

Höfer, Andrés, *Tamang ritual texts II*, Ethnographic studies in the oral tradition and folk-religion of an ethnic minority, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1997, 217 p.

Review by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

Sixteen years after the first volume of the *Tamang ritual texts*, the long awaited second volume has been published. Conceived independently from the first, the book is divided into two parts. The first one presents four songs sung in the context of the national Hindu festival of Dasai, and the second one, a recitation to the deities of the village territory. As in his previous publications, the author adopts the philological method, and states that, despite its dangers - search for an original form or meaning, isolation of the text from its context of performance - it allows us to understand how oral traditions are elaborated by reference to "(...) high cultural and other regional or local oral traditions". History - both of the texts and rituals - is an important concern of the author.

One of the main qualities of this book is the careful description of the context in which each text is sung or narrated, and the permanent reciprocating motion between myth, ritual and their political and historical context, which illuminate each other. Furthermore, Höfer's method of studying a number of villages at the same time, prevents him from extrapolating from too narrow a point of view.

Thus the Dasai rituals of three Tamang villages of Dhading district are described in precise detail. Though pan-Nepalese, they endow some peculiarities to the Tamang which lead us to a better understanding of the role of their chief, as well as their integration into the Nepalese society and the Hindu state. It must be recalled that the performance of the Dasai rituals was mandatory for all the village headmen during the Rana period, whatever their religion. In the three villages studied, the celebration starts on *phulpāti*, the seventh day of the ritual for the high caste Hindus. In this matter, the Tamang do not differentiate themselves radically, as many low castes or tribal people also start their ritual on this date only. In its short form, the celebration omits what can be called the Brahmanic phase of the rite, consisting elsewhere mainly in the recitation of the *Devī Māhātmya*. During this first day, buffaloes are killed and men gather in the home of the head-man where they share alcohol. The main ritual of the day consists in the reaffirmation of the function of the four subaltern headmen by the main one. The second day sees the sacrifice of five buffaloes, one for each

headman, who afterwards keep the head of the animal in their house. On *Nawami*, people visit their relatives. Finally, the most important day, in these Tamang communities as elsewhere in Nepal, is *Dasami*. The usual *ṭikā* ceremony is unknown, except in the context of the administration, as the tenants receive the *ṭikā* mark from the tax collectors (i.e. the Mukhiya headman and the Jimmuwal) in the Bhokteni community. In Cautara, there is a surprising gathering of the women in the headman's house with alcohol and buffalo meat. The author underlines how this gathering corresponds to the men's one on the first day, but while he sees the "the allegiance of the men" in one case, he qualifies the second only as the "expression of solidarity and hospitality by the women". Compared to what we know of the Dasai rituals, this gathering of women among the Tamang is unique and may reveal that the power of the Tamang headman is also conferred on him by them. The most striking peculiarity of the Tamang celebration of Dasai is the ritual which takes place on the evening of this day, called "the death-feast for the head". The men assemble at the Mukhiya's house, around six plates of offerings: one for each headman and one for the *lama*. Then starts song I: a long invocation for the gods during which the *lambu* shaman shivers when a specific invoked god graces his benediction for each headman in turn, materialised in a white substance that the *lambu* incorporates into the butter dabs, which is applied as a *ṭikā* by the *lama* to the headmen.

The participants then eat the buffalo head, divided into one half for the five headmen and one half for the others. At this point, songs II and III, along with dances, are performed.

Höfer underlines Tamang ritual specificities: the secondary role played by the Goddess and the evening *ṭikā* ceremony, which is not, as usual elsewhere, a replica of the *ṭikā* given to the King of Nepal, but an independent benediction of the Tamang gods. He thus logically deducts from this fact: "(...) the Tamang Mukhiya emerges as an embodiment, rather than as a subordinate and local representative, of the King." I am tempted here to make a parallel with the Magar, and the sacred function of their traditional headmen, who is at the same time the descendant of the first settler, a representative of the king and the main officiant of the gods protecting the territory. The parallel can be drawn further as the southern Magar perform an invocation of the gods during the Dasai festival which share some similarities with the one described above: among the southern Magar, the ceremony is called *Sorāthī* and takes place during *Kāl rātri*, but I only witnessed it in the Gulmi district, among hinduised Magar of

Northern origin, where it is usually called *bhāilo* or *khyāli nāc*. On this occasion, all the men of the village (Magar or not), gathered on the playground, but before the Pancayat reform, it took place in the headman's courtyard. A Kami song leader intones an invocation to all the gods of the territory (the village, the neighbouring ones, the whole Nepal, in a circular symbolic peregrination) while men play drums and dance. Each in their turn becomes possessed when a specific god (that they call their *guru*) is invoked, and this *séance* opens a season of dance which ends in December. Among both the Tamang and the Magar, the power of the headman is demonstrated during *Dasai* in a very direct and local way when the gods manifest their presence in his territory and inhabitants. But while they are not apparent in Magar rituals, in the Tamang case, there are intermediaries -the *lambu* and the *lama*- between the headman and the gods. Of course, it must nevertheless be noted in this last context that the song leader is a Kami from the lineage which has adopted the Magar headman's ancestor, that the drum players and masculine dancers are the headman's wife receivers, whereas the feminine dancer is a member of his lineage. In this sense, it is the order and history of the whole community which is thus sanctified by the gods. In the same way, the Tamang dancers and singers are also from an allied clan which came to the headman's territory to take land and wives. The *lama* themselves are from this clan, as if, like in the Magar case, two main religious functions were constantly affirmed : the ancestral role of the headman linked with the gods of the territory and the ritual role of the allied clans, who make the village prosper by the progeny they assure and the rites they perform. Among the Tamang, the gathering of the women further emphasises how the prosperity of the headman is dependant on fecundity, a point fully developed in song IV.

One difference between the Tamang and Magar traditions with respect to the invocation of the gods during *Dasai* is that the Magar follow Hindu practice, because their invocation takes place during *Kāl rātri* or the night when the Goddess manifests herself on earth, whereas the Tamang celebration during the evening of the 10th day is unorthodox, for the gods are conceived as having gone on the morning of this day. Is it that the Tamang gods take their turn after the Hindu ones have gone ?

The first song is a myth of origin of the world, which bears striking similarities with the Western oral tradition of the Magar and Kami in its first part : the world is in a state where there is no night or day, no earth or sky, when nine suns and nine moons rise. The earth, rocks and trees burn and melt. Then Mahadeo and Parbati are born. The creation of two trees

and of two birds on each of them follows. Both have a golden egg from which the first *lama* and the first shaman emerge. The two of them create everything : clouds, vegetation, human beings, cattle, and so on. The creation of the headman is simultaneous with the rise of Kalu Panre, 'Damdare' Panre and the king of Gorkha; and with the rise of the headman, the ritual of *Dasai* and the sacrifice of a yak take place. Afterwards the gods of the headman's clan and those of the mountain are invoked.

The author distinguishes two parts in his analysis of this song : the first one, a journey in a historical mythical register, up to the mention of the present ritual, which is thus linked with myth; then a journey in a geographical mythical register, into the world of the gods. He examines why the buffalo's sacrifice which is performed is called 'yak' and shows how the ritual of *Dasai* in its very foundation is linked with Gorkha power.

Song II follows the same narrative patterns except that instead of the gods invocation, the text affirms the idea that sacrifice will send the buffalo to paradise, an idea which is again developed in song III.

Song IV is the story of two orphans, a brother and a sister, who are separated. The inconsolable boy goes to the mythic place of origin of the Tamang in Tibet where he attends to a yak-head-feast, then comes back up to Cautara where he participates in the *Dasai* dances, which are being accomplished by the singers. This last song shows better than song I that the Tamang probably had a festival of their own with a yak sacrifice that they transformed into the *Dasai* celebration after their integration in Nepal. An impressive evocation of the brother-sister relationship by one informant is reported by the author : in the song, the brother is called Golden Tree and the sister Flower of the Sky, because the sisters are like flowers on the patrilineal tree : they can be picked up, but if they are to conceive a fruit, they must come back to the tree. This unclear conception strongly links the fertility of a clan to the married sisters, and becomes clearer if we note that it refers implicitly to the allied clan, the flowers' pickers. Finally, the last verses of the song express in a clear cut and powerful way the ritual effectiveness of the dance : with the *mane* dance, the living being will go to paradise, disorder will be 'stamped down' the earth, and the obstacle removed into the sky.

The lonely brother of song IV is probably an image of the headman, as he attends or creates the yak-head festival. An orphan, he is a wanderer and thus a potential first settler somewhere. If he does not need a vertical line to become a headman, he needs a sister, because he needs wife-receivers and givers.

The rigorous precision with which the author describes the Dasaī songs and their context is a merit which must be particularly underlined, for it provides the reader with everything needed to *freely* interpret the ritual, at a time when the authoritarian selective view of writers -i.e. interpretation without description- is regrettably becoming more and more prevalent.

The second part of the book is devoted to a narration addressed to the protective gods of the village territory, the *syibda-nè:da*. In this part again, the author follows the same method : comparison of the facts between three villages, an attentive description of the shrines, ritual ingredients and acts, before presenting the text itself. The *syibda-nè:da* are the "lords of the place", responsible for its prosperity. They are sensible to the disorder of the society (incest, illegitimate pregnancy) to which they react by sending calamities. Their cults are performed either by the headman or the *lambu* shaman and the link between the two seems obvious, as Höfer notes that a *lambu* is called Mukhiya when performing this cult, and the Mukhiya shown in the photographs when performing the buffalo sacrifice wears a long tuff of hair, like shamans.

Höfer provides a deep understanding of this category of gods, linked, as he shows, to the mountain gods by their attachment to the rock and slopes, and suspects that their original form were indeed of mountain gods. In contradistinction to the Nepalese Sime-Bhume, the *syibda-nè:da* has no attachment with water although the couple mountain/lake was probably at their origin. But they are dichotomised in a vegetarian aspect, sometimes called Mahadeo or linked with holy Tibet, and a carnivorous one, sometimes called Devi or related with the spirit of a Gurung (an association which is not surprising as the Goddess, like spirits, is viewed as local and dangerous).

By definition however, the *syibda-nè:da* is indefinite : he is the one "whose extent, name, identity and region are unknown", and numerous gods are associated with him. For Höfer, this complexity is due to historical changes and adaptation to different environments. But more fundamentally, it is the result of a cosmo-centric movement which explains its power or incorporation.

There are clues which tends to link the *syibda-nè:da* cult to the epoch when the Gurung were installed in the Gorkha kingdom by the king, as narrated by the *Gorkha vamshavali*. Indeed, the Tamang studied by Holmberg cannot offer themselves to this god, but must give the ritual ingredients to a Gurung for that purpose. And, in the villages studied by

Höfer as well as in the area studied by Holmberg, it is said that the original *syibda-nè:da* resides in Jharkalleri and is Gurung. The author raises the question why there is no reference to the political context and no reference to the king as the supreme possessor of the earth in the *syibda-nè:da* cult ? I think he has answered this question by linking the two parts of his book, like a link between two rituals which forms a totality : Dasaī, which is a *transcendental* power conferred to the headmen (by the king or the mountain gods) on the people he rules, and the cult to the gods of the territory, which is a local, chthonian, and *immanent* power conferred on him as well, as a first settler of the place, which he masters by this very fact.

As a matter of fact, if everybody participates in the offerings to the *syibda-nè:da*, it is a secret cult, a private one, where only the headman or the one who acts in his name can participate. Like the Magar headman propitiating Bhume, the Tamang headman spends the night alone in the sanctuary of the *syibda-nè:da* in a state of purity, reaffirming that his own body is in union with the earth, that, as Paul Mus would have written : he is the earth made man. The taboo against the presence of nubile woman in this rite whereas they are especially present in the Dasaī ritual, may equally be interpreted as the wholeness of the union between the chief and the earth, which needs nobody else. If we compare the Tamang data from what we know of Bhume, they differentiate themselves both from the high caste Hindus who do not have a collective cult to Bhume except in the context of Dasaī, showing that for them the source of power is unique, and from the Magar who always see Bhume as one Magar god whose origin is in their own territory. This regional and Gurung form of the god in the Tamang society raises a question : is it the reflection of a historical or ideological unique and foreign origin of the group perpetually remembered in this allogenic earth god?

The temptation to further discuss this incredibly rich and stimulating book is great. For example, this review has not taken into account many aspects dealt with in depth by Höfer, such as the Tibetan etymologies of the Tamang texts, the analysis of the prosody, or the musical notations of the songs because of the reviewer's limitations in these fields. This book shows us how fundamental questions can be raised only by meticulous ethnography. Every Himalayan and Tibetan specialist will find it a mine of information and a model of method.