thread and the centripetal force of the tales: it brings humans back to gods and ancestors in the local setting of the Roman province⁴², it reveals deep secrets of Nature sheltered by an ancient prophetess⁴³, it connects the rites of different traditions by means of analogical resonances⁴⁴. Empowered imagination is differential, and as such it is not severed from perception and cognition: it is a cleansed door of perception and an unthought-of instrument of cognition. Daniélou’s message in these tales can be summarized as follows: new relations can take place if the perception is cleansed and knowledge is freed from the reductive mirror of flatland materialism, epitomized by logical positivism and its epistemically sanctioned truth conception.

In reflecting about the present impasse of the humanities, Jeffrey Kripal emphasizes the importance of putting “extreme, anomalous,

outrageous narratives in the middle of the table. [...] We may find that we actually *need* these ‘impossible’ things to come up with better answers to our most pressing questions”⁴⁵. One of Kripal’s main goals is to revision and renew the humanities as *sciences of the impossible*, by taking new epistemological and ontological challenges seriously⁴⁶. This would mean, among other things, to erase the limits between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ and accept the hybrid character of our experience in order to *begin to think*. This might have been done with non-European cultures of different kinds – India, Africa, South America, Australia –, at least partially, as a way of objectifying ‘otherness’ to secure our own neutral space. Kripal proposes however to do it with our own culture, the ‘flip-side’ of which should emerge from the shadows of repression and finally become a (quite spurious) hermeneutical object. He proposes therefore to enter a dangerous territory in which interpreters must get their hands dirty with the blurred limits between fact and fiction, third-rate esotericism and the barely distinguishable limits between pathology and illumination. However, in taking that risk the possibility of rehabilitating the creative dimension of imagination arises, even in contexts very hostile to its expansion. The organ of imagination has long been taken as limited and potentially dangerous, a faculty which tends to ignore its own well-delimited framework (sense-perception below and intellectual cognition above). This is mainly due to a false appreciation of its function and scope, since imagination, once ‘empowered’ (for example in arts or religion), is no longer the merely reproductive faculty of a single individual cut off from his (human and non-human) environment; it is rather what enables “an encounter with other actual species, invisible life-forms existing in some other dimensions of the natural world that overlaps with ours”⁴⁷. Daniélou’s narrative in *Les contes du Labyrinthe* links the dimension

of the mirror reflecting an objectified world and the dimension of hidden subjectivities (in plants, animals, spirits and gods) that compels us to reconsider our somehow naturalized tendency to positivism. A strong tension and an unthought-of expansion take place; we are shaken by the complexity of experience and the narrowness of our attempts at integration.

It is relatively easy to read Daniélou as a traditionalist Hindu who adopted an old system and transmitted already established ideas (admirably or deficiently) as a mirror reflecting (a one-dimensional) reality, but this barely does justice to the complexity and creativity of his thought. Daniélou was not a born Hindu, he gathered many pieces and aspects of traditions that do not co-exist in a sort of homeostatic harmony, but rather in permanent (partly disruptive, partly creative) tension: Aryan and Dravidian, Brahmanical and Tribal, Vedantic and Tantric, ancient and modern, erotic and ascetic, oral and written. He did not encounter Shiva for the first time in Benares but in a forest of Brittany, that is, in the form of the Celtic deity Cernunnos. He cultivated his own rapport to that deity of Nature by tracing a path to the pre-Vedic Lord of Creatures, Pashupati, and to the Greek god of love and ecstasy,

Dionysus. His empowered imagination did not reflect the reality of a single culture; it transversally pierced the codes of many cultures to retrieve analogical resonances and elaborate on them in parallel registers. Daniélou's narrative is one of restitution, the restitution of the *flip-side* of 'flatland reality'. Because of this *flip-side*, our most rigid certainties are swept away and other modes of relation begin to take place. This is also why, in his note to the reader, Daniélou refuses to regard fiction as sheer invention and points instead to the *two-way* mirror, that is, the capacity of piercing the veil of the 'no-longer world'. After all, the 'no-longer world' is a cultural wasteland where all powers of Nature have been banished⁴⁸: "The abode of the ancient gods was splendid and its dwellers were living and fantastic realities, unpredictable forces animating the universe"⁴⁹. Seeing this splendor beyond time and space limitations is the function of an artistic imagination guided by the very forces it reactivates, fusing author and characters, ink and blood, book pages and mythological settings. Daniélou's 'flip' is the epiphany of a mind that repudiates remaining attached to the shackles of an uninspired humanity and its normative impoverishment of Life. •

¹ Moritz Schlick, *Die Wende der Philosophie*, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Wien 1938, pp. 31-40, citation p. 33.

² I am of course simplifying Ayer's procedure, which consists of a distinction between sentence (on the level of pure grammar), statement (on a semantic and pragmatic level) and proposition (a term related to the verifiability of statements). For the purpose of this essay the nuances of a positivist ontology intertwined with semantics and a critique of neo-Kantianism are not relevant.

³ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1787), A236 B295, ed. by Jens Timmermann, Hamburg 1998, pp. 336-337. The mad incursion into the unknown was epitomized by Emanuel Swedenborg, to whom Kant devoted the essay *Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch die Träume der Metaphysik* (1776).

⁴ Ayer's verifiability criterion is twofold, as he himself says: "a proposition [that is, a potentially true statement] is said to be verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if and only if its truth can be conclusively established in experience, [...] it is verifiable, in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable" (Alfred Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 9). Despite Ayer's strenuous scientific reduction, a weak verifiability criterion must be admitted, otherwise all historical statements should not even be regarded as possibly true or false, but simply as meaningless.

⁵ For Alfred Ayer, aesthetics does have a value, but only in the subjective sphere, and a certain logic of 'sanity' preventing the subject from exceeding his limits: "If the author writes nonsense, it is because he considers it most suitable for bringing about the effects for which his writing is designed" (Alfred Ayer, *Ibidem*, p. 45). Contributing to the progress of humanity requires objective value, which is the exclusivity of scientific propositions.

⁶ The metaphysician writes nonsense

without intending to write nonsense. There is nonsense generating emotions, which is what the poet is capable of, but not the metaphysician. Misplaced poetry is in the eyes of logical positivists a mystification of the merely secular, emotional power of arts (cf. Alfred Ayer, *Ibidem.*, p. 44).

⁷ Ayer takes one of H. F. Bradley's theological statements about the Absolute as an example of a failure in communication (Ayer, *Ibidem*, p. 36).

⁸ In his book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer speaks of a core-subjectivity which never becomes a thing among others in the world. He ascribes this core-subjectivity a special type of knowledge (of a metaphysical type) and calls it the "translucent world-eye" (Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1816), Band 1, Frankfurt 1995, p. 266). This pure neutrality, which in Schopenhauer's philosophy has an undisputable metaphysical status, was introjected by positivists into the sphere of scientific objectivity and became the dogma of materialistic conceptions.

⁹ See Rudolf Carnap, *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928). Carnap's presumption that immediate reality (as he says "before the construction of a world", *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*, Hamburg 1974, p. 88) is devoid not only of subjectivity-status but also of qualities and spatial delimitation of any kind clearly shows the function and scope of positivism's negative ontology: to empty reality of any intact (in the sense of 'not-fully-grasped') and autonomous (in the sense of 'side-effectual and otherness-related') factor and render it a methodological tabula rasa for the human intellect to display its scientific and technical manipulation.

¹⁰ The idea of anima *mundis*, the beginnings of which can be traced back to Plato's *Timaeus* (in which the world is said to be not only rational but also 'a souled being [zoon *enpsychon*, cf. Plato *Timaios* 30 b8-c1]'), extended even into modernity, not only in the Renaissance with Nicolas

of Cusa and Giordano Bruno, but also in German Romanticism and Idealism with Novalis, Goethe and Franz von Baader.

11 The term was coined by Hegel, who refers to it as follows: “The world-spirit is the spirit of the world, as it unfolds itself in human consciousness” (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte, I. Teilband*, Frankfurt 1955, Einleitung, p. 60). There is ‘spirit’ in the world only in as much as it is projected from subjective consciousness and objectified in what humans do to transform ‘nature’. The following sentence from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* reaffirms this idea: “the general spirit [here: collective human consciousness objectified in culture] gives itself effective reality” Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts. Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, Frankfurt 1983, p. 209).

12 “While protestants and deists have always attacked religion in the name of God, we should on the contrary dismiss God in the name of religion” (Auguste Comte, *Correspondance générale*, Tome V, Paris 1977, p. 98). Of course Comte’s religion has nothing to do with the idea or experience of the sacred. It is a religion of science and progress, hence purely profane and instrumental.

13 Cf. Philippe Descola, *Par delà nature et culture*, Paris 2005, chapitre 6 : L’animisme restauré, pp. 183-202. It should be made clear that Descola does not advocate animism as a world panacea, nor does he reject the world-configuration that became dominant in the modern West – which he calls ‘naturalism’ –, but he rather analyzes, as we shall see, the relativity of values once considered ‘universal’ and the possibility of learning from other world-configurations other (less destructive) forms of ‘anthropization’.

14 This is a sort of invariant in the anthropology of religion during the XIX century, from which the main exponents are Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer, but it permeated the anthropology and sociology of religion (Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl) as well

as the psychology of culture (Freud) in the early XX century.

15 We need to remember that for Descola a world-configuration is not a mental idea of the world in an individual or a group, but a pre-reflexive mode of identification and relation by means of which fundamental bonds are established among humans as well as between humans and non-humans. As he himself writes, the combination of a type of identification and a type of relation “reveals a general structure of a particular scheme enabling an integration of practices” (Philippe Descola, *Par delà nature et culture*, p. 167). The status of a scheme is not objective, but praxeological, that is, a scheme constitutively frames experience in meaning (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 135).

16 The notion of personhood in non-humans can be traced back to Irving Hallowell’s essay ‘Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View’, which was first published in 1960 (cf. Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Culture and History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, New York 1960, pp. 19-52). Hallowell’s essay clearly anticipated and partially inspired the ontological turn in anthropology that took place at the end of the XX century.

17 Cf. Bruno Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, Paris 1997, pp. 128-136.

18 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London 1922, p. 25.

19 In a broad sense, critical thinking can be traced back to Socrates’ ambition of a modality of knowledge freed from non-reflected presuppositions, as Plato presents it in the first book of his *Politeia* in the context of a discussion about the meaning of justice (cf. Plato, *Res Publica*, 331c). In this case, I take critical thinking in the modern sense, as the basis of modern scientific inquiry, that is, a method to examine beliefs and presuppositions in the light of empirical evidence – where the question of quantifiable sense experience plays a crucial role (cf. John Dewey, *How We Think*, Boston 1910, p. 6).

20 In this respect cf. among others Mi-

chael Marker, *Going Native in the Academy: Choosing the Exotic over the Critical*, in: *Anthropology & Educational Quarterly*, December 1998, Vol. 29, N° 4, pp. 473-480.

21 Regardless of their differences and the fact that none was a professional anthropologist, all of them spent years in a foreign cultural setting, learned the languages of the local cultures, were initiated by a religious authority of the traditions they explored, and profoundly changed not only their ideas, but also their sensibility and imagination to embrace a broader reality. It is precisely their 'subjective engagement' that lends itself to debate.

22 This Latin phrase is ambiguous. It can be translated as 'under the aspect of interiority' or 'from an internal or micro-cosmic point of view'. In the first case, there is a certain objectivity in the interiority; in the second case, there is no transcendent parameter outside the merely individual sphere.

23 Jeffrey Kripal, *The Flip. Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*, New York 2019, p. 12.

24 Cf. Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible. The Paranormal and the Sacred*, Chicago 2010, p. 23.

25 Jeffrey Kripal, *Ibidem*, p. 9. Kripal relies on (and expands) Rudolf Otto's definition of the sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Cf. the second and fourth moments of the *numinosum* in Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917), München 1979, pp. 13-14 and pp. 42-43, respectively).

26 Inasmuch as the 'non-human' in modern Western culture is considered devoid of interiority (and therefore of soul, spirit, intelligence), it is a mere object; but the moment we begin to interact with it, a process of subjectivation takes over the 'objective world' – with a profound modification of its constituents.

27 Whitney Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Supernatural. Why the Unexplained is*

Real, New York 2017, p. 119.

28 Alain Daniélou, *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, Monaco 1990, p. 9. My emphasis.

29 Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, p. 116.

30 If we take as a symbolic date the bringing of the sibylline books to Rome during the monarchy of the Tarquins (Tarquin the Elder and Tarquin the Proud).

31 The tales "Le Jardin de Songes (The Garden of Dreams)" shows quite clearly how the creations of passages between human and divine were systematically destroyed by the Christian empire (cf. Alain Daniélou, *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, p. 79).

32 The lonely fate of the young Marco in the tale "La Sibylle de Véies (The Sibyl of Veii)" is due to the fact that modern knowledge deals with the forces of the universe as if they were dead elements, betraying the very conditions of a proper approach. "Some rare books" are mentioned as exceptions in the tale, "those of Mircea Eliade, and especially those of a French author that dealt with Hindu mythology" (cf. Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, pp. 116-117).

33 Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, p. 34.

34 Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, p. 133.

35 "The poets and philosophers asked: what is imagination? Is it simply a spinner of fantasies? Or can it also become a window of revealed truths from some other deeper part of the soul or world? Or better yet, like some secret two-way-mirror in a modern-day police station, is the imagination both, depending on whether one is looking at or through its reflecting surface?" (Whitney Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Supernatural*, p. 118).

36 Alain Daniélou, *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, p. 74. These words stem from Nicholas of Cusa, a character in the tale 'Le jardin des songes [The Garden of Dreams]' who summarizes for the young Leonardo Da Vinci the secret doctrine of Prospero Colonna. In the tale, this Italian aristocrat possesses an enclave of arts, philosophy and wisdom at a place called "Zagarol" (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 70). This is a clear reference to

Daniélou's project at the Labyrinth (his residence at Zagarolo), which took shape during the last period of his life.

37 There are two sorts of Brahmins in Daniélou's writings: the old (or traditional) ones, who appear as a cultural complement to the *sādhus*, since they bring the latter's experience to the level of reflection, and the young (or modernized) ones, whose main concern is to shut the door to the 'reality at large' in which *sādhus* operate, adopting instead a great part of the secular values that Western colonialism brought to India.

38 One example of the higher rung of the *sādhus* in this respect is contained in the tale 'Le maître des loups [The Master of the Wolves]'. In fact, in this tale it is the *śūdras* who open the way of the body for the young Brahmin Kuttu, whose deepest initiation (outside the caste order) is conducted by a *sādhū* belonging to the tradition of Atharvavedic sorcerers called Aṅgīrasas (cf. Alain Daniélou, *Le bétail des dieux et autres contes gangétiques*, Paris 1983, pp. 223-225). For Daniélou the power of the *sādhū* lies to a great extent in his externality to urbanized religion and his proximity to the other (undomesticated) side of Nature.

39 For example the Bauls in the tale 'Les Fous de dieu [The fools of god]', cf. Alain Daniélou, *Le bétail des dieux et autres contes gangétiques*, Paris 1983, pp. 257-300).

40 For example the secret society of the *vaiśya* Jay Prakash in the tale 'La Partie des dè[s] [The Game of Dice]', Alain Daniélou, *Le bétail des dieux et autres contes gangétiques*, pp. 167-194).

41 The reductive character of this 'reality' has turned *sādhus* into tramps and saints into madmen, whereas a considerable part of the artistic milieu has adopted the categorical imperative of our present society, that of quantification at any price.

42 Cf. the relationship that Gwynn, the main character of the tale 'Tages', establishes among others with Etruscan divinities and Roman emperors throughout the story

(Alain Daniélou, *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, pp. 11-53).

43 Cf. the relationship between Marco, a young dreamer, and Silvana, the Sibyl of Veii, out of which the contents of a mysterious manuscript are rendered concrete and effective (Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, pp. 113-135).

44 In the tale 'Le don du soleil [The Sun's Gift]', a living connection is established between Indian, Persian and ancient European rituals related to the sun. Throughout the tale, it becomes clear that the power of Mithraic rituals can be re-enacted by somebody like the main character of the tale, Ludovico, whose *inner gaze* can lead to a ritual combination and even fusion of differently codified contents for the sake of a world restitution (cf. Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, pp. 85-111).

45 Jeffrey Kripal, *The Flip*, p. 45.

46 Jeffrey Kripal, *Ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

47 Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Supernatural*, p. 94.

48 As C. G. Jung said, when the powers are banished, they are not fully absent but return in the form of symptoms (cf. C. G. Jung, Kommentar zu 'Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte' (1929), in: *Gesammelte Werke 13: Studien über alchemistische Vorstellungen*, Solothurn: Düsseldorf 1995, § 54, p. 45, and *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga* (1932), New Jersey 1996, p. 30).

49 Alain Daniélou, *Les contes du Labyrinthe*, p. 116.



Henning Christoph

Director of the “Soul of Africa Museum” in Essen, Germany, and member of FAD’s Advisory Board.

THE SECRET OF THE *PUTCHU GUINADJI*

In this essay, originally written in German in 2013, Henning Christoph (anthropologist and award-winning photojournalist) deals with the *Putchu Guinadji*, an African talisman consisting of miniatures of horsemen or warriors made of bronze, silver, copper or brass, used to treat mentally deranged people among the Kotoko in Cameroon and Chad, near the Lake Chad basin along the Logon and Chari rivers. Henning Christoph retells the story of how he discovered, during one of his sojourns in Cameroon, the significance, the ritual context and the importance of this talisman and its art of curing madness.



Henning Christoph. Photo by Jens Grossmann.

Having acquired a fine collection of miniature horsemen or warriors called *Putchu Guinadji* – made of bronze, silver, copper, or brass – for the *Soul of Africa Museum*, my curiosity was roused to find out more about these talismans, which were said to be used for the treatment of mad people among the Kotoko in Cameroon and Chad near the Lake Chad basin, along the Logone and Chari rivers.

There is practically no literature on the *Putchu Guinadji* or the Kotoko people. The Kotoko now live where the ancient kingdom of Sao once was. Pierluigi Peroni, an Italian collector, has published two beautiful art books on his outstanding collection, but provides no description as to how these horsemen were activated or used. In his book *Der Einfluß Bornus, Mandaras, Bagirmis, der Kotoko-Staaten und der Jukun-Konföderation auf die Kulturentwicklung ihrer Nachbarn südlich des Tschadsees* [*The Influence of Bornu, Mandaras, Bagirmis, the Kotoko States and the Jukun Confederation on the*

Cultural Development of their Neighbors in the South of Lake Chad]¹, Hermann Forki remarks that ever since Islam was introduced among them, the Kotoko no longer forge such objects themselves, but leave the trade to Arabs, Kanuri and Hausa, who form a socially inferior caste in the country and are considered as ‘unclean’ as corpses. Forki adds that the dog is regarded as their typical animal, and that the Kotoko see metalworking as contrary to Islam – which is not felt that way by any of their neighbors.

My curiosity was awakened. There are neither photos of these pieces being used, nor texts explaining their spiritual activation and use. On December 7 2012, I set out for Cameroon with the purpose of unraveling the secret of the *Putchu Guinadji*, accompanied by my two assistants Ismaila Putuenchi, a bronze caster from Fouban, and Aboubakar Sidik Njikam, my driver. We headed 1500 kilometers north from the country after obtaining a first lead in the Yaounde artisan market.

The dealer came from the village of Guilli, 20 kilometers south of Rhumsiki in the Mandara mountain region. In this village live casters who make copies of the Kotoko pieces. To the best of my knowledge, the Kotoko stopped casting with the Islamization of their tribe; nowadays only the Hausa, Arabs and Kanuri preserve the art of casting. Metal workers were supposedly low caste among the Kotoko, but the dealer did say that the Kotoko still keep casting deep in the bush, and that we should look for a person called Mahmud in Waza, because he knows everything.

We arrived in Guilli on Christmas Eve after a 12-hour drive from Ngaoundere on a very bad road. The contacts we wanted to meet were not present. We had no other choice than to continue to Rhumsiki, since in that village was the only hotel of the whole region. The 20 kilometer-road to Rhumsiki was a treacherous mountain pass with rocks and potholes that threatened to destroy our vehicle. After three hours on this road at night we arrived at Rhumsiki. That evening I had doubts about my plans to discover the secret of the Kotoko Horsemen.

The next morning the contact we wanted to meet in Guilli came to the hotel. His name was Chowar and he was familiar with the *Putchu Guinadji*. He proudly told me that he had recently sold the four *Putchu Guinadji* to a man from Toulouse. He gave me the first piece of valuable information, which gave me hope that my efforts might still bring forth fruit. He named the six steps in making a *Putchu Guinadji*:

1. A marabout must diagnose the madness.
2. The marabout sends the patient to a caster with the medicine.

3. The caster makes the horse and rider.
4. Leaves are boiled and the horse is put in the boiling water with the medicine.
5. The blood of a chicken is offered over the horse.
6. When power lessens, another chicken is offered over the horse and rider.

This information was a great help and underscored what I had originally thought: that the casting of those pieces was a sacred act accompanied by certain rituals, and that a marabout had to perform this act, since the Kotoko are Muslim.

Our second contact came a few hours later, a young man called Kotakoji, who travelled all over the extreme north of Cameroon collecting pieces to sell. Kotakoji said that he knew a Kotoko marabout and a Kotoko caster, and that he could take me there. I accepted Kotakoji's offer, and we set off the next morning for Maroua.

After checking into a flea-ridden hotel, Kotakoji set off to find the old marabout in a village not too far from Maroua. Several hours later, he came back and said that the marabout agreed to my photographing and filming him. The marabout was an old Kotoko man called Bakoura. As we sat down in his treatment hut, the old man scrutinized me, since he didn't know what I wanted from him. He took out an old dirty sack and set about ten *Putchu Guinadji* (with and without leather covering) on the ground. He warned us not to touch them because the madness of the former owners could pass on to us. He said that he had to rub each *Putchu Guinadji* with the Gwouabi plant to render them harmless. After he was finished, I was

**The *Putchu Guinadji* are to be seen as the horse and rider
who fight the demons attacking a mad person.**



Putchu Guinadji (Kotoko Warrior / Horseman). Courtesy of Soul of Africa Museum.

allowed to inspect them. Some were covered with leather and tied to a leather band with many other attachments, and some didn't have any covers. Bakoura said that the ones covered with leather and displaying other attachments are for very serious cases. He added that the 'warriors' he had in the bag belonged to people who had died. The families had returned them to the marabout, who in turn activated them.

Bakoura sent for an 11-year-old boy who was seriously ill. The boy had a very complex *Putchu Guinadji* with many attachments around his neck. I was allowed to take photos of the boy. The marabout said that a used *Putchu Guinadji* could be reactivated after being cleaned with the Gwouadi plant. Bakoura then went on to show me how an uncovered horse is activated. After the horse is forged, the patient brings it back to the marabout, and the marabout boils the *Putchu Guinadji* in water containing the plants Gwouabi and Tidih Whoume. The patient must be present throughout this ritual.

Bakoura pointed out that if the *Putchu Guinadji* is encased in leather and has attachments, it is

meant for a very serious case. The two plants are placed under the leather in powder form. Other attached packets can be filled with Koran Suren, Gwouabi and Tidih Whoume, but also with other metal pieces or elements related to the particular kind of madness affecting the patient. A very good example of this is the *Putchu Guinadji* to which a small vial of water is attached. With regard to that particular case, I was told that a woman carrying water from the Logone river at night had gone mad. After the woman died, the family brought the talisman back to the marabout Bakoura. I was able to purchase this particular *Putchu Guinadji* and several others from the marabout after he had deactivated them.

The next day we set off for a Kotoko village not far from Bogo near the Logone river to find one of the last Kotoko casters who make *Putchu Guinaadji*. It was on a Thursday, which is market day in Bogo. The village was filled with Kotoko, Arabs, Hausa and numerous other ethnic groups from Cameroon and Chad. Bogo is very close to the Logone River and to the border of



Putchu Guinadji (Kotoko Warrior / Horseman). Courtesy of Soul of Africa Museum.

Chad. Kotakoji found the caster, and we were ushered into his very tiny workshop on the sandy soil of that village in the extreme north of Cameroon.

The casting of *Putchu Guinadji* is forbidden by Islam, and the practice is therefore dying out. There are only a few casters and marabouts² left who still offer this service to heal people from madness. Islamic fundamentalism and Christian missions have destroyed and continue to destroy many cultural treasures in Africa. Magana, the Kotoko caster, said that the horse and rider symbol originally came from the Peul warriors who fought and enslaved many of the animistic tribes in the north. The Kotoko themselves were not a horse society. They were farmers and fishermen living along the Logone and Chari rivers. According to Magana, the word *Putchu* means ‘horse’, and *Guinadji*

means ‘demon’ in the Kotoko language. The *Putchu Guinadji* are therefore to be seen as the horse and rider who fight the demons that attack the mad person. The horsemen are usually worn on a string or leather band under the arm and under clothing, to conceal them from other people. No one is allowed to touch a *Putchu Guinadji* that is worn and active, because the madness can be transferred by such means. The sick person wears the talisman all his life and, by being rubbed against the body, the *Putchu Guinadji* gets the very smooth patina. After the person dies, the piece may be sold or given back to the marabout who activated it. Some people are buried with their *Putchu Guinadji*.

Magana, the Kotoko caster, inherited his spiritual powers from his forefathers, who were all casters. He affirms that he and his brother are the only real Kotoko casters left. Others are

copying them, but they lack the spiritual power to cast horses that might really help against madness. Magana said that all mentally deranged Kotoko people are brought to him. He said that he cannot count the number of people that he has already treated. His speciality is to attach a crocodile to the *Putchu Guinadji* in order to increase the power of the talisman.

After a person is diagnosed by the marabout as mad, he or she must bring the Gwouabi and Tidih Whoume plants from the marabout to him. They must also bring a chicken, rice and 15,000 CFA (the equivalent of € 22.90). The casting of the *Putchu Guinadji* is a sacred act and takes 15 days to be accomplished. After the *Putchu Guinadji* is cast, the patient must bring the horse and rider back to the marabout, who then activates it and decides whether it must be covered, and eventually what attachments must be added to it. Magama said that “madness has different colors”, referring to the attachments to the pieces.

Before applying the medicine, the blood of a chicken must be offered to the *Putchu Guinadji*, and rice must be cooked. A group of children sit around the mad person and eat the rice. One year later, the patient must return with 100,000 CFA (€ 152.67) and a goat or a cow – depending on how strong the illness is. Every consecutive year, a chicken’s blood must be poured on the *Putchu Guinadji* to empower it.

Magana said to me: “Only God knows how long

I can still cast and cure”. It won’t be long before this old art of healing madness will disappear forever. I am sure that other bronze casters throughout Cameroon will make copies, since it is well known that these beautiful and powerful pieces sell well in Europe and America.

I asked Magana if people are afraid of him. He answered: “only those that are mad”. He added that people may copy him, “but it won’t work”. All the time, while I was interviewing Magana, he was moulding a *Putchu Guinadji* from bees’ wax, which he gave me when he had finished it. However, he said that he couldn’t cast it because this is something he does only for a mad person, since otherwise it is forbidden for him to cast.

We left his village in the late afternoon and went back to Maroua to visit the artisan market. I saw about 20 *Putchu Guinadji* for sale. There were copies and a few very good pieces that I could buy. Kotakoji, my guide, who knew everything and everyone, returned to his village in the Mandara mountains.

I had a great feeling of relief that I had been able to find out the secret, make photos and even a film of the Kotoko horsemen before this very old healing system disappears forever. For me, it is always essential to know the meaning and usage of the artifacts displayed at the *Soul of Africa Museum*. •

¹ Published in *Münchener ethnologischen Abhandlungen*, Bd.5, 1985,

² Originally used for scholars of the Qu’ran and religious teachers in the Islamic context, the term ‘marabout’ in Sub-Saharan Africa designated pre-Islamic priests and healers and was subsequently applied to non-Islamic spiritual guides and fortune tellers.



Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa

INTERVIEW

GESILEU PHASPY NINAWA: A MASTER OF THE AMAZONIAN MEDICINE OF *RAPÉ*

Last year, Amanda Viana spent some time in the state of Acre, North Brazil, to research the relationship of Brazilian descendants of indigenous peoples with Forest medicines. In Western culture there are two main approaches to such traditional medicines: either they are rejected by pharmacologically-based medicine as ‘non-scientific’, or they are considered a door to ‘artificial paradises’ by rebelliously disoriented people. This interview attempts to show that there is a third type of approach: respectful of and attentive to the voice of traditional knowledge, devoid of prejudices and aware of the potential of such ways of thinking and behaving – especially in the context of our planetary crisis.

Interview by **Amanda Viana**

Assistant FAD Research and Intellectual Dialogue

Translation from the Portuguese by Amanda Viana and Adrián Navigante.
Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa's portrait is by Robert Randma.



Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa with an Amazonian harpy eagle headdress.
Courtesy of Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa.

Introduction

Rapé (*dume deshke*, Huni Kuin people; *rume*, Yawanawa people; *rume poto*, Shanawa people)¹ is one of the best-known medicines among the indigenous tribes of Brazil, who have been using it since time immemorial. It is considered a sacred and powerful medicine because of its psychosomatic healing power. According to indigenous knowledge, *rapé* heals through the energies of Nature and at the same time opens the door to archaic powers of the forest that can become accessible to humans.

Rapé is a powdered mixture of tobacco, tree ash and - sometimes - special herbs. There are different types of *rapé*, which vary according to the tribe preparing them and the variety of the type of tobacco, ashes and herbs used. Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa is a Brazilian master of this

medicine who has learned its preparation and usage in different Amazonian traditions, such as the Huni Kuin and the Yawanawa. He also studied with the well-known *pajé*² Yawa from the Yawanawa tradition.

Gesileu Phaspy Ninawa (Brazilian name: Raimundo Gesileu de Lima) was born in Seringal Tupã, Xapuri's town (Acre, Brazil), at the winter solstice of the southern hemisphere in 1967. He is a son, friend, student, and partner of the Amazon rainforest. Because of his devotion to that natural setting, he responds to its beauty and its call, revealing the shapes of vines, tree-trunks and animal bones through his sculptures, promoting traditional indigenous healing and disseminating its knowledge in ceremonies, using the medicine *rapé*. Gesileu is a great *connoisseur* of this medicine. The present

interview was carried out on his ceremonial yard (*terreiro*) in December 2021.

A: Gesileu, what is your relationship with *rapé*? Are you a ‘master’, a *pajé* of this medicine?

G: The term ‘master’ or ‘shaman’ is a very strong designation. In fact, I don’t consider myself a ‘master’ of *rapé* because I still have a lot to learn from this medicine. I am a student of *rapé*, a scholar of this medicine that is so important and sacred to the indigenous peoples of the Acre Amazonian Rainforest. During our study, we learn that the terms ‘master’ or ‘shaman’ are titles that we do not give to ourselves. If you hear someone saying, “I am a master, I am a shaman”, it is a first warning to be suspicious. We don’t call ourselves in that way. Now, if it is another person, if it is you, who calls me ‘master’ or ‘shaman’ of *rapé*, with all humbleness, I will accept it, because it is you, someone else, who is defining me in such a way. But if you ask me whether I am a ‘master’ or ‘shaman’ of *rapé*, I’ll tell you, “No, I am not”.

A: Tell us a little about your ancestry and your relationship with indigenous peoples.

G: I am a *caboclo*, that is, my ancestry consists of a mixture of white and indigenous people. My ancestry line is composed on my mother’s side of original people of the Amazon with some mixture of white people, and on my father’s side of indigenous people stemming from the northeast of Brazil. My mother has indigenous Amazonian ancestors, but due to the mixing with white people that took place after the European invasion, I couldn’t precisely tell you which ethnic group she comes from. My father is a descendant of the northeastern Xukurus people, whose village is located near the municipality of Pesqueira, in Pernambuco. My paternal great-grandparents belonged to that ethnic group.

I was born in Acre, in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. Because my parents were rubber tappers, from a very early age I had a direct and

intense connection with the forest. I lived literally *immersed* in the forest, not knowing what a city, a municipality or even a village was. It was only when I was seven years old that my father took me to the city for the first time, and that was a very particular experience for me. The first town I visited was the town of Xapuri, which, despite being very small, impressed me a lot and made a lasting impression on me.

A: What was the first indigenous village you ever visited, and which are the villages you are still in touch with?

G: Since very early in my life, I have had close contacts with the indigenous communities here in Acre. Precisely because of that, I can say that I know almost all the ethnic groups in this state, of which about fourteen different indigenous peoples are officially recognized. I must say that I have a closer and very special relationship with the indigenous ethnic groups of the Panu linguistic branch, more specifically with the Huni Kuin (‘the genuine people’), the Shanenawa (‘the blue-bird people’) and the Yawanawa (‘the people of the wild boar’). It was with the Huni Kuin that I went through my *rapé* initiation. My first acquaintance with the medicine of *kampung* (also called *kambô*)³ took place with the Shanenawa people, whose village is close to the town of Feijó, that is, on the other side of the town. After some time, I had a long relationship with the Yawanawa people. With these people, I had also the opportunity of furthering my studies on the medicine *ayahuasca*⁴, which they call *uni*, and on the songs of the forest, which enables to communicate with the living beings there.

A: Did you discover the medicine of *rapé* with the Huni Kuin people? How was your first experience? Could you talk about your initiation into this medicine?

G: In fact, my first contact with *rapé* was in the town. The first *rapé* I took was from the Apurinã Indians, who call this medicine *awiri*. After

that experience, I began to study *rapé* as a medicine, and subsequently I had the opportunity of receiving initiation into this substance with the Huni Kuin people of the village of Caucho, where I have brotherly ties. It was also in this village that I received my Huni Kuin indigenous name: my *txais* (relatives) decided to give me a traditional name in honor of my person and my genuine interest in forest medicines. After several rituals, they finally gave me the name *Ninawa*: *ni* means ‘forest’, and *nawa* ‘people’. The literal translation of this name would be ‘People of the Forest’, but when it is applied to a single individual, it becomes ‘Person of the Forest’. Other meanings could also be attributed to this term, such as: ‘Being of the Forest’, ‘Father of the Woodland’, or ‘Lord of the Forest’. The Huni Kuin gave me that name, took me to the forest and sang a kind of baptismal song for me, which they call *pakari*. From that day on, I was called ‘Ninawa Huni Kuin’. This was my first significant step in dealing with the medicines of the forest, guided by these people, who welcomed me in a very kind and affectionate way. I owe a lot to the Huni Kuin people for that profound initiation into the medicine of *rapé*.

My studies with the *pajés* did not take place through diets⁵ in indigenous villages. They taught me in a more personal way and in a relationship of friendship: “You are my friend, I will teach you!”. I received great teachings from *pajé* Yawarani, also known as *pajé* Yawa of the Yawanawa people. He was a very wise master with extraordinary knowledge of the Amazonian rainforest. His own life is an example for

anyone who wants to study the different medicines of the Amazonian Forest. *Pajé* Yawa was a very responsible person with a kind heart, who kept his ‘inner child’ alive. I consider him my main teacher, the most significant person on my path towards the forest medicines. He taught me a lot not only about these medicines and how to live with them, but also about my personal life and the way in which I should behave when I am confronted with the power of the forest medicines.

A: Could you say something about the meaning of the term *rapé*? What is the history of this medicine? What do the *pajés* say about its origin?

G: In fact, the term *rapé* is a Portuguese word that we use with non-indigenous people, so that they may understand what we are talking about. In indigenous traditions, however, this medicine has other different names. It can be called *nawô*, one of the expressions most used by indigenous people, which is a synonym of ‘tobacco’. Other names are – among many others – ‘*rumâ*’ and ‘*dume*’.

It is said that the Amazonian peoples have used *rapé* since time immemorial, whereas the contact of the white man with this substance is very recent. The point is that *rapé* is one of the most important medicines for indigenous traditions, but not for the white man. The white man also acquired the habit of using snuff tobacco and even manufacturing it, but the indigenous snuff tobacco is totally different from the one used and produced by the white man. In fact, the only thing in common between these two *rapés*

***Rapé* is one of the most important medicines in indigenous traditions. The white man has acquired the habit of using snuff tobacco and even manufacturing it, but the indigenous snuff tobacco is totally different from that used and produced by the white man.**

is that they contain tobacco, nothing else. The truth is that shamans provided the white man with ancestral knowledge, that is, a medicine that they had been using for thousands of years. I am not able to tell you how *rapé* began from a historical point of view, but I can tell a story of the Yawanawa people about the emergence of the principal forest medicines, a story in which *rapé* is also included.

The Yawanawa say that, at the beginning of time, the forest had a very powerful king called Ruwá. This king, who was at the same time a ‘cacique’ (chief) and a shaman, belonged to the Yawanawa. This was a time of *encantados* (enchanted creatures), in which humans had a direct and clear contact with spiritual beings. It was not new for someone to meet a *yuxin* (spirit of the forest) and converse with it.

The story goes that this great king was also a skilled hunter and liked to organize great hunting events. One of his most special hunting events, which he organized in the middle of the forest, involved the whole tribe: the Yawanawa stood near the edge of a lake and enclosed the place by beating trees, branches and bushes and making all kinds of noise to scare the animals away. Their purpose was that the animals should move to the edge of that lake – the only clearing in the middle of that dense forest. Ruwá and his wife strategically placed themselves at the edge of the lake in order to kill the animals as they appeared out of the forest. In one of these hunting scenes, a special kind of bird appeared, which in this region is called *nambú*. Seeing him, Ruwá immediately shot him and said to the woman: “Fetch the bird and bring it to me”. The woman took the dead bird and brought it to the king’s side. At that very moment, the water of the lake began to boil, giving off many different aromas and smells, and Ruwá fainted and fell on the ground.

It is important to know that at that time the Yawanawa people did not know death. No hu-

man died at that time, and no Yawanawa had ever died. They were born, but they lived forever. When Ruwá fell on the ground, his woman saw it and tried in many ways to bring him back – without success. In utter despair, she began to scream. The Yawanana who were hunting stopped and came to see what was happening. When they arrived, they asked what had happened and she said, “I don’t know. Your ‘cacique’ has fainted and lies there on the floor. It looks like he’s sleeping, but he doesn’t wake up.” Other people also tried to reanimate him, but to no avail. Then they said, “Let’s take him home.” And so, they did. They placed him in his hammock, where he remained with no reaction at all. Everyone was very sad and worried, because they didn’t know what was happening. He remained in that state for a long time and the people went back to their homes. Only his wife stayed with him. And at some point, he woke up. He got up and asked, “Woman, what happened?” She said, “I don’t know. You fell asleep and could not wake up. We called you and you didn’t react. We were very worried because you didn’t wake up”. He asked, “Where is the *nambú* I killed?” She said, “It is there”. He asked, “Have you prepared it?” She said, “No, because I was very worried about you.” The ‘cacique’ said, “Prepare the *nambú*, I am very hungry.” As soon as he finished his sentence, he fell once again on the floor. His wife tried to reanimate him several times and he didn’t wake up. She spent hours trying to bring him back, but it was impossible. Then, she called the whole tribe, because she didn’t know what to do any more. Finally, an old and wise Yawanawa shaman instructed the people to bury Ruwá in the center of the *shurú* or *maloca*, the longest house of the tribe. They did as they were told: they dug a hole in the center of the *maloca* and moved to another village (at that time, there were several villages and they moved frequently from one to another).

After some time, they returned to the village



Solimões River, Amazon Rainforest. Source: Lucia Barreiros. *Catedral Verde*

where Ruwá had been buried. When they arrived, they found their *maloca* covered with leaves and a different vine that they didn't know. The vine was the *jagube*⁶ of *ayahuasca*. They went to the place where Ruwá was buried and saw that this place was covered with plants. Then they decided to dig up Ruwá, and discovered that from the center of his heart region, a *jagube*'s root had grown, which surrounded the entire *maloca*. On the right side of his heart, a tobacco plant had grown, which gave rise to *rapé*. On the left side of his heart, a chili pepper plant had grown, which is also a very strong plant in indigenous diets. In the lower part of his heart, a *chupa* root had been born, which is a medicine widely used by the Yawanawa prior to their contact with white people.

Ruwá appeared to the old and wise *pajé* of the village in a dream and taught him how to prepare these medicines that emerged from his body, thus: "This tobacco here, you must take the leaves, dry them, crush them and mix them

with the ashes of a tree (...)". In this way, the medicine of *rapé* arose, that is, from its main component *nawô* (tobacco) and its combination with extracts from the tree-trunk. Ruwá also taught the *pajé* how to prepare the medicines of *uni*, chili pepper and *chupa* and work with them. The story is very long and full of details that I will spare you at this point.

From the day in which Ruwá experienced death, the Yawanawa people began not only to die in the village, but also to travel – while 'alive' – to the world of 'the dead' with the help of *uni* (*ayahuasca*). By drinking this medicine, the people of the village were able to find Ruwá on the other side, who told them that whenever they wanted to talk to him, they could take the medicine and find him, spend some time with him learning, and come back to the world of the living.

It is important to know that this story about the origin of the forest's medicines, which also includes the origin of *rapé*, belongs to the Yawa-

nawa tradition. Each indigenous people has its own story about the origin of these medicines, and the stories have different aspects and variations.

A: We can say that the medicine of *rapé* consists of a mixture of tobacco and tree ash, to which one or more herbs can be added, is that right?

G: Yes, but in addition to them, traditional prayers are a very important component, as important as the material elements.

A: It is known that the medicine of *rapé* has a physiological, psychological and spiritual healing effect. In addition to it, *rapé* is said to open the door to archaic powers of the forest that can become accessible to humans. And it connected humans with the beings of the forest and the world of the dead. I would like to know what *rapé* is for you personally, Gesileu.

G: *Rapé* is the main medicine that I have been studying. In my opinion, *rapé* is not only a medicine for curing different types of illness, but also a bridge that connects the material world with the spiritual one through mental power. The power of thought is a fundamental condition of *rapé*, and this power can expand our consciousness and amplifies our thought. It is also for this reason that *rapé* presupposes prayer. The power of thought linked to prayers leads to the realization of a given intention. It is in this way, through the realization of intentions, that this medicine works on the so-called material and spiritual planes.

Something important that I would like to add is that we never use the term 'to sniff *rapé*'. The correct term according to the indigenous tradition is 'to take' (*tomar*) or 'to pass' (*passar*) the medicine of *rapé*. When you undergo treatment with *rapé*, you are said to 'take *rapé*'.

When you give *rapé* to someone else, you 'pass the *rapé* to the other'. When something is not right in your life and you want to regain your focus, you 'take *rapé*'.

A: It is known that shamans use *rapé* for healing purposes. Can they also use *rapé* to harm someone? Can a poisonous mixture be included in preparing *rapé*?

G: Several indigenous traditions say that *rapé*, which for the Yawanawa was born on the right side of the heart of the Ruwá, is a powerful medicine that works for good purposes. *Rapé* came into the world to heal and to do good things. However, as with every medicine, we know that the question of good and evil will rather depend on the person who prepares the *rapé*. Surely, *rapé* can also be used to harm someone. This is an option for the shaman or the person who handles this medicine. Judging from my experience and my study, I also believe that a person who prepares *rapé* without knowing how to do it correctly will do harm rather than good.

A: If a person wants to work with *rapé*, how can he/she be respected (by both indigenous and white people) in dealing with that medicine?

G: The main thing is, you have to be fair. To be fair not only with yourself but also with the people around you, with the medicine you are working with, with Mother Nature, with the animals, plants, and every being surrounding you. The moment you are fair with these forces, you have great chances of achieving a higher degree in your interaction with the force of this medicine. It's no use showing that you are fair merely as a pretense, because some people will perhaps believe you, but the medi-

The power of thought is a fundamental condition for the use of *Rapé*.

cine knows that deep inside you are not, and it begins to look at you differently. It will tell you, “You are a liar, so we won’t help you anymore”.

Sometimes, we find people who have thoroughly studied our medicines, but they don’t speak or act in a fair way. Hence, despite their considerable knowledge about the culture and the medicines of the forest (even in their application), such people will lose strength and power if they operate with the medicine. For a *pajé*, it is evident that the ones who give strength and power are the ‘enchanted beings’, the ‘people on the other side’. If they don’t give you the strength to transform a state, a situation, or a person, you won’t be able to do it just by yourself. In this sense, there is no point in saying to the person you have treated: “I have cured you”. This is not fair, since it is the medicines that heal, whereas the human being is only a channel of their power. The expression “I have cured you” comes from the ego of the person: it is an expression of vanity. We must be very careful with such medicines not to be arrogant, not to be seduced by the vanities of the ego. We should rather listen to what the medicines say and how they guide us.

A: Could you tell me what kinds of disease you have cured with the help of this medicine and whether you can identify a disease under the power of *rapé*? Are there differences between diseases of the body and diseases of the spirit?

G: From a shamanic point of view, illnesses first appear in the spiritual world and then manifest themselves in the material world. In my studies I have seen and treated people with different kinds of problems: alcoholism, drug addiction (cocaine and other heavy drugs), also people suffering from sinusitis, allergic flu, nose-bleeding, breathing problems and many other things. I have also dealt with people bearing so-called mental and spiritual problems: complexes, traumas, and other sort of crises. Sometimes forest medicines can make people

aware of negative past events and give them another meaning, so that oppressive or traumatic memories are released and overcome. In addition to that, I often say that medicines are spiritual accelerators. A stage it would take you a lifetime to reach can arrive very quickly with the help of these medicines, also by studying them⁷. If medicines are used correctly and with proper responsibility, you will obtain the cure you are seeking. Often, despite the intention of a person, the forest medicines know exactly what the real needs of the person are – it is a question of general balance. So, it is very common for us to focus on a thought when taking *rapé* and when you feel the strength of the medicine, it tells you: “It is not this intention, but this other one”. To sum up: There are different elements in a cure: the intelligence of the medicine, prayer, mental power, thought, conviction ... When all this is properly combined, you can heal your life or the life of someone close to you.

We help in the healing of many people, but I cannot speak explicitly about cases cured by me, because, as I said in relation to the title ‘*pajé* (shaman)’, it is the people who must tell me whether they are healed or not, not me. Some of them tell me: “You helped me on this particular issue”, and I am glad to hear that. But I insist: I am not the one who heals these people, but the medicines that are summoned for help.

In my opinion, the medicine of *rapé* should work together with the medicines of *kambô* and *ayahuasca*, because these three medicines constitute a unit – this is something that few people understand. Some people say, “Ah, I have already drunk *ayahuasca*, I’m fine now”. Others say, “Ah, I have been taking *rapé*, I feel well now”. Or even, “I have already taken *kambô*, I’m fine now”. People need to be aware that these three medicines are complementary to each other, and that each one of them must be used at the right time. Nothing is arbitrary in

the question of shamanic healing.

I also emphasize that the healing of a person will depend on the medicine, the prayer and on the merit of each of the persons involved in the process. Certain problems can be easily cured, others not. Some problems cannot be cured at all and become something that the person will have to live with and learn from, also for other situations. Ultimately, the reasons for such cases lie in the spiritual world, and there is little we can 'explain' with our own logic.

A: When you produce *rapé*, that is, when you harvest the tobacco plant, collect a piece of bark from a certain tree and/or gather specific herbs, do you establish some kind of negotiation with the beings you are dealing with?

G: Yes, of course. First you need to ask permission from these beings to do whatever you want or have to do. An opening prayer is uttered, and in that prayer you have to declare your intention of using a certain plant. For example, you can say to the plant you need, "I need you and I want you to help me. I will remove your bark and parts of your branches to crush them into ashes, which I will use to make my *rapé*, and this *rapé* will help people who need to be healed". You can't just place your hand on the tobacco leaves and rip them out.

When you are producing the medicine, you must pray to it throughout the preparation. It is necessary to invoke the beings of the forest and the energy of healing with the different qualities required for the case: love, peace, happiness, health, abundance, etc. So, you summon these energies and put them inside the *rapé*. Apart from this, it is essential that you feel well at this moment. If you are sick or if you are angry with someone, it means that you are not fit to prepare *rapé*. If your soul is full of anguish or your heart is full of sorrow, you are not fit to produce *rapé*. If you are a person who gets easily irritated, who carries a lot of anger inside and may have a fit of rage for no reason,

you are not fit to prepare *rapé*. Just as when you are on a diet with a plant, you must work on special introspection before embarking on the preparation of *rapé*. You must forgive those you are angry with and you must ask forgiveness from those you have offended. You must pray and cast all negative feelings out of you. Only when you feel that your heart has been cleansed of these negative energies can you start preparing *rapé*. If you prepare *rapé* with negative feelings, you will pass those feelings on to the medicine and, consequently, on to the people you treat. They will be contaminated with these feelings; they will receive your negative feelings and experience them in the same way as you have experienced them. Instead of helping these people, you will harm them.

This issue is very important and often overlooked because of financial interests. We often see people making *rapé* and working with the medicine because they need money, but they don't have the slightest concern about healing others in need. If your work with *rapé* revolves around money, you are dealing with the wrong energy, because money is just a consequence. This is the opinion of some shamans I learned from, serious shamans, really focused on healing and not on their wallets. This is the way I behave in my study of *rapé*, with full awareness of where the focus should be laid, and this is also why it is not good to use *rapé* from a person you don't know. Before using any kind of *rapé* from anyone, you should ask, "Who made this *rapé* and under which circumstances was this *rapé* prepared?"

Something I always advise is the following: If you are going to use *rapé* stemming from people you don't know, try to get in touch with them, to find out about their personal life, for example if they behave correctly towards their family and friends, if they are able to care for other people. If they have those qualities, they don't even need much technical knowledge to prepare good *rapé*. The *rapé* will be impregnated

ed by their good qualities, because the main ingredient of this medicine is love. If you have this main ingredient within your heart, you are fit to prepare and use this medicine. If you don't have it, it's something quite different, and you should be careful of the things I have mentioned.

Today we are facing an absurd marketing expansion of forest medicines, and the thing is becoming bigger and bigger. Of course, everything I have said about *rapé* also applies to *ayahuasca* and *kambô*. Many people work with these medicines to make money. They take advantage of them without really helping people. They just want to feed their greed, get more money and material goods, and the rest does not matter at all.

A: Could you speak about *rapé* diets? Are there several kinds with different durations? For example, I know that you usually do a one-week diet with certain people.

The one-week *rapé* diet has been developed through my own experience with and research on this medicine. There are different kinds of *rapé* diet in the indigenous tradition. Certain tribes, for example, prepare a pot of boiled tobacco broth and you have to drink it on the first day of your diet, which makes you vomit a lot. Only after that first step can you follow the diet with *rapé*, but certain types of food will be forbidden, because they are not compatible with your plant diet.

A: Is the prohibition of certain types of food restricted to the period of the diet?

G: No, it is a restriction for the rest of your life. For example, if you have made a diet with *rapé*, you can never eat armadillo meat again, because in the Amerindian world-conception the armadillo is the owner of tobacco.

A: Can we say that *rapé* is a living entity? Can you talk to it? Does it teach you the way a master teaches his pupil?

G: *Rapé* contains several living entities. In fact, it would be correct to talk about the 'tobacco entities', instead of the '*rapé* entities'. Snuff, the pipe, cigars belong to the tobacco family. All this involves a very large spiritual field of 'enchanted' beings. And each of these beings has an affinity with a certain identity of each person who works with these medicines in a ritualistic way. It's a matter of energy, some 'enchanted' ones identify themselves with you and are open to work with you and others don't.

A: You talked about the 'enchanted beings'. Who are they? Are they 'non-human' beings from the forest? Do you have a relationship with them? Can you communicate with them? Do they help you in healing work with the medicine of *rapé*?

G: Strictly speaking, the 'enchanted beings' are not 'helpers'; they don't 'help' me, since they are the ones who really carry out the healing work. Without them, you can't do anything. With them, you can do wonderful things. If the 'enchanted beings' don't work with you, you can't do anything with *rapé*. For most indigenous peoples of the Amazonian rainforest in Acre, the 'enchanted beings' – in concrete and spiritual terms – are the most powerful beings of the forest, which are also called *yuxibus* (spiritual *pajés*) because they can do significant and decisive work of the type we know from shamans. The three most powerful and important 'enchanted beings' of the forest are the 'enchanted boa', the 'enchanted harpy eagle', and the 'enchanted jaguar'.

Usually, people who take part in ceremonies in which forest medicines are used tell me that afterwards they have dreams about boa constrictors, jaguars and harpy eagles. In Europe, for example, where I worked several times, people told me about visions and dreams with these animals, even without having seen them before or knowing that such animals are linked to forest medicines. I heard comments of this



The medicine *Rapé* and the applicator for two persons, called *tepi*.

type: “I saw a big snake at work, a snake that I had never seen before!” It was clear to me that the ‘enchanted boa constrictor’ had manifested itself through the power of the medicine.

A: Can a white man really enter the world of *rapé* and gain deep knowledge of it? Is the person who shares the teachings of the ‘enchanted’ ones responsible if he/she transmits this knowledge to the wrong person?

G: One thing I can say for sure is that, within the spiritual world, there is no skin color. Within the spiritual world, there is no spirit of indigenous people on the one hand and spirit of the white man on the other hand. There is ‘the’ spirit, and this spirit can become incarnate both in the indigenous man and in the white man. What happens is that indigenous people live in the forest and, because of their habits and way of life (so close and even intertwined with the

natural environment), they acquire knowledge of it. The forest is part of their culture, and it also produces culture – without the intervention of humans. However different this is from the modern culture of the white man, none of it prevents the latter from penetrating the world of forest knowledge. In fact, we sometimes see white people whose spirit is nevertheless profoundly indigenous. In the same way, you will find indigenous people living in the forest who neither study nor use ancestral medicines such as *rapé* and *ayahuasca*, and who are fond of modern city gadgets such as televisions, cars, computers, and telephones. It is also common that some indigenous people hide or deny their origins, but you can also find white people who affirm “I am an indigenous person”.

Pajé Yawa used to tell me that there are some people who, from birth, have a strong connec-

tion with the powers of the forest, and that they know instinctively what to do with forest medicines. Such people can do what they want with their prayers and the force of the medicines. Even if they refuse to use them, they are always ready to deal with them. They will be the most powerful people, whether or not they practice the forest healing art. There are of course many people without these inborn qualities, but who can develop them by working with diets and studying the forest. For sure, if they take their study seriously, they will be able to do wonderful things for others. But according to *pajé* Yawa, even with study and experience, they will never be as powerful as the person with an inborn talent. *Pajé* Yawa also told me that quite some time ago, when they were looking for a future *pajé* for the village, they observed their children. Of those fifty or one hundred boys who were in the village, one was not like the others: he did not like to run around, play or do pranks with the other boys. He had a different character, he was very quiet and obedient, he used to watch the forest for hours and didn't talk a lot. When the shamans found him, they took him immediately to themselves: "This boy already has a strong connection with the forest and is going to study with us", they said. They taught him, from an early age, to become a very strong shaman.

But that story belongs to the past... Today, some indigenous peoples offer numerous diets merely to gain status, and they no longer look for someone with special qualities to become a great *pajé*. Today, some people go on a short diet and soon afterwards they call themselves *shamans*. From then on, they prepare medi-

nes and offer rituals that would actually take years and years of learning. We see this kind of behavior especially in ethnic groups that have assiduous contacts with white people. A lot of people want to become a shaman because of the status that this title gives. In the past, it was not like that. It was very different.

A: Could we say that the medicine of *rapé* is a kind of intermediary between human beings and the forest?

G: The term I like to use is 'bridge': *rapé* is a bridge.

A: In this sense, would you say that *rapé* contributes to the protection of the forest?

G: I believe that not only *rapé* but all forest medicines contribute to its protection. These medicines are directly associated with the forest, they come from it and belong to it. Thus, it is logical that they contribute – directly or indirectly – to the preservation and protection of the forest: if there is no forest, there is no medicine!

A: This means that the study and use of *rapé* bring in a certain way greater ecological awareness and, consequently, a potential reduction of environmental problems?

G: Without a doubt *rapé*, as a forest medicine, makes people more sensitive to the environment and enables them to feel that they are an integral part of Nature. I believe that *rapé* can contribute not only to the protection of the Amazonian Forest but of any natural setting, because it brings awareness and a concrete sense of rootedness. Who wouldn't want to protect one's own home? My home is the forest,

***Rapé*, as a forest medicine, makes people more sensitive to the environment and enables them to feel they are an integral part of Nature.**

and I want to take care of the forest. The more people know and interact with this medicine, the more they will feel a sense of respect for the natural setting it stems from and the more they will try to convince others of its value.

A: How does the healing process for a white take place using the medicine of *rapé*? I ask this because a white man has another worldview and is very often full of preconceptions about other cultures. Moreover, persons who live in completely urbanized places without contact with the natural environment cannot possibly develop an awareness of the ‘enchanted ones’, as well as of the typical medicinal plants of the place you know so well...

G: As I said before, the medicine itself already brings the energy of its setting, and with it a sense of rootedness and an interaction with other (subtler) dimensions of being. This is already part of a healing process. If the forest medicine brings all that, it will benefit that person no matter what the latter’s background is. Natural medicines know no barriers, since we *are* part of Nature – whatever the distance from it and whatever our lifestyle.

This idea becomes easier for us when we accept the view that everything consists of energy. This view can help us wherever we want to go and whatever we want to do. Energy is fluid, and once we really connect with it (at its different levels), all barriers become relative. In addition to that, it is evident that nothing dies, but everything transforms itself. Birth and death, creation and destruction are closely related. The moment you create something, you destroy something else, and this enables creation. At the same time, the moment you destroy anything, something else is already being created. When you observe creation and destruction in practice, it becomes clear that this opposition does not exist.

A: Do you agree, however, that we are living in a time of destruction driven by human ac-

tion and exercised upon the body of “Mother Earth”? Would you say that we live in a period characterized by the dominance of human spaces, with pollution at all levels, deforestation and destruction of various types of biomes, the extinction of different species – to sum up: by an economy of death? How can we re-establish creation when the fundamental conditions for it are being destroyed?

G: Well, we must think in terms of balance. The energies of creation and destruction must be in balance. In the period in which we live, this balance is totally tilted towards destruction, hence all these consequences. But at some point, the forces will balance out once again. Unfortunately, most people don’t learn through love, but through pain. It is obvious that the world is moving towards a lesson of pain. Although there are many people trying to counterbalance the relation between creation and destruction, most people, because of their greed and ignorance, are not interested in the other option, in learning through love and care.

A: Humankind is actually *enfiaando o pé na jaca* (‘sticking its foot in the jackfruit’), that is, going beyond the limit. As Ailton Krenak says, we are working on our own extinction, while ‘Mother Earth’ will seek her own ways to regenerate herself from the damage that our species has caused.

G: It is true, human beings, despite being part of this planet, are destroying everything. But they are very feeble, and if they continue behaving in this way, they will end up sealing their own extinction on this planet. Nature itself, at some point, will balance things out again, because its self-regenerative capacity is an essential part of it. We can say that Nature has already given alarming signs, as if saying, “No, that’s not right. Dear humans, do you want pain? I will inflict pain on you if you insist on that”. Accordingly, Mother Nature has been teaching us through pandemics, floods, and other so-called

catastrophes, all those negative things that are now happening to us.

A: I think we could almost speak of a specific role or function of forest medicines in the present context. Maybe that's why they are now spreading all over the world. In this regard, I wish to ask why you have been traveling abroad. Are you working with forest medicines in other countries? If so, why? What is your experience so far?

G: A forest medicine student must become a facilitator, that is, it is his duty to disseminate knowledge about the forest and help people by that process. If you travel, you can reach more people. Obviously, I can't speak for other indigenous people who travel, I can only speak for myself. In addition to transmitting forest knowledge, my interest in travel is to help people in need. But I know a lot of people working with forest medicines who travel for money. I myself don't travel for money. Money is welcome and is very well spent (on local projects I am developing in Brazil) and I am very grateful for it, but it is not the main reason why I travel to other countries or even to other states in Brazil. Rather, it is friends and suffering people in general who are the main reason for my travels. My focus is on people.

I could prepare *rapé* quite comfortably at home and sell it abroad, since my *rapé* is already well known even outside of Brazil. I could work at ease with my family without making much effort. But at some point, travel calls, because people ask for help. Then, I remember all my friends who live in other places, and if I know that they need me, I feel a strong call to respond to that demand. I also know that many people need forest medicines but haven't the means or the knowledge to get to the right setting. Because of that, I go to them. My purpose in traveling is to help as many people as possible. We can help *some* people, not all people. But the desire to be useful and to contribute in some way to

the benefit of others is like reestablishing a balance. Of course, it is not easy at all...

A: I realize that it must be very difficult to perform healing work with forest medicines outside your native place, not only because of all the physical and mental exhaustion that this kind of work can cause, but also owing to legal issues abroad, for example in countries where some forest medicines are considered 'drugs'. Sometimes money is no retribution for that kind of healing work.

G: Of course, when you make a trip like that, you come back exhausted. Usually, before arriving in Rio Branco, I stop in Brasília, where I stay for three or four days – especially because of the waterfalls in the vicinity of that city: they cleanse me and give me steadiness; they strengthen me. If I don't do it, I am totally worn out.

A: Do you have any message for those who work with the medicine of *rapé*?

G: Yes, I would tell them: "Use this medicine with full responsibility. *Rapé* is a medicine, but if you use it too much, it can become a poison!" Today, we see many people lost to the power of *rapé*, using it compulsively, like drug addicts, taking it as easily as a compulsive smoker lights a cigarette... These people are doing everything completely wrong. If you use *rapé* responsibly, for example when you really need to work with it, you are on the right path. If you use it anyhow, if you mechanize your use and it becomes a habit like drinking coffee, lighting a cigarette, or watching television, you are doing it wrong. You need to have responsibility and respect for forest medicines.

A friend of mine asked me once, "*Txai*, how many times do you think I should use *rapé* per day?" I replied, "I don't think anything! What's this story? Why are you asking me to prescribe the frequency of your daily use of *rapé*?! You are the one who knows or should know what you need. This is the starting point". I continued with the following question, "How often do you

take pharmaceutical medicines?” He replied, “I take it when I am sick”. I asked, “What is *rapé* for you?” He said, “It is a medicine”. I added, “If it’s a medicine, then why are you going to take it every day? You should take it when you really need that medicine”. Do you understand what I mean?

Now, let’s imagine that I intend to study this medicine profoundly for a week or two. During that period, I would use a lot of *rapé*, but I would take it with a very clear objective,

a purpose related to something that I really need. When that period is over, I would stop taking that medicine for a while, at least until new purposes arise. *Rapé* should not be used just for the sake of it...

And one last last remark: Our talk, however instructive it may be for others, can only be a minor basis for awareness. We humans can scratch the surface of the mystery. The deep knowledge ultimately belongs to the forest medicines. It is they who are the real masters. •

¹ These other designations of the word *rapé* (*dume deshke*, *rume*, *rume poto*) belong to the Amazonian linguistic trunk Panu. Huni Kuin (‘the genuine people’), Shanenawa (‘the blue-bird people’) and Yawanawa (‘the people of the wild boar’) are indigenous peoples of the Amazonian Rainforest in Acre (Brazil).

² The term *pajé* is the Tupi-Guarani (sub-family of the linguistic trunk Tupi in Brazil) equivalent of shaman. During the interview, the word ‘shaman’ also appears and is used interchangeably with *pajé*.

³ *Kambô* or *kampô* (a word belonging to the Amazonian Panu linguistic trunk) is a species of frog (*phyllomedusa bicolor*), whose skin secretions are used in Amazonian folk medicine as a vaccine to protect the organism and to strengthen the immune system as well as to cure illnesses and injuries.

⁴ *Ayahuasca* is a sacred medicine in Amerindian traditions, a brew made from the stem and bark of the tropical liana (*banisteriopsis caapi*) and the shrubby flowering plant of the coffee family Rubiaceae (*psychotria viridis*), also called *chacrana*.

⁵ In Amerindian traditions, a person may become familiar with the qualities and also with the personality of plants through so-called ‘diets’, that is, a period in which his/her organism is exclusively devoted to the plant. Such diets have not only significant effects on a physiological but also on a psychological and even anthropological level, in the sense that communication with the plant adopts an animistic register (communication with the soul of the plant, spiritual use of the plant for certain purposes, etc.).

⁶ *Jagube* is another name of the liana that is combined with leaves of *chacrana*, to make *ayahuasca*.

⁷ By “studies”, Gesileu does not mean merely a theoretical study of such medicines, as some ethnologists or ethnobotanists may do, but a study following the shamanic method, in which you become familiar with the plants by taking them and establishing a dialogue with them. This study differs considerably from the individualist experimentation with psychotropic substances typical of the new-age context.



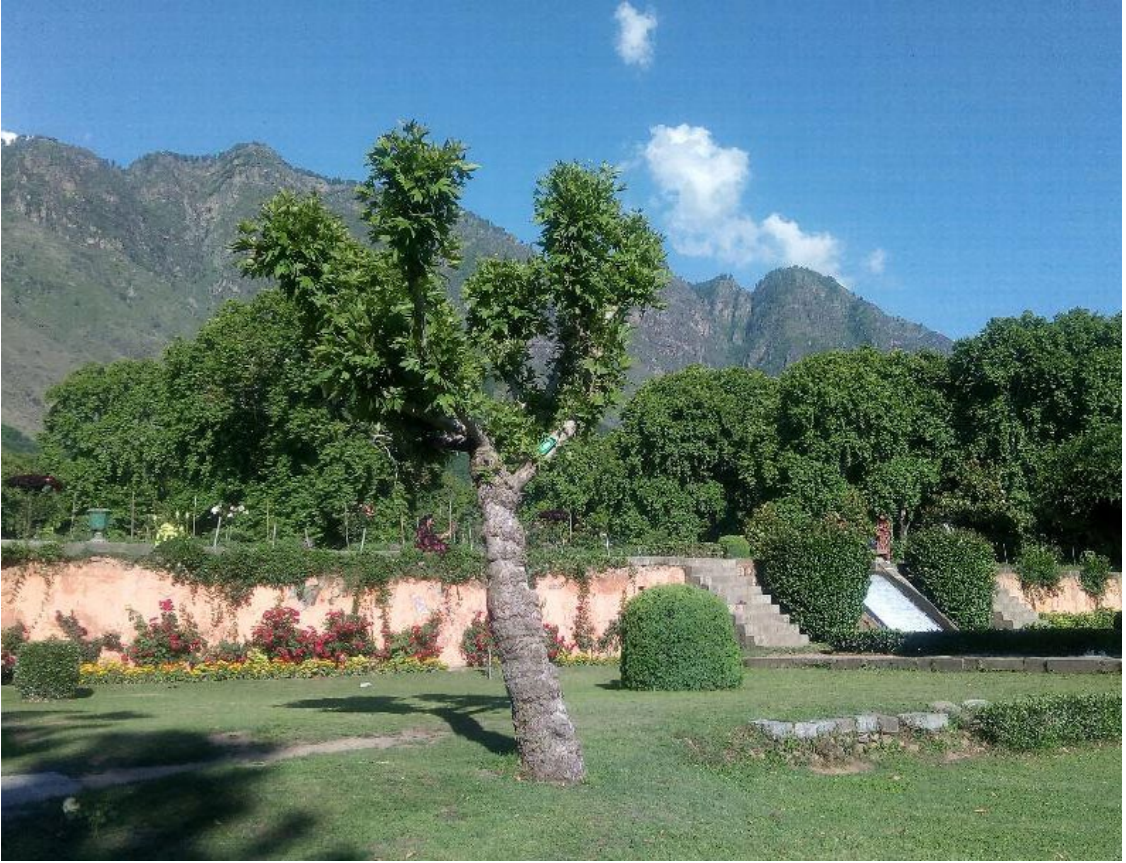
Gioia Lussana

Indologist, Yoga Teacher and ex FAD Grantee

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE AND THE PATH OF JOY

In this essay, Gioia Lussana explores the question of 'spiritual exercise', comparing two different historical contexts: inner practice in ancient Greek philosophy, and the yoga of the non-dual Tantric Śaivism of Mediaeval Kaśmīr, the ripest fruit of spiritual exercise in the Hindu framework. She lays special emphasis on the common thread of 'joy', a pivotal experience that permeates those spiritual practices from beginning to end.

Translation from the Italian by Kenneth Hurry.
All photos are taken by the author.



Nishat Garden, the 'Garden of Joy', where Abhinavagupta used to teach.

When everything began. The Greek world

Throughout the whole ancient world of our Western tradition, spiritual exercise, i.e. inner practice, was conceived as a 'preparation' – *meléte* in Greek – for understanding the meaning of reality, with the aim of preserving it within us so that we can implement it in our daily lives. Rather than *knowing*, the individual at first trains him/herself to *recall*, moment by moment, the memory of being alive, honouring the fact of existence with its sensory and mental evidence by practical application: inner training.

'Remembering' means 'recalling something from the heart', deemed to be the seat of mem-

ory. Our basic reality is conceived as something buried in our heart, which has to be awakened and allowed to emerge. In the Greece of the Stoics, *mneme* (memory) and *meléte* (preparatory exercise) are basic elements of the inner process. The Greek term *meléte* can also be translated as 'meditation', albeit only its essential function and not something theoretical¹, but embodied, as Epictetus explains²: meditation as training for life, becoming an expression of life itself. Inner exercise, thus fundamentally of a contemplative nature, was proposed as a kind of incessant recalling, a prophylaxis for learning to live, to celebrate existence just like celebrating an art, like enjoying a precious asset.

In the West, the roots of spiritual exercise derive from the birth of Greek philosophy. Rather than a mental abstraction aimed at equally abstract knowledge, Western philosophy arose from the need to incarnate the stupefying reality of being alive, through awareness and exploration of this miracle. Spiritual exercise represents the ‘method’ (*méthodos* in ancient Greek, which means ‘the way’) of savouring this condition, in the context of an original conception of philosophy itself as the school of life³. Literally, ‘philosophy’ is ‘taking care of knowledge’⁴. Spiritual exercise means implementing what is revealed to one’s conscience as clear, manifest, evident, luminous, *saphés*. It is significant that the Greek adjective *saphés* means first and foremost ‘of a penetrating taste’. The term thus has a sensory connotation, i.e. expressing a perceptive indication of taste that is then mediated intellectually. Thus, ‘to know’ substantially means ‘to taste’. From *saphés* derives *sophós*, the knowledgeable one, he who has ‘a good nose’, or ‘delicate taste’ and thus manages to understand reality. Knowledge (*sophía*) effectively brings to light (*pháos*) the truth through concrete application, giving bodily expression to the heart’s inner impulses. Exercise was an actual conversion (*epistrophé*) to the concreteness of experience, converting the thought of life into life itself. This transforming path necessarily involved educating the heart, i.e. a distillation of one’s own sensory and emotional world, sifting it through the sieve of investigative awareness to find what we may call true joy, the authenticity of a pacified mind in a body lacking nothing. This path to happiness, which initially requires an intellectual sort of training of the mind and heart, can be compared to what, in the yoga of Kaśmīr, is called *śākta-upāya*, the most widespread form of yoga, to which we shall return below. This implies using a *vikalpa*, a mental construct to reach a condition of *nirvikalpa*, i.e. free from any intellectual construct.

Happiness, moreover – as already evident in Aristotle’s metaphysics – is itself the scope of ancient philosophy. Later on, in the Gospel of John, leaving its mark on the direction of developing Christian mysticism, we find emphasis placed on ‘a life (*zoé*) truly alive’, overflowing with incessant creativity, a spring ever-flowing with truth, and thus with joy. The ascetic who, in the original Greek world is also a *homo philosophicus*, accesses the awareness of ‘being alive’⁵, with the implicit appreciation of life as such.

Rousseau⁶ - as we might say in tune with the early Greek world’s vision of philosophy - describes the ‘feeling of existence’ (i.e. the remembrance of being alive) as a state of happiness, complete and perfect in itself, a self-sufficient condition, independent of any external cause.

In its original sense, asceticism or spiritual exercise is essentially outlined as a search for truth that coincides with the joy of being able to enter fully into a relationship with reality. This truth is the Good itself, an order as significant as it is mysterious: spiritual exercise as the art of being able to trace in the scant horizon of any individual existence the universal prospect of the *kósmos*, or the coherence of a general law mirrored in the meaning of each small thing that exists⁷. Thus, happiness is the final outcome that allows us to glimpse our own inner order inscribed in the measureless project of universal order.

Contemplative attention: the core of spiritual exercise in the Greek world

The spur that triggers research and reveals the ultimate and infinite meaning of personal condition as the joy of existence is *thaûma*, the original wonder celebrated by Plato in the *Theaetetus* and by Aristotle in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, which is not merely wonder, but essentially confusion and awe in the face of all beauty, as well as all existential pain and death,

as fear of annihilation⁸. Western philosophy arises from this background of terrified wonder with the salvific aim of rescuing mankind from suffering. The remedy, or instrument of this enterprise, is indeed spiritual exercise which, in its first form, is *theoría*, contemplation.

It is interesting to note that the most ancient meaning of the Greek term *theoría* is festive testimony, contemplation of the feast, the ritual celebration in honour of the gods. Through contemplation, the *homo philosophicus* or 'festive man' feels safe (*salvus*), i.e. intact (*solvus*) with regard to the threat of ontological annihilation.

From contemplation of the original terror that the term *thaûma* evokes arises that impetus of spontaneous and immediate joy at being alive, which then becomes the *awareness and the act of will that transforms loving ecstasy into acceptance of being-in-the-world*,⁹ i.e. the actualisation of the concrete experience of that joy, the method of stabilising it. From this fervid and instantaneous adhesion to the sensation of being alive comes the inner inclination to awareness of that adhesion, leading to true spiritual exercise with its result of happiness achieved.

This happiness may sometimes even burst into everyday life, in a self-explicatory and self-sufficient manner, without any need for specific training, suddenly eclipsing all the egotistical and spatial-temporal limitations that structure our ordinary existence in the world. This happiness may also come through ecstatic emotion, as sudden as a lightning-bolt that illuminates the night sky, with no explicable relation to the apparent irrelevance of the situation that triggered it¹⁰. The possibility of such a spontaneous irruption of grace, needing no preparation or exercise, at any moment or in any situation, is also a characteristic element – albeit not to be taken for granted – of the non-dual Śaivaite schools of mediaeval Hinduism, of which examples will be given below. Even in this latter

eventuality, however, the phase of awareness and practical training following that first and immediate spontaneous joy is in most cases a necessary path in order to stabilise attention and acquire constant access to joy.

Practice of contemplative attention (*prosoché*), crucial both for the Stoics and for the Epicureans, arose from a kind of 'inner reawakening' that allowed and facilitated existential orientation toward the Good as fundamental truth. This aptitude, at the very beginning of Western philosophy, gave rise, in the third century C.E., to the spiritual practice of the first monks, for whom attention became the 'guardian of the heart'¹¹, revealing in each a divine vocation.

Contemplative attention in the ancient world itself became the focus of study (in India, in the IV-V century C.E., we find the term *svādhyāya*, with the same meaning, 'crucial experience' in Patañjali's vocabulary) to achieve an inclusive understanding of self and the world which, with Socrates, takes the external form of the dialogue, either with the self, or with an external interlocutor. What truly makes it the absolutely primary tool in any spiritual exercise is its methodical application, which increases in value with continual practice (*abhyāsa* in *Pātañjala-yogaśāstra*). Although, as we have seen, in some cases, the unveiling of reality simply occurs, i.e. without any intention of accomplishing it, without any need of repetition or even the urgency of reaching a result.

Among the Stoics, attention was essentially *tónos*, or dynamic tension, i.e. the leap of the heart, which instils its charge of energy into everyday activity. The Epicureans, on the contrary, emphasised the relaxing aspect of attention, a kind of remission (*ánesis*) – to use a medical term – that characterised a serene and pleasant disposition with regard to the real. The Epicureans thus lay emphasis more markedly on pleasure rather than on commitment. It was, in any case, a matter of conscious consent to one's personal human condition and to the



Nishat Garden, the 'Garden of Joy', where Abhinavagupta used to teach.

will to keep this consciousness alive through spiritual exercise, never resulting in any out-and-out effort or coercion.

Such exercise, widely known for its relatively simple nature, thus becomes the rule to be applied to the various circumstances of life, concretely recalling how to interact with them: *putting one's life constantly before one's eyes*¹², thus always having at hand the possibility of congruous action, inspired by an inner understanding.

Epictetus termed *prohairesis* the basic moral choice that orients the 'science of living'. This means that anyone can live in a condition of freedom and fulfilment if he/she is aware of what necessarily escapes his/her control and,

as such, cannot be desirable. Choosing to desire only what is in his/her power, i.e. desiring only what is given and nothing more, one will live naturally in a state of autonomy and satisfaction.¹³ The choice that makes one free is the one that faithfully mirrors one's own humanity, with its privileges and its limitations, justifying the feeling of being alive and the awareness of so being. Epictetan ethics is thus based on a view of optimism. Joy is always at hand if one directs oneself realistically to desire only what there is or what in some way depends on oneself.

In 1600, Spinoza, greatly influenced by the Stoics, wrote his philosophical masterpiece: ethics, rather than metaphysics, an investigation

into how one must and how one can live as happily as possible. The problem of each of us lies in the fact of allowing ourselves to be disturbed by things, *not* in the things that disturb us, which are innocent or – as Nietzsche said much later on, ‘beyond good and evil’. Joy is the aim of philosophy. To face this disturbance, as in ancient Greece, Spinoza’s view requires a ‘purification of the mind’ to make it ready to seek the true and shareable Good, released from small personal desires, to possess the real. *“Only if I stop taking myself as the point of reference of Good and Evil can I accept that the All is Good, is Beautiful, is Divine. The All cannot be comprehended by limited human knowledge; the All is the occasion of possible beatitude and happiness.”*¹⁴

Nietzsche¹⁵ too, going back to the Stoic view, speaks of *amor fati* in connection with the intimate contentment that comes only from what life brings us up against, as being part of a larger economy than that of personal advantage and our limited knowledge of reality¹⁶.

In the Stoic or Epicurean view, spiritual exercise as a rule gives rise to an experience of happiness deriving from the awareness of our real condition in life and from conscious gratitude towards that condition. This very kind of conscious, grateful pleasure does not belong to the temporal category of ordinary pleasure, since it does not depend on duration, but on intensity. This feature was also typical in mediaeval Kaśmīr, where *ānanda* – happiness – is instead an intensity animated by consciousness, rather than being a merely pleasant condition. The intensity of the experience, rather than its pleasantness or duration in time, is the true protagon-

ist in the spiritual experience of non-dual Tantrism, because it characterises all that is alive and, as such, sacred.

As already stated by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,¹⁷ for Stoics and Epicureans, inner exercise discloses the infinite starting from the present moment, which acquires that completeness and unicity that make it perfect in itself, rendering desirable precisely what is here and now. Moreover, the context that regulates this awareness is profoundly ethical, leaving aside the short-sighted view of mere personal fulfilment. One acts in total accord with the reason that governs the cosmos. It is good and this good is exactly what is present, because it is complete in itself. The reciprocal implication of whatever is contained in any other thing is moreover one of the peculiarities of mediaeval Kaśmīri Śaivism. *Sarvam sarvātmakam*, says a celebrated aphorism of the Trika school: everything includes everything¹⁸.

The infinite gaze

A widespread exercise of the ancient Western world was what we might call the ‘cosmic gaze’, a work of the imagination through which the adept rises to contemplate things, as it were, from ‘on high’. For the Epicureans, it was a profound joy to imagine oneself soaring in space above worldly things. As we find in the Epicurean vision of Lucretius, starting from his observation of nature and its enigmatic grandiosity, the mind opens and widens, soaring above minor daily worries and acquiring the freedom of the infinite heavens.¹⁹ Such an exercise of imagination was not an expression of the proliferating activity of the ordinary mind,

**In the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra*, *ānanda* becomes ‘bliss’
with an ontological value that distinguishes spiritual
experience tout court.**

but a ferment of thought serving attention, which we may define in this sense as generative or contemplative. Observation of nature using the instruments and knowledge of the time was the point of departure for this celestial journey with its raised perspective, beyond the confines of one's habitual self, to the point of scaling down the overwhelming pressure of the passions of the life of the common mortal. From Pythagoras to Lucretius to Seneca, the exercise of cosmic flight documented in the ancient world aimed at reducing the coercive impact of the emotions that renders us slaves circumscribed in a microcosmic environment, to find ourselves unharmed, without the preoccupations of a narrow mind, living an extended, all-inclusive passionate nature. What we may call 'an open desire'. The unconfined space that the Epicureans managed to inhabit during their 'cosmic flight', in the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* becomes contemplation of the immensity with a mind not yet bridled by thought, but free and 'sensitive', like that of a child, feeling emotion in its whole range of intensity before it is transformed into the overwhelming wave of conceptual thought.²⁰

We can still trace one element of comparison with the Epicurean exercise of the 'infinite gaze' in *śloka* 84 of the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra*. Here, contemplating the heavens, aimless, the self is transfigured in that infinite cloudless blue (*ākāśa vimala*). Fixing his gaze on that vastness, without moving (*stabdhātmā*), the *yogin* literally embodies the freedom of space. Instead of imagining soaring in flight above the turmoil of ordinary life, experienced as obstacles to be overcome, the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* proposes the pure contemplation of the vast heavens, empty of everything. In the end, space is revealed as the fundamental nature of everything that lives, in a vision in which the very upheavals of everyday life are, in any final analysis, made of this same freedom. No practical instructions are provided by the text.

The only indication is an absorbed attention, until the thinking mind dissolves and a mind as unconfined as the heavens is discovered, a mind made of space, a heaven-mind.

Contemplative attention in mediaeval Kaśmīr

In mediaeval Kaśmīri Śaivism too – the exceptional flowering of non-dual Hindu Tantrism – the tool of attention plays a crucial role, contributing to the characterisation of Kaśmīri yoga as eminently meditational. Inner receptivity, alerted by attention, triggers a contemplative capacity, which in turn activates the creativity of the mind. In Tantric yoga, the stillness of breath in the *āsana* is one of the preferred conditions for reawakening mental presence and for its creative outcome. *Contemplative imagination*, as we may define this development of attention, may in such a context have two different results, which may follow each other, coinciding with two of the three levels of non-dual Kaśmīri yoga: *śākta-upāya* (or *sūkṣma-dhyāna*) and *śāmbhava-upāya* (or *parā-dhyāna*), which we shall touch on.

In Plato, the path towards the Good is actually the path towards truth, *mégheston máthema*, supreme knowledge, which consists of the discovery of that 'right relationship' (*lógos*), harmony with things and of things to each other. Discovery of that bond, that natural manifestation of universal coherence is discovery of the thread that connects all things that exist. To make this 'cosmic intelligence' reveal itself, Platonic practice consists of contemplation (*theoría*). This shows a significant affinity to the experience of the *bhāvanā*, i.e. to the meditative aptitude of religious India, since it aims, rather than 'exploring an external object, at generating *lógos*, the ability to understand, revealing a reality of things that is usually hidden and more intimate than what is manifested: contemplation as generative capacity.

Bhāvanā, derived from *bhāvaya-*, causative of the verb to be, *bhū-*, is for mediaeval Nyāya logicians the emergence of something preserved in the consciousness²¹. It implies an inner transformative - and not merely static - process, becoming the very synonym for meditational practice after the V century C.E. What *bhāvanā* produces is a creative or generative act that emerges from its inner custodial status. The contemplative aptitude of *bhāvanā* is pertinent above all in what we have denominated *śākta-upāya* (in the classification recognised in mediaeval Kaśmīr).

Central to this level of yoga is the practice of *vikalpa-saṃskāra*, i.e. the purification of the *vikalpa* or conceptual level of the mind, which is the fundamental application of *śākta-upāya*. By means of a true *bhāvanā-krama* or succession of meditative stages, a 'beneficial thought', i.e. aimed at liberation,²² may be recited or memorised as a *mantra* or visualised as an image and thus its authentic significance will be gradually assimilated and digested like nutritious food. Its conceptual nature is thus neutralised and the thought may literally be embodied, losing its purely intellectual value and reacquiring an energetic or transformative one. An idea of this kind, leading to freeing oneself from thought itself and materialising in a direct and living experience, is called by Abhinavagupta²³ *śuddha-vikalpa*. This practice utilises the discursive mind with the aim of overcoming it, leaving a mind that is open, intuitive: mind freed from mind. It is consequently an imaginal activity with an aim of realisation and purification. Attention acts as its trigger. The most widely practised yoga, as Abhinavagupta maintains in the *Tantrasāra* (cap. IV),²⁴ may be defined as being this 'special type of *vikalpa*' or use of thought, aimed at investigating the essence of reality. The materials with which this yoga works, called – according to context - *śākta-upāya* (enhanced means) or *sūkṣma dhyāna* (subtle contemplation), are thoughts and emotions, the

activity of consciousness (*citta*).

This means that the *yogin* adopts a particular mental model to explore the nature of mind, only to discover that for this purpose he must go beyond the mind itself. The paradox of this strategy is to utilise a type of conditioning to go beyond all conditioning and let reality finally manifest itself in all its elusive vastness. This is why this model of yoga is called 'indirect immediate' (*kramākrama*).

Śākta-upāya may give rise to the yoga level handed down as *śāmbhava-upāya*, which is also an autonomous path of realisation and is thus traditionally considered as the first level of yoga, potentially accessible to all. It is the immediate occurrence of a non-discursive mind that sweeps away all mental constructs, without any need for a refinement of thought. This is the experience of *pratibhā*, creative intuition, a crucial experience in the schools of non-dual Tantrism. The adept thus already recognises in himself the divine nature of Śiva and nothing more is necessary. The joy of this realisation remains palpable. This is the spontaneous path, the highest, which is the result of grace. In Kaśmīri interpretation, *śāmbhava* yoga (the divine means) or *para-dhyāna* (supreme contemplation) is immediate (*akrama*). It occurs without exercise or preparation of any kind, and is consequently achieved when a profound degree of intuitive, non-discursive attention occurs spontaneously. This *upāya* arrives as a sudden and self-sufficient stimulus making life's experience perfect in itself, just as it is, without the need for specific tools or techniques. It is simply being open to accept the grace of every moment. At this level, the adept sees no distinction between the spiritual and the ordinary. He perceives the divine in everything. He finds his teacher not necessarily in a person, but in all things, persons, situations. Path and destination are not distinct. It results naturally in what Abhinavagupta mentions as *anupāya* (non-means) which consists of an

instantaneous reawakening (*śaktipāta*), so intense that it is permanent: a yoga that, in the end, is non-yoga; an exercise that requires no exercise, like the spontaneity of life.

In any final analysis, the use of the imaginative or discursive mind, utilising tools such as *mantras* or visualisation linked to the practice of attention, prepares the way for a condition of non-mind, a mind that is no longer rational and dualistic, but sensitive and non-dual. Such a mind is able to grasp not only the real, but a real that has grown in intensity. In this context, the imagination is thus revealed as a leavening and evocative power of reality itself.

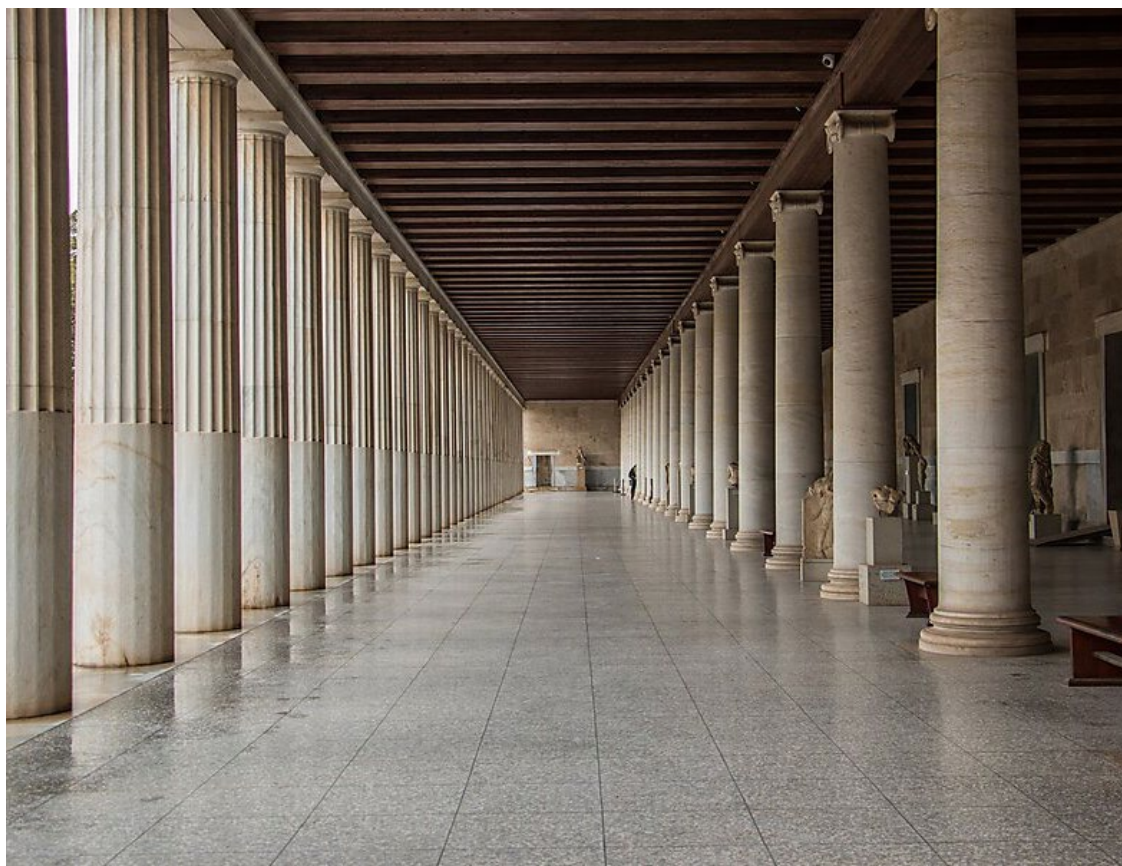
Contemplative application in Kaśmīri yoga

A particular use of attention, typical of higher yoga (*śāmbhava*) in which proliferating thought is not active, or is as yet not activated, is to dwell on the first moment of each experience²⁵, when one is ‘on the point of’ starting to do something, as when a bird is about to open its wings and take flight. It happens at the moment at which everything is about to begin, or has just begun (*unmeṣa-daśā-niṣevana*), when the energy and emotion of experience are still in bud and about to burst open. Thus the initial phase of every experience is especially invested with attention. Pondering this beginning, the first-fruit of feeling, one dwells in a widened space, defined as being ‘without support’ (*nirādhāra*) and without thought (*nirvikalpa*), unmoving in the contemplation of an ‘open desire’, when all possibilities are ready to take flight in an opening that is beyond choice and without confines. The contemplative attention in non-dual yoga, in *śāmbhava-upaya* also constitutes an educa-

tion of mind/heart and is applied to any manifestation of emotional experience. In managing to stay present in the ‘eye of the cyclone’, in ‘passion in bud’ or the initial flowering of emotional energy, the adept also experiences his power energy charge before it triggers the dynamism of the rational mind and of the consequent proliferation of judgements. The exercise here is to halt, succeed in savouring the taste of emotion in itself, without proceeding farther, when the mind becomes overwhelming like a river in flood, taking over our feelings. The Tantric adept knows how to taste, without avidity, the rising tide of the passions, without reaching a point of no return. The exercise is that of knowing how to grasp the moment – simultaneously swirling and still – in which everything ‘is about to’ happen. The key is the tasting, without reserve.

Passions, emotions and motions of the soul in the mediaeval Kaśmīri context are thus invested with attention, as in the Greek world of the Stoics and Epicureans, but they are never deemed to be obstacles to the inner process, nor as something to be managed or avoided. Quite the opposite: it is the very intense vitality of the motions of the heart, whether positive or negative, that overflow into what we have called the remembrance of being alive, i.e. in a growing presence and tasting of reality. Here attention becomes tasting (*samviccarvanā*). Furthermore, this is not a state of trance (more common), but of vigilant presence, effortlessly free from all constructs of thought. On the contrary, a state of trance is relatively opaque, sometimes bright, but obtuse, lacking the acute vividness that makes the real present moment sparkle.

In the Kaśmīri non-dual yoga, the contemplative
attention also constitutes an education of mind/heart.



Stoá Poikile, Athens Agorà, the painted Portico of the Stoic School.

An example of this timeless fruition by a mind that is firm even when negative and potentially overwhelming emotions arise is provided by the already-mentioned *śloka* 101 of the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* (VII century C.E.), one of the root texts of non-dual Śaivism. Here, desire, wrath, avidity, envy are grasped by a mind that is unmoving, centred like the motion of energy at its arising, like surface waves that do not disturb the depths of the ocean, the underlying reality.

If however any effort enters the practice of contemplative attention, the adept's level of yoga is not the supreme one – immediate and spontaneous – but the stage centred on purifying the mind and its dynamics, mentioned

above as *śākta-upāya*, or else a purely technical yoga, deemed the last and lowest level of the hierarchy of spiritual exercise named by Abhinavagupta, who utilises the classification of the *Mālinīvijayottara-tantra*, *āṇava upāya*, minimal means (or *sthūla-dhyāna*, unrefined contemplation).

Practising attention in *sāmbhava* is, rather, abandonment and an opening of oneself; in *śākta* a focusing of oneself; in *āṇava* it becomes making an effort.

The pleasure of being in the moment

Epicurus considered philosophy as a form of therapy: a basic tool for healing²⁶ from anxieties and regaining the joy of living. From

the Epicurean point of view, mankind – distracted by daily worries – forgets the flavour of that most authentic of pleasures, that of being. Spiritual exercise is configured as the true *phármakon*, the powerful remedy capable of transforming any unnatural and unnecessary desire into the serene fulfilment of *atarassía*. The latter is a condition of quiet and stable joy, untouched either by anxieties or by ephemeral pleasures. This condition of the soul, which is neither indifference nor detachment, but on the contrary complete adherence to what is there first, before the ego gets its hands on it, recalls in some ways what Abhinavagupta, in mediaeval Kaśmīr, conceived as *śānta rasa*, the emotion of tranquillity, matrix and background of all the emotions. Experienced without avidity, every emotional state can be enjoyed but, rather than immediately, by dwelling – as we have described – in the spacious background from which every emotion draws its nourishment.

Epicurus celebrated the essence of pleasure as the awareness of existing, in the moment.

*In the prospect of death, the fact of existing, even for a single instant, suddenly assumes an infinite value and provides a pleasure of infinite intensity.*²⁷ In this view, tasting the instant, common to both Stoics and Epicureans, assumes an eternal, measureless value. The impetus of the present moment makes past and future fade and what the senses grasp here and now is the presence of life.

The full joy of the Epicureans may be compared to what religious India calls *ānanda*. This ancient word, which originally represented in concrete form the flow of sexual secretions in the intimacy of coitus, i.e. in orgasmic pleasure, thus comes to mean bliss beyond all pleasure (*sukha*) and pain (*duhkha*), nourished however by the energy of both with an unfurled sensoriality open to the present moment. *Kṣāna*, the instant, is one of the features of Kaśmīri yoga and contrasts *abhyāsa*, repeated practice,

which in Patañjala-yoga is one of the pillars of practice. In the Kaśmīri context, emphasis lies always on the intensity and completeness represented by even a single instant of conscious presence. .

The secret of Epicurean serenity involved, at the same time, circumscribing the instant, attributing to it an infinite capacity. The present moment, experienced fully, is thus self-sufficient and complete in itself, and includes the taste of every other experience. For Epicurus, being ready to grasp this savouring is the spiritual exercise *par excellence*, i.e. the fundamental aptitude for undertaking any inner practice. The Stoics, too, reassess the present moment which, in such a context, becomes a feeling of intimacy with the entire universe²⁸. For the Stoics, emphasis is laid on the will to discover the universe in an instant; for the Epicureans, the pleasure of the event in itself.

In the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra*, *ānanda* becomes bliss with an ontological value that distinguishes spiritual experience *tout court*. Enjoying the instant as though nothing else exists is the felicity of sexual union in *śloka* 69, which becomes, for example, the pleasure of the first instant of encountering a dear friend after a long time (*śloka* 71). The exercise is to dwell on the source of such joy that overflows at the beginning of every moment of happiness. The contemplative value of joy, with all one's senses open to experience the present, is also clear in the subsequent *ślokas* of the text, which speak of pure aesthetic pleasure, like tasting good food or listening to beautiful music. The secret of this joy is always that of grasping in any experience, even the most common, that vital sensitivity that makes all things sacred, the cipher of life and its beauty, the peculiarity of being. •

- 1 *Theoría* is another Greek term indicating meditation or contemplation.
- 2 Cf. for example, Epictetus, *Discourses*, II. 9, 13; II, 18, 26; III, 8, 1; III, 12, 1-7; IV, 6, 16; IV, 12, 13.
- 3 Furthermore, the word ‘school’, *skholé* in Greek, originally indicated ‘idleness’, leisure time, in which the pleasure of learning arose spontaneously.
- 4 Cf. E. Severino, *La filosofia antica*, Rizzoli, Milano 1984, pp. 15-33.
- 5 Cf. F. Jullien, *Risorse del Cristianesimo, ma senza passare per la via della fede*, Salani Editore, Milano 2019, pp. 51-66.
- 6 Cf. P. Hadot, *Ricordati di vivere. Goethe e la tradizione degli esercizi spirituali*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2009, p. 36. Goethe’s romantic idealism picked up this intense feeling of existing, emancipated from anything else.
- 7 Furthermore, the literal meaning of the word ‘universe’ comes from the Latin *unus* and *versus* (past participle of *vertere*): “that which turns wholly in the same direction”, Cf. G. Tonelli, *Genesi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2019, p.32.
- 8 Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d, and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b-983.
- 9 B. Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (quoted from the Italian translation of Pietro Zvetemich), Milano 1970, p.596.
- 10 Cf. G. Lussana, *Lo yoga della bellezza. Spunti per una riformulazione contemporanea dello yoga del Kaśmīr*, Om Edizioni, Bologna 2021, p.96 ff.
- 11 *Nepsis* or vigilance. Cf. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, cit. in P. Hadot, *Esercizi spirituali e filosofia antica*, Einaudi, Torino 2005, p. 76-77.
- 12 Marco Aurelio, *Meditations*, VII, 58.
- 13 “If you choose, you are free”. Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 17.
- 14 Cf. C. Sini, *Spinoza*, Book Time, Milano 2012, pp.40-41.
- 15 Cf. For example, in *Ecce homo* (in the Italian edition translated by Giorgio Colli, Milan 1991, p.206 ff.).
- 16 *Samtoṣa* is the Sanskrit term that, in the Hindu lexicon of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (or *Yoga-sūtra*), is a similar fulfilment that excludes the avidity of taking what is not within our grasp.
- 17 Cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1174 a 17 ff.
- 18 “What happens to one man brings benefit to all”. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VI, 45, 1.
- 19 Cf. Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura*, II 1044-1047; III, 16-17, and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, XI, 1.
- 20 Swami Lakshmanjoo: “The saint is broadminded like a child”, in *Vijñānabhairava-tantra, The Practice of Centring Awareness*, Commentary by S. Lakshmanjoo, Ishvar Ashram, Nishat, Srinagar 2002: “If one makes one’s mind stable in the various states of desire, anger, greed, delusion, intoxication or envy, then the Reality alone will remain which is underlying them”, śl. 101, p.121.
- 21 Cf. G. Lussana, *Ibidem*. p. 111.
- 22 For example, *drśyam śarīram* (all that is perceptible is my body). Cf. Vasugupta, *Gli aforismi di Śiva* with the commentary by Ksemarāja (*Śivasūtravimarsinī*), ed. R. Torella, Adelphi, Milano 2013, sūtra 1. 13.
- 23 *Luce dei Tantra (Tantrāloka)*, ed. and transl. by R. Gnoli, Adelphi, Milano 1999, 15. 269 - 71a.
- 24 *Essenza dei Tantra (Tantrasāra)*, pref. transl. and commentary by R. Gnoli, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1990, cap. IV, p. 102.
- 25 In other contexts, attention enhances both the initial and final moments of the experience. In the first case, the opening is the matrix; in the second, the result. But the opening vibrating with vitality in the Kaśmīri schools may also be found in the middle, between the beginning and the end. It may be said that the open space is reality in all its interest; this completeness is what the attention grasps.
- 26 In a very ancient language, Semitic, ‘to heal’ and ‘to live’ are expressed by a single verb. Cf. M. Vannini, *Vangelo di Giovanni*, Garzanti, Milano 2016, p. 97.
- 27 Cf. P. Hadot, *Ricordati di vivere. Goethe e la tradizione degli esercizi spirituali*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2009, p.28.
- 28 Cf. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 66, 6.

FIND.ORG.IN/TRANSCULTURAL-DIALOGUES

Transcultural Dialogues use textual or image sources either on permission from the related authors or which are free from copyright. In any exceptional case to the contrary, Alain Daniélou Foundation is ready to acknowledge the proper source or remove the related text/picture, used for purely cultural and non-commercial purposes.

Some views and opinions expressed in the essays published in *Transcultural Dialogues* do not necessarily represent those of the Alain Daniélou Foundation.

Intellectual supervision: Adrián Navigante
Editorial work: Adrián Navigante and Kenneth Hurry
Design: Valentina Barsotti / [Takk.studio](https://takk.studio)
Technical support: Walter Beschmout and Christian Braut

For contributions and further questions, please contact
communication@find.org.in
© 2022 – Alain Daniélou Foundation: Center for Transcultural Studies



ALAIN
DANIÉLOU
Foundation



INTELLECTUAL
DIALOGUE