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GEORGES LAPASSADE'S TRANSVERSALIST DETOUR: A NOTE ON "MACUMBA" AND "MINOR LITERATURE"

Following the same train of thought as in the previous issue of Transversal Paths, *in this essay Adrián Navigante deepens his reflection on "extended transversality", focusing on Georges Lapassade's "transversalism" and its transcultural consequences. Lapassade is considered a rather marginal and eclectic intellectual who ventured a bricolage of different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies) and at the same time transgressed them all by merging human sciences and literature. This last aspect is something he thought essential to a valuable experience of alterity – as opposed to the "scientific neutrality" prescribed by Western scholarship*

THE INCEPTION OF TRANSVERSALITY: GUATTARI AND LAPASSADE

In the previous issue of *Transversal Paths*, I delved into Félix Guattari's early experiment in psychiatry (which dates back to 1964) to underline his notion of "transversality". What interests me most about that notion is both its transdisciplinary consequences and its transcultural potential. Guattari approaches, in his own way, the margins of a system with the aim of reaching the "externality" that looms behind and discloses the – otherwise unseen – subversive force of the margins. When he refers to a "creative potential" in schizophrenia, he is far from romanticizing mental illness. Rather, he opposes a "logic of madness" to an increasingly stagnated (but still naturalized) "system of normalcy" – whose inherently ethnocentric (and sometimes even sociopathic) features constitute the main traits of Western thinking. What should be understood here by "Western thinking"? Mainly a universalist project that emerged in the XVII century and flourished in the XIX century, a project that brought together modern science and technical development, fostered industrial urbanization and cultural secularism, privileged colonial expansion and achieved long-term and world-wide dominance. This project has failed. Not in its entirety, since many people still live in that paradigm and cannot figure out real alternatives (historical periods are much longer than existential frameworks, and their persistence is also a permanent influence on the life of individuals). But it failed in its civilizational convictions and aims. We are barely awakening to that fact and the shock has not yet set in – in spite of the ecological and geopolitical urgency for a rapid change. According to Guattari, generating coefficients of transversality is one of the main social tasks for the future, since it could lead from "subjugated (or oppressed) groups" to "subject (or emancipated) groups"[1] and establish a new horizon for the institutional practice of psychotherapy – far beyond the limited and excessively prescriptive field of psychiatry. Caring about the psyche is not a task to be fulfilled in a doctor's office, although that is what *bourgeois* culture imposed as a rule. Psychic life is also somatic, environmental, and social. It has a collective *desideratum*.

It is important to note that both the notion of "institution"[2] and the idea of a shift from pre-assigned roles and functions to a "transversal practice" (that is, a practice that breaks with such naturalized roles and is therefore able to generate unexpected changes) surpass a theory of collective action based on phenomenology of consciousness, existentialism, or even dialectical materialism – all three strong referents of the Parisian *intelligentsia* to which Guattari belonged. This special and in a way undefinable "surplus", which constitutes the movement of institutional analysis[3], deserves

1 Cf. Félix Guattari: *La transversalité*, in: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, Paris, François Maspero, 1974, pp. 72–85, especially p. 76. In his introduction to this volume, Gilles Deleuze refers to the meaning of the expression "subjugated group (*groupe assujeti*)" in the following terms: "subjugated groups include both the masters that the oppressed assign to themselves and the subjugated masses. The hierarchy, the pyramidal organization that characterizes them, is designed to banish all possible inscription of nonsense, death, or dismemberment, to prevent the development of creative ruptures, and to ensure mechanisms of self-preservation based on the exclusion of other groups." (*Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. vi). Subject-groups (*groupes-sujets*) are constituted at the moment when "delirium" takes on a dialogical, communal, and creative quality – shifting from exclusion to the infusion of a collective space (cf. *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 82).

2 By "institution", paraphrasing René Lourau, we mean a system of roles or positions linked to cultural mechanisms that define and manage (i.e., order and normalize) group relationships (cf. René Lourau: *L'analyse institutionnelle*, Paris, Minuit, 1970, p. 171). It is in this sense that Guattari and Lapassade understand and use the term.

3 As René Lourau points out, the movement of institutional analysis – which was systematically

special attention, and its consequences become visible mainly in the last period of Guattari's production, particularly when it comes to themes like "ecosophy" and "chaosmosis"[4]. Paradoxically, the transition from a "localized outline" of transversality to a "general effervescence" in its practice marks an expansion and a concretization of that idea as well as its simultaneous saturation. In this sense, it is not surprising that Guattari referred to the early 1980s as *les années d'hiver* ("the winter years")[5], and that his ecosophical and chaosmotic rebirth (following a personal depression) drew upon ideas that predated the project of *Anti-Oedipus* (in the 1970s) and were to a large extent independent of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, to which Guattari's thought is unfairly subordinated. His most significant production does not lie in his collaboration with Deleuze (that is, at the point where transversality became saturated by the very social trends that promised its realization), but rather in *all the rest* – what he did on the psycho-socio-political battlefield before and after the period between *Anti-Oedipus* and *Mille Plateaux* – and even during the composition of those books, in marginal notes and interventions[6].

The inception of transversality consisted in a new logic of relationships based on parameters of subjectivation that had previously remained imperceptible. From the very beginning, this inception ran the risk of being swallowed up by a phenomenon external to any kind of analytic work aimed at forging a "field" leading to a progressive transformation of relations. This external phenomenon I alluded to in the previous paragraph is no other than May 1968, after which certain ideas that inspired Jean Oury's and Félix Guattari's institutional analysis were massively disseminated under the imperative of "liberating desire" – not so much collective desire, but rather the (quite inconsistent) desire of white middle-class students and *bourgeois* intellectuals with so-called "progressive ideas". In most cases, this impulse did not lead to concrete experiences of "community"[7] but rather to an ongoing social fragmentation, directly proportional to the whimsical claims of individualists who considered themselves absolute subjects and models of social change for the rest of the world. Since

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approached in an early article by Cornelius Castoriadis (*Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire*, 1964) – is fed by a variety of historical sources. The first is Freud's collective psychology as it appears in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), where Freud systematically connects notions like (social) organization and ideology to the question of libido (cf. René Lourau: *L'analyse institutionnelle*, p. 168). The second is Wilhelm Reich's work, which not only exposes the (non-)knowledge hidden in the patient during analysis but also proposes a radical form of dissidence within the analytic device itself – revealing the indissoluble link between two worlds (patient and analyst) ideologically held apart (see in this respect Remi Hess & Jean-Yves Authier: *L'analyse institutionnelle*, Paris, PUF, 1981, pp. 30–31). As a result of a theoretical elaboration that socio-critically exploits those Freudian and Reichian aspects, the notion of "institution" loses a layer of meaning usually attached to it: that of an oppressive device that deprives individuals of their freedom. Instead, the term acquires quite a different connotation and should be taken as a space in which both the barriers of (*bourgeois*) individualism and the collective constraints (imposed by the state) are transformed by means of a singular group-practice.

4 See in this regard Guattari's last three books: *Les trois écologies* (1989), *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (1989), and *Chaosmose* (1992), all published by Éditions Galilée in Paris.

5 Regarding this expression Guattari writes the following: "I am one of those who experienced the 1960s as a springtime that promised to be endless, so it is quite difficult for me to get used to this long winter of the 1980s" (Félix Guattari: *Les années d'hiver 1980–1985*, Paris, Barrault, 1986, p. 7). Although *Les années d'hiver* reflects Guattari's disappointment with the "left in power" (after the 1981 election and the first term of François Mitterrand), at a deeper level it elaborates on the difficulties linked to his proposal from the late 1970s: the "molecular revolution" (see *La révolution moléculaire*, pp. 9–12, and the second part of *Les années d'hiver*, titled "Moléculaire", pp. 123–232). A central point to consider in doing justice to the "molecular revolution" is the distinction between the dissemination of singularities as a new politics of desire and the saturation of the molecular opening of desire by the "subjective obfuscation" (*Les années d'hiver*, p. 65) of the very actors who proclaim their liberation.

6 For example his *Écrits pour l'Anti-Œdipe*, published only in 2012, showing Guattari's internal work on the chef-d'oeuvre he wrote together with Gilles Deleuze, or *Qu'est-ce que l'écosophie ?*, also posthumously published (in 2013), which can be read as a necessary detour (and therefore a paradoxical accomplishment) of the project of *Mille Plateaux*. One should not forget the volume *De Leros à la Borde*, inspired by Guattari's visit to one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in Europe in 1989, in which he brings the exercise of psychiatry the closest possible to an artistic practice.

7 Here the word "community" is taken in the sense of an emergent social group bound together by quasi organic ties of solidarity, as opposed to the contrary opposites "individual" (susceptible to isolation and denial of group-relations) and "society" (prone to collective measures denying the singularity of individuals).

the rise of capitalist modernity, the idea of community – usually deemed previous or alien to the modernization process – has been mostly associated with reactionary models (a form of resistance against technical progress and individual liberties). Yet, even the most basic ethnological awareness warns against the mistake of reducing non-Western variants (more valid than ever today) to historically known models. Fieldwork opens the researcher's view to invisible or unthought-of dimensions, so that levels of experience fully withdrawn from his/her horizon of expectations are suddenly disclosed and become central to the project in question[8]. From this sort of cultural shock, transformative relationships can emerge which end up altering the field of interaction within a given practice, and in that very context the invisible dimension appears as both "object" and "agent" of that change[9]. The question of *agency* proves in this context to be a key issue to de-configure and re-configure worlds. Convictions can be questioned to the point of crisis, and the solid foundations of a universally valid world may be threatened with collapse under the weight of pluri-versed forms of knowledge.

I have mentioned the Guattarian inception of transversality mainly because, despite its sociohistorical pitfalls and anthropological limitations, it remains indispensable to a proper understanding of Georges Lapassade's *transversalist detour*. What does Lapassade's "detour" look like and what should we make of the epithet "transversalist"? Is it worth dealing at length with that train of thought despite its lack of historical visibility? Lapassade's project, if we take the notion of "transversalism", was part and parcel of the subjective effervescence that drew a grimace of discontent in Europe's cultural production, and it seems to have been burnt and reduced to ashes within that tiny sparkle of history called "May 1968". Half a century later, some questions impose themselves: does Lapassade add anything truly significant to Guattari's insights on transversality? What can be extracted from such a marginal attempt which, instead of seeking to gain a solid terrain in the immanence of existing relations, strove to reach an exteriority that put the very logic of those relations at stake? It is probably in the face of those aspects generating contemporary skepticism that one can rediscover and assess the interstitial value of Lapassade's radical heterodoxy in social anthropology.

The inception of transversality (in Guattari's thought) consisted in a new logic of relationships based on parameters of subjectivation that had previously remained imperceptible.

There is no denying that Lapassade is more erratic and less inventive than Guattari. His social anthropology is an aesthetic parody of Lévi-Strauss's work; his denunciation of the pathological aspects of *bourgeois* sociality does not amount to any clinical or micropolitical counter-model that might resist the backfiring strategies of the system; his revolutionary impetus is mostly eclipsed by a mixture of exacerbated subjectivism and literary scraps of *jouissance*. This said, there is something in Lapassade's errancy that reinserts key aspects of Guattari's project in a framework that counterweights both the ideological imperatives of his time and received opinion on questions like cultural dignity, mental health, and social exclusion. In his own way, Lapassade reaches the barely receivable and even dangerous

8 Ethnology needed the radical contribution of Pierre Clastres to finally question – not from outside, but from within an alternative paradigm (linked to societies demarcating an external limit to "Western civilizational development") – certain ideas treated as universal *desiderata*. These include the assumption that the constitution of the state is a necessary stage in the organization and management of human groups (cf. Pierre Clastres: *La société contre l'État*, Paris, Minuit, 1974), as well as certain European communitarian fantasies that were underpinned by the same *bourgeois* individualism they claimed to oppose – only in a more theatrical and unrestrained fashion. Clastres's work laid the foundation for a realistic reflection on social organization processes previously ignored or denied, opening a third path between Thomas Hobbes (whose work is focused on a logic of generalized conflict) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (as a thinker of universalized exchange). This third path is different from and resistant to the type of ultra-individualist reappropriation that characterized the student revolts – and their manifold drifts – during the 1960s and 1970s.

9 In their book on institutional analysis, Remi Hess and Jean-Yves Authier offer a definition concerning a symptom that can be found in every mechanism of institutional organization (including the mechanism of knowledge production): "The first object of institutional analysis is *the invisible*" (*L'analyse institutionnelle*, p. 76, my emphasis).

terrain of what could be called the material spirituality of foreign entities. The entities he deals with are so "foreign" that their irruption, even indirect and mediated by mythological narratives, threatens to break with the reproduction of human relations prescribed by "Western civilization". His interstitial oscillation between psychology and sociology, critique and subversion, ethnography and fiction, significantly expands the scope of Guattarian transversality – its functionality, its importance, its paradoxes – to the point of creating an ecosophically anti-Eurocentric and transculturally chaosmotic scenario[10]. In that context, fragments of outdated militancy and flows of aestheticized delirium (not delusion!) are rechanneled and reshaped toward a radical experience of *literal incorporation of alterity*[11]. This is how Lapassade takes up the legacy of May 1968 and adds – for the sake of still another "new anthropology" – a colorful twist to it. His transversalist detour enables the actualization of the potential contained in Guattari's device of transversality beyond the intellectual field and cultural context in which it was conceived. It should be borne in mind that Lapassade himself actively sought to transgress those boundaries by exceeding his own limits – as an intellectual and also as a human being. As we shall see, the richest aspect of his thinking is focused on the multidisciplinary articulation of the passage from *socio*-analysis to *trans*-analysis, and a further disclosure of the latter's reverse-side: *trance*-analysis[12]. Paradoxically, this passage reveals a point in which the transversalist movement flips into its phantasmatic opposite. In order to account for this "flip", I will resort to a key concept by Deleuze and Guattari that encapsulates much of Lapassade's subversive – or rather inversive – impasse: *minor literature*. This expression characterizes (without precedent) the existential itinerary that Lapassade tries – with considerable difficulty – to reconstruct through his personal approach to the phenomenon of trance – which in the end proves to be emptied of the socio-religious specificity that had fascinated him in the context of his Afro-Brazilian explorations – to which I will devote part of what follows in this essay.

Let us briefly return to the inception of Guattari's transversality. To understand it properly, we must bear in mind that, in the first half of the 1960s, Guattari was not the co-author of *Anti-Oedipus* (published only in 1972), nor the cartographer of schizophrenic desire pleading for and working on its Nietzschean transformation: from reactive to active[13]. At that time, Guattari's ties

10 The Guattarian notion of "ecosophy" points to new assemblages of connectivity involving aesthetics, ethics, and (micro- and geo-)politics. Such assemblages, which introduce for the first time the question of "alterity" in Western thought form a point of view that is not *a priori* invalidated by colonial prejudices, can be said to re-define the practice of "philosophy" beyond its naturalized Eurocentric framework, the "purest" version of which can be found in Heidegger's construction of a Greek-German axis of self-affirmation and self-delimitation in his rector's address (Rektoratsrede) of May 27, 1933. Many Western philosophers who have vehemently reacted against such a position and delimitation (mainly due to strategies of "political correctness" in the public sphere) still exercise a form of (fully conscious but also unconsciously introjected) "colonialism of thought" which in my opinion presents a clear continuity with Heidegger's line (though with much less argumentative and stylistic talent). As to the transcultural aspect and relevance of chaosmosis, I think the very assemblages implied by it, for example what Guattari calls "incorporeals", lend themselves to new forms of conceiving relations and their corresponding ontological schemes. In a chaosmotic scenario, there is not much sense in distinguishing "facts" and "fiction", "matter" and "spirit", or "science" and "arts" as two well-delimited spheres – one of which is in possession of an empirical truth. The study of certain non-Western societies has shown new paradigms which are better understood with Guattarian categories than with the usual epistemic delimitations of scholars who insist on the validity of one-world (that of epistemology) over all other ways of living.

11 This term should be understood in the sense of the Portuguese word *incorporação*, used in Afro-Brazilian possession cults. In that context, the devotees not only receive spiritual entities in their bodies (and are therefore compared with a horse when ridden, only with the head – not the back – as their mount) but are also instructed in their behavior for the benefit of the entire community (both human and non-human). This process of learning how to socialize with other-than-human entities marks the transition from *incorporation* as a first (ecstatic) rupture to a regular interaction engaging forms of otherness for both individual and collective benefit.

12 The phonetic and graphic support for this reading is stronger in French, where *transanalyse* and *transe-analyse* are homophones and nearly homographs (given the fact that the French word "*transe*" is spelled with an "s").

13 If reactive schizophrenia is an individual pathology, the active becoming of schizophrenic desire is, for Guattari, a revolutionary becoming. This idea is clearly stated in *Anti-Oedipus*: "Schizophrenic escape does not merely consist in withdrawing from the social, in living on the margins. It causes the social to flow through the

with Jacques Lacan were still quite close[14]. This is shown already by the vocabulary used in the writings prior to his encounter and collaboration with Gilles Deleuze[15]. In those early days too, his dialogue with Freud was intellectually relevant[16], and his attempts to forge alternative spaces to the psychoanalytic orthodoxy did not consist in rejecting the whole Freudian-Lacanian paradigm, but rather in offering an immanent and progressive critique of it[17]. The clearest example of this critique appears in a 1966 essay published in the *Cahiers de philosophie* at the Sorbonne, where Guattari states that the concept of "institutional object" in the context of group psychotherapy is "a notion complementary to the Freudian partial object and to the transitional object as defined (in a derived way) by D. W. Winnicott"[18]. Since psychoanalysis refused to modify its technique with the aim of future interventions in hospitals, Guattari decided to develop a proposal based on a threefold articulation of levels: drive-based, relational, and institutional. This articulation did not follow any linear progression (from the individual drive to the collective institution), nor did it imply a compartmentalized logic (in which each level is presumed to be separated from the others). The very notion of "institutional intervention" presupposed a modification that affected the roots of psychoanalytic theory itself – specifically regarding notions like "drive" and "object relation". The most important aspect of Guattari's proposal is his determination to abandon the "death drive" (elaborated by Freud in his famous essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[19]) and reconsider the constitutive character of the

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multiplicity of holes that corrode and penetrate it, always coupled directly to it, spreading everywhere the molecular charges that will explode what must explode, make fall what must fall, make escape what must escape, consolidating at every point the transformation of schizophrenia as process into an effectively revolutionary force." (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Œdipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie 1*, Paris, Minuit, 2018, p. 412)

14 Already in 1953, during the establishment of the experimental clinic La Borde in the South of Paris, Guattari developed a close relationship with Jean Oury (whom he had met as a teenager), a Lacanian-trained analyst with broader, distinctly anti-psychiatric horizons, who became his mentor. In 1962, Guattari began analytic training with Jacques Lacan. This Lacanian period, which lasted seven years, left an indelible mark on his thought. In fact, Guattari always retained a deep respect for Lacan's thought, even during the wildest (and most popular) anti-Freudian years – those of his iconoclastic collaboration with Gilles Deleuze. See, for instance, the indirect praise of Lacan in Chapter 2 of *Anti-Oedipus*: from the reference to Lacan's resistance to Oedipal triangulation to the suggestion that he anticipated inclusive disjunctions that invalidate the (abstract) division between "imaginary pathways" and "symbolic values" (cf. *L'Anti-Œdipe*, pp. 65, 102, 122, and 126 respectively).

15 In developing his theory of the liberation of desire (from individual implosion to group circulation), Guattari uses the expression "signifying logic" to highlight the passage from symbolic stagnation (with a neurotic tendency) to a new specificity that emerges through a subversive and amplifying recomposition of the space previously defined as "transferential" (cf. Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 74). Guattari and Deleuze first met in 1969.

16 Referring to the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), Guattari claims that Freud was not unaware of the impact of social relations on individual and family problems. From the perspective of a post-Lacanian reformulation, Guattari sees in Freud a direct relationship between the social machinery of signifiers, castration, and guilt. This, on one hand, defines the field of application for the Freudian theory, and on the other hand points to a broader potential of Freud's insights – something that Guattari reinterprets through a Lacanian lens for further amplification and enhancement of psychoanalytic motives (cf. *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, pp. 73–74).

17 In this regard, it is essential to mention the influence (on Guattari) of Wilhelm Reich, an undeniable bridge between Freud and Marx, to whom Georges Lapassade dedicated a 1974 essay titled *La bioénergie*. Reich's rejection of the death drive (or more precisely: of its intrapsychic dimension and its role as determinant of *all* human behavior) is an unmistakable sign of his presence in Guattari's early thought. Cf. Wilhelm Reich: *Character Analysis* (Third, enlarged Edition), Main, WRM Press, 1988, pp. 225–236. On this aspect of Reich's thinking and its influence in France, see Elisabeth Roudinesco: *Histoire de la psychanalyse en France*, Volume 2: 1925–1985, Paris, Fayard, 1994, pp. 58–59.

18 Félix Guattari: *Réflexions pour des philosophes à propos de la psychothérapie institutionnelle*, in: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, pp. 86–97, especially pp. 87–88, note 2. This essay first appeared in *Cahiers de philosophie*, no. 1 (journal of the Philosophy Group of the Sorbonne) and was later republished in the journal *Recherches* (1966).

19 In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud himself acknowledges the quasi-metaphysical nature of his reasoning. In the fourth chapter, he explicitly announces his departure from the empirical foundation that had served as the basis for the elaboration of his notion of "repetition compulsion" and accepts the risks implied by such a step: "What follows now is speculation – sometimes of a far-reaching kind – which each person will evaluate or reject according to their own perspective." (Sigmund Freud: *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in: *Studienaus-*

social and collective when it comes to object formation and object choice (two foundational aspects of human desire). In the context of Guattari's later collaboration with Deleuze, this aspect led to the use of concepts like "multiplicity" and "assemblage" in the light of which the term "object" in the post-Freudian context (whether it comes to Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, or Harry Guntrip) as well as its subjective counterpart (following the heritage of Descartes, Kant, or even Hegel) appear as epistemological archaisms.

Guattari's conceptual shift implies, among other things, a productivist conception of desire in which the notion of "lack" (as negative cause of "desire") evaporates. Freud's view of an underground level of human desire rooted in death (as intrapsychic inscription of a *meta*-physical kind) was further replaced, in the context of *Mille Plateaux* (1980), by the notion of "rhizome", its vitalist proliferation and his autopoietic ability (or force) to create collective processes of singularization[20]. The more liberated the movement of desire, the more reduced (or molarly codified, as Deleuze and Guattari would say) the social space for its inscription and accomplishment. In this context, the Marxist idea of "world transformation" (with its utopian impulse and messianic overtone) shifts into a micropolitics of subversion with an emphasis on local and barely perceptible transformations. We are faced with a philosophy of becoming with practical inroads of wandering consistency, far away from trade unions, political parties, and combatant cells. Such "molecular regimes" – an expression that refers to their functional inconsistency – usually escape immediate reabsorption into the (capitalist) system's coding machine.

The expression "transversalist detour" should be taken as a permanent subtraction from any tendency to fix, control, or "normalize" the different flows of desire at the service of collective transformation.

As I already pointed out in referring to the term "transversalism", Georges Lapassade took up the challenge of transversality and attempted to expand that concept by means of a detour. The expression "transversalist detour" should be taken not so much as a deviation or a distortion from the mainstream norm but rather as a permanent subtraction from any tendency to fix, control, or "normalize" the different flows of desire that can be put at the service of collective transformation[21]. Lapassade carries forth Guattari's subversion of institutional(ized) codes and amplifies it by means of a somewhat erratic but promising device. He questions, among other things, the dominant coefficient of rationality in the treatment of psychic abnormalities and social disruptions (both of which go together) and the institutional spaces fostering such epistemic and clinic intervention, adding a pedagogical dimension to it. What if abnormality, or at least some forms of it, indirectly reflected alternative roads to the standardized pathology of normalcy? What if that mirror, seen from the other side, could reveal other systems of thought, other forms of knowledge, and other ways of living (with their respective and hitherto barely seen worlds)?

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gabe, Volume III: *Philosophie des Unbewußten*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1997, pp. 213–272, quote p. 234).

20 "A multiplicity has neither subject nor object. [...] Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are not tied to the supposedly unified will of an artist or puppeteer, but to the multiplicity of nerve fibers that form another puppet following other dimensions connected to the first [...]. The nerve fibers, in turn, form a weave and fall through the gray matter, the grid, into the undifferentiated." (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, pp. 14–15).

21 The notion of *dérive* (drift, detour) refers to a movement that diverts the focus of signification precisely to nurture a subtractive flow parallel to dominant signifiers and discursive traps (mechanization of polemics, instrumentalization of concepts, and rigidification of initiatives and practices). In this regard, we should remember Jean-François Lyotard's book *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (1975), in which the term "drift" appears in the title as an example of a type of writing and a reflective practice fully aligned with the subtractive movement which proves impervious to mainstream ideological retrieval. One can recognize in Lyotard a trajectory very attentive to the notion of *dérive*, from *Économie libidinale* (1974, which can be read as an experiment in active writing that conjures the intensities of machinic desire) to *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (1988), where Lyotard offers a differential approach to the primal repression (*Urverdrängung*) of Western thought – beyond its most radical but still selective gesture of "difference" embodied in Heidegger's philosophy – and its genocidal consequences.

Guattari had clearly shown that the mechanics of the psychiatric institution (with its politics of neutralization and its perpetual oppression of disruptive forces emerging from "madness") is effectively regulated by a specific form of "institutional transference", to which he opposed the idea of "transversality in the group"[22]. Creating a space of transversality meant for him modifying naturalized, stereotyped, and meaning-regulating pyramidal structures – which affect not only the patient-analyst relationship but also the roles and functions within institutions more broadly (nurses, interns, doctors, etc.). If the transferential relationship is narrow, rigid, mechanical, individualizing – "an internalization of *bourgeois* repression" that reproduces "caste phenomena with their cortege of group phantasms", transversality can eventually avoid the dead end of vertical rigidity and at the same time its abstract counterpart: simple horizontality. The goal, rather, is to "establish [...] a maximum of communication [...] between the different levels and, above all, in different directions"[23]. Far from the pseudo-anarchic stereotype encapsulated in the phrase "let desire flow everywhere", Guattari's aim was to generate creative twists and turns in a group's energy that may permeate all its levels of articulation, thereby avoiding prior confinement to the roles assigned by the system. As an interventionist strategy, the Guattarian device of transversality intends to bring to light and correct what Lapassade would later call "institutional forgetting"[24]. *Bourgeois* society (and its postmodern version) has established a system of forgetting – repressing, oppressing – any instance that might stir one's own desire to change, improve, and expand collective life. It has silenced other voices, and the echoes of alterity that challenge human beings' miserable isolation in the wasteland of a one-world world.

Let us recall that, for Guattari, industrial society aspires to "an unconscious control of our destiny, satisfying from the perspective of the death drive", whose result is "a vast mutilated body, reassembled solely according to the requirements of the supreme god of [capitalist] economy"[25]. The alternative, writes Guattari, is "a new kind of dialogue, so that delirium and any other unconscious manifestation—in which the patient had until now been enclosed and isolated—might become a collective expression"[26]. Without the energy of *delirium* (literally: that which deviates from the norm), nothing is possible, but the *im*possible, that is, the internal possibility contained in the deviation from the norm, demands taking risks. It is well known that, in order to block that disruptive potential, our society declares the inception of delirium to be a delusional state or a criminal tendency. Creativity is not only presented as destructiveness but also shaped by the very reactive forces it intends to fight against. The question is then: how can one give expression to the energy of delirium so that it may re-activate reified spaces of group behavior within an institution and bring them to fruition?

As early as 1955, Guattari ascribed "an anthropological role" to madness. His motivation was clear: "we are beginning to realize that madness is an essential phenomenon, particularly in our contemporary society, and for this reason it is necessary to revise old frameworks of thought"[27]. This early statement has striking implications. Guattari did not say that madness needed to be approached anthropologically (as Michel Foucault would later do in 1961[28]); rather, he claimed that madness

22 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 79.

23 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 79.

24 Georges Lapassade: *Socianalyse et potentiel humain*, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1975, p. 97. Lapassade's observation emerges from the analysis of the psychoanalytic treatment. According to him, the consolidation of this type of cure depends on a repression of the problems involved in the course of its very institutionalization. Clearly, the Freudian model serves as a basis for a critical analysis of the dynamics of any institution in modern Western society, insofar as its functioning is symptomatically selective.

25 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 82.

26 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 82.

27 Félix Guattari: *Sur les rapports infirmiers-médecins*, in: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, pp. 7–17, quote p. 9. This text consists in a report of a discussion that took place between Guattari and Jean Oury at the clinic La Borde.

28 Michel Foucault: *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, Plon, 1961. Foucault's archaeological method leads to the practice of a singular anthropology, as it uncovers hidden aspects of social dynamics by transforming the gaze and shifting the usually accepted codes of intelligibility. This is what

deserved to be assigned an anthropological role. We must begin *from* delirium and seek possible openings in thought and action that could contribute to new forms of subjectivity – while challenging at the same time outdated (i. e. conservative, mainly Eurocentric and colonialist) conceptual frameworks. In view of this anthropological turn within psychiatry, Lapassade understood quite well that an "anthropologist of madness" does not risk or gain much by merely describing or theorizing an object of study. Instead, he allowed himself to be re-anthropologized by what madness revealed, and the channels to express the new anthropological potential were mainly to be sought in subversive arts and marginal forms of religion. His transversalist detour consists in carrying the transversal input to a point of saturation, namely the saturation of a culturally (over-)determined desire. I am referring to the desire for "truth" in sociology, history, psychoanalysis, and any other devices of power that perpetuate the geopolitical asymmetry of forces – whether in terms of First World vs. Third World, or in the opposition between developed countries and developing countries. Lapassade's detour manages to introduce new instances of subjectivation quite foreign to the modern Western spirit – with its relentless techno-scientific colonialism and its obsession with universal values.

THE TRANSVERSALIST REORIENTATION: LAPASSADE'S "DRIFT"

In 1974, Lapassade published *Les chevaux du diable* (*The Devil's Horses*), subtitled *Une dérive transversaliste* (*A Transversalist Drift*). This book, which emerged from his experience with institutional analysis in Brazil between 1972 and 1979, pursues an audacious goal: to map the revolutionary potential of excluded social actors and restore their confiscated language, transforming it into a kind of "magical weapon". Read in the light of his earlier novel *Le bordel andalou* (1971), Lapassade's work can be said to articulate the anthropological reverse side of delirium and let long forgotten forces (at least in the European context) re-emerge and take over the scene. In a way, Lapassade returned to an early intuition of Guattari which can be found in his dialogue with Jean Oury on the anthropological role of madness, but he also attempted to reshape it within the framework of a *socio*-analysis with a view to reaching a much deeper level of transformation – under the rubric *trans*-analysis. This term points to a form of analysis operating beyond the established institutional and cultural framework; it even questions the very idea of "analysis" – which for Lapassade revealed a wordy and sterile methodology (what he would later call *parolisme*). His focus upon madness was permeated with a special type of anthropology – one carried out to its very point of inversion. The analyst must be able to grasp the other side of his profession *through desire* (not through analytical procedures); he must experience "the other side of madness" through contact with cultural referents (or rather "entities") embodying *otherness* – rather than confine madness to a self-referential desert, preserving thus the clinician's comfort zone. This procedure does not mean romanticizing pathologies or giving in to any kind of sterile superstition. Neither of these attitudes could pave the way to that "other side," because both coexist within the same saturated space: the West, with its modern constitution of truth and normality/normativity. In fact, Western truth was epistemically purified and universally sanctioned, and it became the most effective support of neo-colonialist strategies dressed in promises of universal progress and emancipation[29].

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happens (or rather what *should* happen) in anthropology when one attempts to extract the structural meaning of phenomena and behaviors from civilizations considered distant from and even incommensurable with Western culture.

29 Cf. Bruno Latour and his critique of the modern constitution, which "invents a separation between the scientific power responsible for representing things and the political power responsible for representing subjects" (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 46). This separation, which leads to an epistemic split between "nature" and "culture", and to a purification or erasure of the socio-historical inscription of scientific procedures, makes it possible to write history and construct anthropology based on an absolute distinction between truth and error, science and belief, culture and primitivism – all this, of course, with eminently political consequences. Latour's proposal consists in critically interrogating, in the context of modern Western society, the

Les cheveaux du diable opens with an epigraph from Gilles Deleuze's book *Logique du sens* (*Logic of Sense*). The text reads: "What if analysis and desire finally ended up on the same side? What if it were desire that in the end performs the analysis?" The word confiscated by analysis, the word from "the other side" (i.e. the "outside" of desire), is that which cannot be verbalized. Lapassade's writing (even before reaching its thematic referent) attempts to recover that other side through a hybrid passage toward a politics of exteriority – one that begins with a de-neutralization of the body and a transgression of the very ideological parameters composing an individual: "They don't want to understand. They prefer to beat, expel, exorcize. And yet, I am convinced that the liberation of the body is on the agenda"[30]. The process of subversive transformation begins with the inscription of the letter in the body, or the confluence between that written inscription and the spirit of the other side (no less material than the body receiving it) that breaks into that space. It is easy to notice, in Lapassade's project, the importance of the struggle for the liberation of new subjectivities that characterized the spirit of May 1968, and the personal failures he faced to consolidate and disseminate that struggle in France and Canada. His narrative brings each local referent to a turning point; its amplification strategies redirect the reader toward a problem that cannot be grasped by means of socio-political clichés of the type "clash between students and police", "rebellious intellectuals vs. conservative bureaucrats", "anarchic-desiring militants against reactionary *apparatchiks*", or "rigid institutions and subversive analysts". The politics of the outside – as disclosure of the other face of desire – requires disposing of all ideological garments inscribed in the foundations of an allegedly universal paradigm, and opening up the fabric (bodily and discursive, without much distinction) to the irruption not just of "difference" and its respective "language games", but of *exteriority* itself. This exteriority implies not only a different space, but also a pulsation, *a different agential and relational dynamic* in the constitution of that vital space. It is in his quasi-poetic impulse to articulate the outside that Lapassade assumes his own excess, taking his proposal far beyond the parameters of institutional analysis: "That naked group was the counterculture within the counterculture—the black sexual macumba within a white Occitan purity establishing itself as a repressive force"[31]. In this depiction, Lapassade declares his own (Occitan) ancestry to be contaminated by the same type of repression as the one he personally suffered while trying to carry out his projects in different university contexts – against which he finally decided to react, despite the ostensible lack of counter-referents stemming from his own cultural space. The alternative must therefore entail a high – or rather excessive – coefficient of otherness.

Lapassade's passionate and even obsessive bent on transgressive modes of subjectivation [...] intends not only to render "the Western symptom" ostensible but also to highlight the intrinsic value of a complex panoply of religious practices fitted together under the terminological umbrella of macumba.

Two years before *Les chevaux du diable* and one year after *Le bordel andalou*, that is, in 1972, Lapassade co-authored a book in Portuguese with Brazilian philosopher Marco Aurélio Luz entitled *O Segredo da Macumba* (*The Secret of Macumba*). The aim of that book (which in many ways looks like a political manifest) was to approach the subject of Afro-Brazilian religions beyond any "ethnographic paternalism or Catholic appropriation"[32] – something quite difficult at that time. The authors' argument against ethnographic paternalism (whose most prominent representative at that time was Roger Bastide[33]) stresses the error of believing that "*macumba* is an impoverished or degenerate

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mechanisms that conceal the (constitutively) hybrid nature of each cultural formation with respect to the constitution of its objects (of desire, daily practice, and knowledge). This critique reveals the ideological selectivity of "scientific objects" and their essential relation to the politics of expansion and domination that characterized European modernity and the extended Western paradigm.

30 Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable: une dérive transversaliste*, Paris, Éditions universitaires, 1974, p. 8.

31 Georges Lapassade, *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 8.

32 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1972, p. xii.

33 In Bastide's book *Les religions africaines du Brésil* (1960), the term *macumba* is related to the Brazilian

form of Candomblé", and the ideological nature of "establishing a scale of values to decide what is pure and what is impure"[34]. As for the Catholic appropriation of *macumba*, its possibility is revealed, according to the authors, in the hierarchical and bureaucratic organization of Umbanda federations. Lapassade refers not only to their material structure but also to their symbolic form, which lent itself to an alliance with the Catholic Church: "The symbolic social expression of Umbanda—the law of Oxalá, the good, the superior, and the pure, in contrast to the disorder of the Exús, the evil, the inferior, and the impure—adapts to the laws of the center and to the socially expected behaviors. [...] Today, Catholic priests are conducting research on Umbanda. Some try to revalorize the cult of the Orixás within the Catholic public sphere"[35].

In view of their rather Manichaean distinction, it becomes clear that, for the authors of *O Segredo da Macumba*, the term *macumba* is essentially tied to *quimbanda*. If the European counterculture of the 1960s proposed new subjectivities, Lapassade saw in that opposition cult (which contained not only repressed aspects of African religious practices partially eliminated and domesticated in Umbanda but also iconographical and cultic additions from modern European demonology and witchcraft) *a counterculture of the counterculture*, a more radical form of contestation leading toward new subjectivity parameters that are not only external to but also inaccessible to even the most radically libertarian doctrines in the West[36]. Lapassade's passionate and even obsessive bent on transgressive modes of subjectivation emanating from a social tissue that very often haunts the good (= white) European sensibility intends not only to render "the Western symptom" ostensible but also to highlight the intrinsic value of a complex panoply of religious practices fitted together under the terminological umbrella of *macumba*. For Lapassade, such practices constitute "a threat to psychoanalysts", partly due to their oppositional nature as a socio-religious phenomenon, but also because their concretion in *terreiros* involve "a therapy of immense technical richness – and, even more important, a popular therapy"[37]. This stands in utter contrast to the white elitism of the psychoanalytic therapy and the cultural snobbery resulting from it.

Lapassade's socio-analysis (later further developed and renamed *trans*-analysis) attempts to articulate the intrinsic value of *macumba* as "therapy" through an art that demands a production of desire liberated from the naturalized access to culture by means of the mainstream coupling "oppression–repression"[38]. In *Les chevaux du diable*, he wields the term *macumba* – practically exiled from ethnographic vocabulary (contrary to its widespread use among practitioners in Brazil) – as a battle horse, precisely because of the socio-critical discharge it triggers. *Macumba* appears in his eyes as a necessary disorder to restore the dimension of *collective Black desire* – an instance that has been confiscated, enslaved, and subjected to the laws of the "individualist white" order.

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subproletariat and considered part of the "practices of disaggregation". In contrast to the Candomblé of Bahia, such practices lack traditional values (all of which has been massively destroyed by industrialization and urbanization) and are therefore unable to unite their practices with adequate social bonds (cf. Roger Bastide: *Les religions africaines du Brésil*, Paris, PUF, 1995, pp. 409–412).

34 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, p. xiv.

35 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, p. xix.

36 Examples of such libertarian doctrines are the ones adopted by the Human Potential Movement in California, which dates back to the 1960s: Gestalt therapy, bioenergy, and encounter groups. In 1973, Lapassade discovered the possibility of transforming the socio-analytic device through his encounter with these new therapeutic initiatives (cf. Remi Hess, preface to Georges Lapassade: *Socianalyse et potentiel humain*, p. xvi).

37 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, p. xix.

38 A critique of this lexical pair was formulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, when they refer to Wilhelm Reich's great insight: "showing how intrapsychic repression (*refoulement*) depends on social repression (*répression*) [...] since social repression precisely needs intrapsychic repression to produce docile subjects and ensure the reproduction of the dominant social formation" (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Œdipe*, p. 143). Deleuze and Guattari refer to Reich's bold distinction between *Verdrängung* (translated into French as *refoulement*) and *Unterdrückung* (which they translate as *répression*), cf. Wilhelm Reich: *Die sexuelle Revolution,* Frankfurt, Fischer, 1974. The basis for this book, originally written in English in 1945, derives from an earlier German text published in 1936 titled *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*, from which the terminological issue is drawn.

Despite its unstable constitution as well as its complex political and cultural spectrum, the racialization of the term *macumba* should be regarded as a geopolitical and sociological fact[39]. For this reason, even today, it is difficult to embrace fully the terminological sanitization procedures often carried out in academia to keep it out of sight. Blackness is the dark, the rejected, the buried, or what is relegated to "hell". Whiteness is purification at multiple levels (ethnic, social, psychological, spiritual), with its consolidation of "well-being" led back to culturally foundational – i.e. ontological – principles. The devil is associated with the figure of Exú in *quimbanda*. As an oppositional entity, Exú made its appearance in writings prior to *O Segredo da Macumba*[40], but Lapassade's socio-analytical essay seeks to explore the meaning of a concrete interaction with him. What does it mean to become a horse of that "devil"? What cultural consequences could the work of a French writer have if he were literally mounted by an entity (to the point of experiencing a form of possession)? Some writers flirted with the figure of Exú; some others might have ventured some invocation for the sake of Gothic taste – or rather Satanic bad taste. Lapassade, on his part, wanted to implement a trickster figure whose destiny in mainstream Western culture is rejection and condemnation as a catalyzer to pass from "analysis" to "synthesis" (i.e. from an addictive rambling to a healing act) in a therapeutic context. In a way, his writing can be read as an effort to incorporate the entities of *quimbanda* that emanate from the two-headed (and virtually multiple) trunk of Exú-Pombagira, and to put forward a project of individual and collective transformation essentially linked to popular healing techniques. For Lapassade, those techniques are valuable remnants of foreign traditions being perpetually re-created and therefore deserving anthropological attention. His first aim is to transform the analytic space and its attempt at intra-psychic purification; the second is to change the theatrical scene inherited from representational traditions; and lastly he intends to subvert the social structure of Eurocentric history in its very foundations – the taken-for-granted opposition between "white (good)" and "black (bad/evil)." The entities of *quimbanda* reveal in this sense the secret of the *macumba*[41]: they are the bearers of a "theater of cruelty"[42] that performs – in the occurrence of each local ritual – a civilizational subversion. Lapassade offers both a bodily and a scriptural gesture: direct participation in rituals with aesthetic elaboration. He takes that gesture as a sacrificial revelation that can effect massive changes within already established parameters.

Before assessing the scope of Lapassade's "theater of cruelty" and attempting to determine its simultaneously utopian and aporetic character[43], let us first consider how the anthropological inversion

39 In this regard, the following observations by Vânia Zikàn Cardoso are especially relevant: "Macumba is both the ambiguity and the practices grouped under this disturbing (dis-ordering) designation, an ambiguity saturated with racialized meanings, a space of in-betweenness that feeds the mixture of desire and rejection of *macumba* found in Brazilian society" (Vânia Zikàn Cardoso: "Spirits and Stories in the Crossroads," in: Ruy Blanes, Diana Espírito Santo [eds.]: *The Social Life of Spirits*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 92–107, quote p. 94).

40 In his novel *Le bordel andalou*, Georges Labalue (Lapassade's alter ego) refers to his own metamorphosis in the following terms: "They say that I'm possessed by Exú, the black god. It's true. My life here [in Rio de Janeiro] is like a continuous trance" (Georges Lapassade: *Le bordel andalou*, Paris, L'Herne, 1971, p. 138).

41 "The goal [...] is to show that *quimbanda* is the most important aspect of *macumba*. At the same time [...] the meaning of *macumba* is hidden, it is secret. [...] Within *macumba*, all the libertarian aspirations of a particular social formation are present" (Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, p. xv).

42 To have an adequate idea of the scope of the term "theater of cruelty" as the only possible *real* theater (and the transformative project contained in it), it is best to let its inventor, the poet Antonin Artaud, speak for himself: "I declare that the current social state is infamous and must be destroyed. It is the task of the theater – or rather the task of the machine gun – to do so. Our theater is not even capable of posing the question correctly, with passion and effectiveness. It would be capable if it managed to go beyond the sphere of its own object, which for me is majestic and secret. [...] The object of theater seems to me to be directly related to that kind of poetry that accomplishes, the one that takes place when one knows how to draw effects in a concrete way and on all levels" (Antonin Artaud: *Le théâtre et son double*, in: *Œuvres Complètes* IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, pp. 40 and 288).

43 As we will see, every discourse embodying "difference" (with its numerous phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical variations) collapses or is dissolved in the ritual performativity of *macumba* which Lapassade relentlessly seeks. However, differences persist between the sexualized/written body proposed by Lapassade and the semantics of incorporation in ritual coupling with entities. In *Le bordel andalou*, Lapassade

functions in the thought of the French socio-analyst. *Les chevaux du diable* contains clearly disruptive elements related to the human sciences it draws upon (from psychoanalytic treatises to ethno-sociological research). The essay's style is hybrid – part of it diary, part novel, part manifesto. This formal trait reveals a subjective turn in the analyst's gaze. He descends not only into the Acheron of his own desire, but into that of a collective desire that resist any strategy of assimilation. As a "European analyst", Lapassade can only assume the (subversive, homosexual, anti-ethnocentric) difference that his analytic theater compels him to conceal. His attempt to enact that difference leads him, over the course of the novel, through various experiences of exclusion and failure—which can be read as a preliminary stage to the true irruption of otherness.

This scheme was already present in his novel *Le bordel andalou*, where the subjective overtones are even more pronounced, and the geographical shifts in the narrative compose both a transgressive and initiatory journey[44]. In *Les chevaux du diable*, the reader witnesses a construction of place articulated as a public project: the establishment of "institutional analysis" on Brazilian soil[45]. At the same time, Lapassade does not hide his subjective conflict. Once settled in Belo Horizonte, he openly regrets that his public life is that of a timidly rebellious professor. Protest can be expressed – up to a point – on the level of learned political discussions, but certainly not through sexuality[46] or self-management, not as a transformative impulse within educational institutions[47]. The most desired methodological revolution in the therapeutic field escapes him and seems to flicker far away from any possible concretion. The last two aspects compel us to approach not only Lapassade's confrontation with his own conflict (the reduction of social rebellion to alternative ideas as well as the concealment of sexual desire beneath the mask of a respectable professor) but also the way he conceives a possible transformation of all (other) social actors – that is, the activity of analysts and educators within public institutions subjected to a dictatorial regime[48].

In *Les chevaux du diable*, institutional intervention – in the legacy of Lapassade's and René Lourau's subversive spirit – stands as a trend of thought radically opposed to the social analysis founded by Elliott Jaques[49], which puts forward quite another model of socio-analysis. Lapassade criticizes the Anglo-Saxon version of socio-analytical consultancy for its purely contractual character – according to which client and consultant must remain totally dissociated. This requirement reveals an instrumentalization of the most parasitic aspects of psychoanalysis (developed by Elliott Jaques in the

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acknowledges this discrepancy: "I discovered the connection between these solitary, disappointing experiences [of liberated writing] and the collective experience of mediums." (*Le bordel andalou*, p. 7)

44 The first part of *Le bordel andalou* takes place in an underground Spanish setting (which in turn opens a channel to the Maghrebian underworld); the second contains an episode in Tunisia that marks the African irruption into Labalue's life (as well as his definitive exclusion from the "white world"); and the third part, which takes place in Brazil, is a descent to hell and an existential turning point—since the protagonist becomes traumatically bound to Exú.

45 Institutional analysis, as it was developed in France by René Lourau, is in fact the matrix of Lapassade's socioanalysis. Before his sojourn in the Brazil of the 1970s, Lapassade attempted to expand Lourau's project in Montreal, but such maneuver appeared as a contribution to the spirit of October '68 in Quebec (cf. Georges Lapassade: *Le livre fou*, Paris, Epi, 1971, p. 133).

46 Cf. Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 19.

47 On the different institutional levels of self-management, cf. Georges Lapassade: *Socianalyse et potentiel humain*, pp. 67–70. The experience of self-management in educational institutions is a project Lapassade began as early as in 1962 within the framework of the UNEF (*Union nationale des étudiants en France*).

48 Lapassade's experience in *Les chevaux du diable* unfolds in the context of the Federative Republic of Brazil under the presidency of Emílio Garrastazu Médici. As a European, his "dissident activity" was monitored but notably more tolerated than that of Brazilian intellectuals who opposed the regime, allowing him to create a short-lived oasis of pedagogical self-management – for instance, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Although he perceived this situation not only as socially promising but also as "profoundly erotic", Lapassade returned to concrete reality by means of the following reflection: "In this country without freedom, where organizing and speaking about organizing society is officially forbidden, this brief moment of democracy took on an emotional and at times pathetic character" (*Georges Lapassade, Les chevaux du diable*, p. 27).

49 This method was first developed in 1965, but its origins go back to 1947, when Elliott Jaques was working at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

context of organizational consultancy[50]), a capitulation – typical of *bourgeois* intellectuals – before the institutionalized imperatives of a bureaucratic state or a corporate structure. Lapassade compares the distinction between "client" and "consultant" in classical social analysis with the dissociation between "patient" and "specialist" according to the biomedical model[51]. The conviction of possessing "neutral knowledge"—that is, knowledge detached from any point of view—is the main aspect of the biomedical ideology that Lapassade aims to dismantle by invoking the *macumba* as therapeutic option. Since the "neutrality" of such method sets it apart from any other form of knowledge (ethnic, local, communal, magical-religious, etc.), the central objective of modern epistemology coincides – as Bruno Latour points out – with its very ideological tool: to purify its object of sociopolitical hybridity, to erase the collective subjectivity that constitutes it as well as the ideological conditions of possibility inherently tied to its "neutral value"[52]. In this way, a single, immovable, absolute point of view is consolidated – to the detriment of all other possible approaches. Scientific knowledge elevated to the rank of universal prescription implies an epistemic (counter-)mystification whose ambition is to abolish the plurality (and hybridity) of world configurations. The same method that sanctions a plurality of worlds dismisses all other forms of knowledge as either primitive stages of humanity or cultural products of underdeveloped societies. For Lapassade, by contrast, there is no knowledge without desire, no desire without subjectivity, and the subjective sphere – process-related and therefore impossible to essentialize – cannot be reduced to the individual, the family, or the most immediate exogamic group. It cannot even be reduced to a specificity of human species, nor can the human be taken as the exclusive bearer of affective and intellectual intentionality exercising a complex influence over its environment. It is rather the social, human and non-human environment that calls for analysis – due to its hitherto disguised complexity. In Lapassade's thought, *macumba* emerges as a counter-model of sociability and as an opening to intersubjective (human and non-human) configurations where desire flows through different channels and toward different destinations, generating not only other forms of knowledge but also other (therapeutic) mechanisms of influence.

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At the Catholic University of Belo Horizonte, Lapassade proposed a self-management experiment involving "the introduction of active work methods [...] with guitars, cigarettes, and *cachaça*, a popular spirit widely used [...] in macumba rituals"[53]. Unsurprisingly, his proposal was not received with enthusiasm by his Brazilian colleagues. They were part of a national "white" culture which is – still today – a magnified version of European values. His attempt to introduce a marginalized form of Brazilian counterculture into an institution ruled by the dominant values of the Nation ended in repeated failure. The accumulation of failures was subjectively compensated by Lapassade's increasing frequentation of *quimbanda terreiros*, especially in favela areas[54]. It is this specif-

50 See Elliott Jaques's 1982 article, where he summarizes his project of social analysis and explains his appropriations of the Freudian method: *The Method of Social Analysis and Social Change in Social Research*, in: *Clinical Sociology Review*, Vol. 1, 1982, pp. 50–58, especially p. 51.

51 "In the clinical act, the client's goal is to regain health, but the physician does not get involved in the client's illness. On the contrary, he avoids contamination. [...] This [classical] model of the socioanalytic consultation is very similar to the biomedical model." (Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 25). Along this very line, the "physiological" conception of trance that Lapassade would later elaborate – after his experiences with *macumba* – can be seen as a regression toward Eurocentric parameters. This will be explored in the final part of this essay.

52 Particularly on the notion of "scientific object" and its ideological purification, see Bruno Latour: *Notes sur certains objets chevelus*, in: *Nouvelle revue d'ethnopsychiatrie* No. 27. *Pouvoir de sorcier, pouvoir de médecin (1)*, Paris, La Pensée Sauvage, 1994, pp. 21–36.

53 Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 39.

54 Descriptions of these adventures into the underworld of *quimbanda* in the favelas are found especially in the third and sixth chapters of *Le bordel andalou*, whose titles deserve to be mentioned due to the symbolic relevance of their proper names: "Exú" and "Abaluaé", respectively.

ically marginal character of *macumba* that becomes conspicuous in his writings, turning his social anthropology into an insurgent form of ethnographic fiction. At the same time, his identification with marginal groups led to increasing social and intellectual isolation. It is precisely from that position that a selective (and partially biased) reading of the ritual distinction between Umbanda and Quimbanda emerged in his writings, along with an unnuanced condemnation of Candomblé in the Brazilian Nord-East – mainly in Bahia. Lapassade condemns ideals of Black-African purity in Candomblé almost as much as the white elites that incessantly work to de-Africanize Umbanda: "It is not fashionable, when one is a white Brazilian with intellectual status, to attend vulgar rituals [of *macumba*]. In Bahia, the *intelligentsia* has for a long time valorized the Candomblé of Salvador, thus distancing itself from macumba – especially from its most popular and vulgar aspects"[55]. In *O Segredo da Macumba*, Lapassade's movement from the oppositional construction "white culture vs. Black counterculture" to a subversive, hybrid, and marginal position is glaringly evident. According to him, the true resistance to white (Eurocentric and capitalist) domination is not located in the "pre-capitalist" cults of African origin (i.e. in the land of slaves) but rather in the urban subproletariat of the favelas in Rio and São Paulo[56]. Both the ideal of (Catholic and Umbandist) white purity and the ideal of (Yoruba and Fon) Black purity appear as forms of oppressive reaction against the true dark or shadowy counterculture, the impure and transgressive *macumba*.

For Lapassade, the world of *quimbanda* is "a specific and original cultural fact"[57], which cannot be explained merely by its origins in Congolese or Angolan ancestor worship and its link to healing practices[58], but rather by specific innovations that occurred in Brazilian *terreiros*. These include the transformation of Exú from an *orixá* (nature spirit) into an *egun* (spirit of the dead), the presumable feminization of the Bantu god Bombogira into Pomba Gira, and the incorporation of *caboclos* (indigenous spirits) and *pretos velhos* (spirits of enslaved Black Africans) into the pantheon of marginal and popular entities[59]. It is in the underworld of *quimbanda* that Lapassade finds the key to his own version of counter-culture: a religious and socio-political power counterbalancing an oppressive system disseminated throughout urban social fabric under labels such as progress, development, legality, and universal values. In this sense, Lapassade's transversalism consists in an immersion into the subterranean world of excluded sociality, where the existential void of a European who renounces his "collective burden" (the Freudian "death drive" diverted from its implosive negativity into channels of social destruction and dominance like racism and colonialism) can be filled by the power of antinomic entities – and restructured into a new existential and collective mode of resistance.

55 Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 39.

56 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, pp. xiv–xv.

57 Georges Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz: *O segredo da macumba*, p. xv.

58 Renato Ortiz refers to the explanations of Oscar Ribas, José Quintão, and Heli Chatelain regarding the term *kimbanda* to dissociate it from any identification with witchcraft in the Congo-Angolan context (cf. Renato Ortiz: *A morte branca do feiticeiro negro: Umbanda e sociedade brasileira*, São Paulo, Brasiliense, 2011, pp. 132–133). The opposition between *kimbanda* (a priest who conducts spirit worship) and *onganga* (a master of black magic), as well as the meaning of the Kimbundu root *mbanda* (faculty or art of divination and healing through natural remedies and supernatural cults), provide evidence that the dichotomy between *umbanda* and *quimbanda*, as programmatically asserted by authors like Aluizio Fontenelle (*O Espiritismo no conceito das religiões e a lei de Umbanda*, 1950) or Lourenço Braga (*Umbanda [white magic] and Quimbanda [black magic]*, 1961), results from a reinterpretation developed by just one (Eurocentric and evoutionist) trend of the Umbanda religion. This trend is marked, among other things, by a dualist conception of "good and evil" that not only clashes with the previous African substrate but also distorts part of the Kardecist heritage – whose evolutionism, although useful for constructing pseudo-racial arguments, intends to balance out such radical dualism when it comes to the vicissitudes of the spiritual world.

59 On the reorganization of sacred space within the Umbanda–Candomblé complex and the role of "spirits of darkness" in that context, see among others Stefania Capone: *La quête de l'Afrique dans le candomblé : pouvoir et tradition au Brésil*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2017, especially Chapter 4 (pp. 169–193).

PASSAGE À L'ACTE: ON WRITING (AND) TRANCE

In *Le bordel andalou*, the spectacular downfall of Georges Labalue – Lapassade's alter ego – within the institutional environment of "white Brazil" culminates in his expulsion from the *Merding Théâtre* group[60], whose gatherings take place at a luxurious hotel in Copacabana. More than a mere instance of discrimination, the exclusion scene looks like a court-proceeding in which the prosecutor is also the jury: the artists involved take on features of inquisitorial agents; Labalue is accused of manipulating the group's dynamics, poisoning relationships, and destroying the project. The outcome of that trial confines Labalue to the underworld of the favelas. His incursion progresses and becomes more intensive until one night, at the entrance to the *terreiro* of Dona Rosa (a *mãe de santo* mentioned in *O Segredo da Macumba* and *Les chevaux du diable*), his marijuana dealer transforms himself into Exú Caveira, lord of cemeteries. The world of non-human entities breaks into the human scene, and Labalue[61] – though intellectually bent to resist that irruption – is seized by the "powers of the outside" before he can even realize what is happening. That night, the entrance does not lead to the *terreiro* as a physical enclosure, but to the field of forces where the *quimbanda* entities take over. Labalue literally crosses the line and dwells on "the other side". Upon his return, he begins to die to the white world: his body barely manages to crawl, almost out of inertia, from the favela back to the "civilized space" (the city, the hotel room, the shower, the bed), but his soul remains tied to the *quimbanda* inferno. Several times, Labalue asks himself – oscillating between depression and paranoid reactions – whether what is happening to him may not be a drug overdose, a favela disease, or some other type of organic trouble. Yet his misadventure on the other side continues and reaches a point of no return: "I entered Rio's macumba to the point of living immersed in apprehension and terror. I have no faith, but I am fascinated and dominated by the cult of death and the Satanic side of macumba"[62].

Labalue's transition from daytime and conventional drama (that of the *Merding Théâtre*) to the popular and terrifying scenario of *macumba* (in the favela *terreiros*) disfigures and transfigures not only his experience but also his writing. Lapassade's novel weaves itself into a mixture of field notes, intimate diary entries, surrealist verse, fragments of conversations, and records of possession experiences. Disorder or reconfiguration? "This senseless imposture that I now feel authorized to call *writing*". Those were words Labalue pronounced in a room of an Andalusian brothel, as he listened to someone outside speaking about Abaluaé. This *orixá* of fever and heat was in fact the guardian at the entrance of the Brazilian *terreiro*, embodied in the criminal from the favela who hid

60 It is impossible not to connect the phonetics of the name *Merding Théâtre* with Lapassade's characterization of the group (and the entire project in question) as "crap theater." In the Tunisian interlude of the novel's first part, the excremental metaphor threatens to engulf the entire environment around Labalue, to the point of his remarking the following: "From then on, I had to be careful. If I didn't pay extreme attention, I risked sinking definitively into a tide of crap." (Georges Lapassade: *Le bordel andalou*, p. 42).

61 Perhaps it would be more adequate to use the compound proper-noun "Labalue-Lapassade" to refer to that complex character. In fact, Lapassade's novels featuring Georges Labalue include an internal replication of this character which offers *a mirror of the author from within the universe of the novel.* In *Le bordel andalou*, for example, Lapassade makes the construction of the literary character "Labalue" explicit – not as a conventional meta-discourse but from Labalue's own world. During the latter's confrontation with his fellow actors, one member of the theater says: "I'm surprised that in a moment like this, you're taking notes about a guy named Georges Labalue who would be someone else." (*Le bordel andalou*, p. 71). This is a double rupture with the dichotomy between "fact" and "fiction". In *Joyeux Tropiques* (1978), Labalue recounts a violent confrontation he had with Michel Foucault, which instantly transforms him into "Lapassade". When Foucault accuses him of being responsible for his dismissal [a real-life expulsion Lapassade experienced in Tunisia], Labalue—now as the author Lapassade—responds: "No, I didn't say that. But maybe it's a distorted echo of what I wrote in *Le bordel andalou*". Also, in *Joyeux Tropiques*, the Tunisia episode is told from the perspective of Georges Labalue, with Georges Lapassade as one of the characters: "They say the strike is over, and that French professors must return to work. Only one of them, Mr. Lapassade, allowed himself to interrupt his colleague Michel Foucault in the middle of a class." (Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux Tropiques*, Paris, Stock, 1978, p. 53).

62 Georges Lapassade: *Le bordel andalou*, p. 60.

marijuana under a pile of garbage. As Exú-Abaluaé, this figure is immune to filth. He belongs to the infernal entities, and through his feats of sorcery he grants Labalue the power to die to the white world and be reborn in the dark energy of the realm he feels attracted to. How is Labalue reborn? By annihilating all his representations, the culturally inherited contents introjected through"decent" modes of life – realizing that behind the decency of good life there is always the hypocritical instrumentalization of power and the cowardly attitude of choosing "measure" even if one craves "excess". Labalue's process of transformation is a sort of communion with Abaluaé, in which he experiences the torments of sickness and the shackles of madness, but also a healing power rooted in the very source of affliction. The graphic homology "Abaluaé-Labalue" in *Le bordel andalou* should attract the reader's attention. Far from accidental, it is the very inscription of Labalue's communion with the forces of the other side.

We could ask ourselves what kind of human being can emerge from that transformation process. However, the most immediate evidence for readers is the style of writing. Labalue(-Lapassade)'s writing literally becomes the *language of macumba*. In the midst of his intoxication, he writes in verse: "It's as if I, forced to write, always forced to write, what could only be in macumba, re-produced, I don't know why, I write it and they go together MACUMBA MACONHA"[63]. In a way, these verses summarize Lapassade's utopia: to make the secret of *macumba* into his own language and disseminate it to infect the others. A language that is not field notes, or lecture annotations, or pedagogical remarks, or strategic outlines for institutional intervention, or timid first-person asides in an essay, or rebellious speeches that die on the page, or wishful thinking that will never become act or attitude. This language emerges when the *logos* of conquest (along with all its "lofty values") is inverted and subverted by the infernal intensities that survived that conquest. But this does not simply come down to a therapeutic need for a passage (of the body) to action[64]; rather, it involves a new constellation of relationships that emerge from perceptual and sensory contact with alterity. Such relationships are articulated in a space incommensurable with the codes of the dominant culture (European or Western, Christian or secular, conventional or scholarly). For Lapassade, these *alterities* are no other than the entities of *quimbanda*, who create new forms of socialization at the *terreiro*. It is precisely in that piece of empowered land that the entities materialize – primarily through nodes, outbursts, fluids, and ecstatic surges – quite irrespectively of whether their personifications are judged to be "real", "mental", or "conceptual" by the perpetrators of our social myth of normalcy. But how can these entities – the non-human pole of communication and transformation – be articulated, if not by lending one's own (human) body to their irruption? For Lapassade, writing must, at a certain point, become a record of the influence of entities on human creativity, that is, it must flourish as *a poetics of effects*[65]. Poetics of effects is the inscription of that alien influence in the

63 Georges Lapassade: *Le bordel andalou*, p. 84.

64 In his book on Wilhelm Reich, Lapassade emphasizes the opposition between the psychoanalytic "acting out" (*passage à l'acte*) and the "working through the act" (*passage par l'acte*)—or technical intervention on the body—in Reich's bioenergetic conception, attributing to the latter a considerable advantage over Freud's verbal therapy (cf. Georges Lapassade: *La bioénergie: essai sur l'oeuvre de Wilhelm Reich*, Paris, Éditions universitaires, 1974, p. 46).

65 This poetics is what Lapassade saw in Marco Aurélio Luz when he began to work with him in 1970. Luz's Marxist orientation – with all the political, critical, and cultural selectivity it entails – did not prevent him from regularly attending the *terreiro* of Maria Batuca (to the point of receiving an *Exú* quite different from the one conjured and partly fantasized by Lapassade), producing documentary films about *macumba*, and enhancing his relationships not only with religious authorities of the Afro-Brasilian world but also with the entities of Candomblé as well as with those of the Umbanda-Quimbanda complex (cf. Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, pp. 107–108). Unlike Lapassade, Marco Aurélio Luz saw the opposition between Umbanda and Quimbanda, as presented in *O segredo da macumba*, as specific to a particular context. Brazil under a dictatorial regime certainly privileged Eurocentric, racist, and classist cultural policy, although that tendency did not begin with dictatorial governments but with the very constitution of a certain "Umbanda integrity" that intended to free itself from any influence stemming from African traditions and align itself with European (evolutionary) models (cf. Luiz Antonio Simas: *Umbandas: Uma História do Brasil*, Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 2024, p. 16). In the same year in which Lapassade published his book on Wilhelm Reich, Luz began to relativize the institutional opposition between Umbanda and Quimbanda and openly recognized the value of Candomblé *nagô* in

written word, and its subsequent amplification from the reverse side. It is in this way that Lapassade expands the Guattarian notion of transversality with the aim of experientially confirming and re-affirming *macumba* against all racial, religious, political and social prejudices. Macumba is not to be taken as a metaphor for the rebellion of marginal, excluded or repressed desire, or as a denominator of marginalized social classes, or even as the violence of the system internalized in their structural victims, but rather as *a field and horizon of (much broader and qualitatively different) socialization*.

If the social (human and non-human) actors of *macumba*, with their disruptive force capable of resisting social repression and even replacing Western forms of therapy[66], are reduced to occasional outbursts of desire and a collateral gesture of exteriority here or there, then the force of writing can be confined to the conventionalized space of "marginal expressions (of mere subjectivity)". This is a risk in Lapassade's proposal, precisely because of its explosive and erratic character. Like all endeavors combining an excessive individual yearning for transgression and a deficient and/or biased exploration of the field in which such attempts should reach a collective level, his gesture runs the risk of vanishing upon contact with concrete life and its relentless intricacies. Marco Aurélio Luz, co-author of *O Segredo da Macumba* and Lapassade's guide during his marginal excursions in Rio de Janeiro, rendered that scriptural trace of alterity much more fruitful by including a singular and progressive articulation of what he termed "Black counterculture." His work bears witness to the other side, before which Lapassade stands in awe – or freezes in terror and rapture. Luz's titanic effort to articulate the counterculture of the excluded is contained primarily in his book *Agadá: Dinâmica da Civilização Africano-Brasileira* (*Agadá: The Dynamics of Afro-Brazilian Civilization*), which began as a doctoral thesis in 1988 and saw several editions (with revisions and expansions) between 1995 and 2020[67]. That work seeks to reconstruct, affirm, and articulate a continuity (usually denied by orthodox scholarship) in the transmission of Black cultural values in Brazil, with special attention to their complexity and plurality. Luz attempts to do justice to the dual foundation of the trans-Atlantic cultural complex that permeates Brazilian religiosity: the cult of the dead (*nkisis*) and of natural forces (*orixás*). Lapassade, by contrast, embarks on a proliferation of fragments of writing and attempts to generate a dizzying oscillation between *quim-*

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the anti-colonialist and anti-racist struggle in Brazil, as well as the links between Candomblé and Umbanda (cf. Jean-Claude Bernardet: *Os babalaôs resistem aos sociólogos*, in: *Opinião*, 28 February 1974, p. 24). This shows that every dichotomy consisting of two poles "good-evil" – even when inverted (as in Lapassade's countercultural project) to address sociopolitical and cultural injustices – can never do justice to the complex and intricate relationship of Afro-Brazilian religions with their respective sources of inspiration. Such relationship, when depicted by the tension between Umbanda and Quimbanda, can be better expressed through a complementary (instead of an oppositional) dualism. Umbanda and Quimbanda practices should be situated along a pluridimensional religious *continuum*, and a possible approach could consist in describing the practitioners' relationship with entities in terms of a right-hand path (Umbanda) and a left-hand path (Quimbanda), both of them being variants of a single cult (cf. Juliana Barros Brant Carvalho, José Francisco Miguel Henriques Bairrão: *Umbanda and quimbanda: black alternative to white morality*, in: *Psicologia USP*, Vol. 30, 2019, pp. 1–11, especially p. 9).

66 Cf. Georges Lapassade: *Les chevaux du diable*, p. 56.

67 When we say "corrections," we refer not only to textual errors but also to a shift in position – or rather, in the author's motivation – from an academic interest to an existential engagement related to the politically challenging treatment of the topic. Marco Aurélio Luz's existential commitment to what he calls "Black values" results from a personal struggle against the education he received in the context of Rio de Janeiro's "white" (Eurocentric, positivist, liberal) elite and a lucid, attentive, and sensitive awareness of the importance of enslaved, marginalized, and obliterated or exterminated traditions in the construction of Brazilian identity with all its historical vicissitudes. (cf. Marco Aurélio Luz: *Agadá: Dinâmica da Civilização Africano-Brasileira*, Salvador, EDUFBA, 2020, pp. 20–21). At the same time, because of his own study and practice of Afro-Brazilian religions, Luz adopts a position contrary to that of ethnologists who engage in the cults for merely "scientific purposes" (cf. Stefania Capone: *La quête de l'Afrique dans le candomblé*, pp. 57–58). His work emerges from existential, cultural, and religious involvement, and its goal is to get rid of two masks: the "scientific" and the purely "individual". The former attacks the cults' vitality through analytical vivisection, while the latter magnifies a single perspective through a one-sided consideration of individual processes and realities (cf. Marco Aurélio Luz, *Agadá*, especially pp. 363–364).

banda intensities (as factors of subversive therapy and sociocultural torsion) and literary techniques that serve as aesthetic bridges but at the same time act as a cultural barrier. His *"writing of exclusion"* undermines the kind of articulation and expansion we find in Marco Aurélio Luz's work (not only in essays but also in his film documentaries), since it rejects – after the fashion of all *minor literature*[68] – any possibility of reinforcing itself through attachments to external configurations (in this case, local religious and cultic traditions) that could provide coefficients of ancestry, performative meaning, or counter-identity.

The "exteriority" of minor literature provides a permanent exile in a nearly inhospitable (non-)place. Lapassade's novel *Joyeux tropiques*, which can be read as an attempt at inverted ethnography[69], contains multiple layers where the impasse of writing as "a hope that always coincides with the deepest despair"[70] becomes ostensible. Faithful to the notion of *minor literature* as a form of writing stripped of everything and converted into pure intensity of desire, Lapassade's hybrid and feverishly nomadic traces span from Tunis to Dakar, from Paris to Naples, and from Tipasa to Rio. They are carried along two thematic threads, both tied to the night: possession rituals and sexual encounters**.** In this context, the "Black element" is not a political-religious counter-identity (as it would later appear in Marco Aurélio Luz's work) opposing colonialism and ethnocultural oppression. It is rather *the* mark of an institutional exclusion on the body*:* "Because the Blacks were discredited, I was too [...]. Lost for lost, I felt obliged to carry out my immediate desires"[71]. Throughout *Joyeux tropiques*, Labalue's wandering connects references that could never be linked within a professional ethnographic study: the Stambali music-therapeutic ritual in Tunisia, the procession of the *Madonna dell'Arco* in the Neapolitan suburbs, the Candomblé Nagô of Bahia and its popular variants, until finally returning – once again – to the terrain of *macumba*: "One has to shake up the rigidity of ethnology, puncture the overly serious discourse of sociologists, and learn to see trance with new eyes instead of locking it up in the knowledge of specialists"[72].

What does Lapassade see in the phenomenon of trance with those "new eyes" bestowed by his literary alter ego (Georges Labalue)? In the entities of *macumba*, he sees "earth, life, sex"; in the *orixás*, "sublimation and castration"[73]. This opposition would dissolve if so-called possession cults were no longer considered the case of an individual outside of himself, but rather that of an interaction between a human being and another social agent (culturally inscribed in the invisible reverse-side of the same environment). This would imply a relational opening to a concrete (both intrapsychic and bodily) inscription of the cultural entities involved in the situation – whether it be the *Exú* of Brazilian *quimbanda*, the *Erzulie* of Haitian Vodou, or the *Madonna dell'Arco* of Catholic-pagan Italy. Such an expansion of the observer's gaze renders his/her cultural participation fundamentally relational, but it requires not only decentering oneself from the status of "individual" and making room for other voices; it also implies reconfiguring an entire universe of meaning hitherto inaccessible, and integrating it into a collective level of experience to organically reinforce social relations[74].

68 With this term, we return to Guattari and Deleuze, who in their book on Kafka (1975) emphasize the "strong coefficient of deterritorialization" that affects language and drives the writer to "become the nomad, the immigrant, the gypsy of his own language" (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Minuit, 1975, pp. 29 and 35, respectively).

69 The radical opposition to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* is obvious, not only in the title (*joyeux* vs. *tristes*), but also in Lapassade's travel motive. Lévi-Strauss's book opens with a declaration of hatred toward travels and explorers, whose adventurous character represents the opposite of the ethnographer's discipline (cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes tropiques*, Paris, Plon, 1993, p. 13); Lapassade, by contrast, writes: "Each of my journeys has reasons that are not ethnographic; I make these trips as an amateur" (Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 71).

70 Maurice Blanchot: *L'espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 71. Blanchot's pages on Kafka, which make up the second chapter of his book (written in 1955), in many ways anticipate – and in a certain sense surpass – several aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature.

71 Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 50.

72 Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 141.

73 Georges Lapassade, *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 140.

74 It is a mistake to believe that cultural entities exist only in history or ethnology books when there is

The transversality proposed by Guattari, namely a device whose aim was to inject vital intensity into rigid and sterile forms of socialization, is considerably extended, in Lapassade's work, toward modes of singularization not limited to the human factor. Natural forces, the dead, gods and demons, ancestral webs, mythical cartographies and their corresponding ritual enactments are all part of his subversive assemblages[75]. This complex, multiple, and interconnected constellation provides a new (and very peculiar) version of Guattari's transition from subjected (or oppressed) to subjectified (or emancipated) groups. However, Lapassade's writing morbidly rejoices in an existential minimalism constantly challenged by irruptions of alterity but unable to establish a stable relationship with the spaces of subjectivation articulated by the forces of alterity. After all, the good news that Lapassade proclaims in *Joyeux tropiques* is the following: there is no longer any need to travel to exotic cultures to encounter trance. This ecstatic phenomenon also exists on European soil. It is preserved in "the miraculously retained memory of what once formed the foundation of our Mediterranean culture"[76]. This explains, he argues, "why young Italian workers and peasants can enter the same type of trance as the faithful of Vodou or Macumba, only without the ritual and cultural support provided by Afro-American religions"[77]. In this key statement of *Joyeux tropiques*, the utopia of a transcultural macumba converges with the aporetic attempt to empty the latter's inherent cultural references and preserve its subversive power. This is the core of Lapassade's practice of *minor literature*. A "symbolic and emotional space"[78] proves to be sufficient to provoke trance and shift existential parameters. This space, once called psycho-socio-analytical, is now re-founded *emptied of all belief* – and thus stripped of any concrete and tangible alterity[79]. In fact, the term "belief" is already

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clear evidence of their concrete manifestations in places of power, consecrated objects, ecstatic bodies, devotional songs and dances, or techniques of influence. The ethnocentric and reductionist idea that equates "religion" with "belief" (as opposed to "science" and "knowledge") results from a conceptual abstraction that emerged from a struggle against a previous abstraction: the theological notion of "religion" as "revealed knowledge" within the framework of Christianity. This superimposed concept hides the rich and complex reality of religious phenomena, which can never be reduced to any theoretical or dogmatic schema. As Graham Harvey notes, if the study of religions could resist the tendency toward alienating conceptual mediation (greatly intensified by the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the modern state), the religious world would appear as an "everyday reality" lived by "people who eat, make love, host guests, and care for strangers" (Graham Harvey: *Food, Sex & Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 3) – a reality as far removed from the radical transcendence of monotheism as it is from the laboratory abstraction of modern science, two instances historically linked by their exclusive claims to "reality."

75 If transversality expresses, as Guattari states, "a nomadism of fronts" (Félix Guattari: *Révolution moléculaire*, p. 17), this implies not only a certain link between analysis, revolutionary movement, madness, and art, but also "a multitude of singular entities, flows, territories, and incorporeal universes that articulate themselves into functional assemblages" (Félix Guattari: *Les années d'hiver*, p. 130). Here, Guattari refers to modes and agents of experience that are not codifiable by pre-established norms, that is, they are not to be declared "universal". For this reason, they are capable of collapsing quasi-naturalized oppositions rooted in the Western cultural heritage – such as the distinction between reality and fantasy (or delusion).

76 Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 71.

77 Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 79.

78 Georges Lapassade: *Joyeux tropiques*, p. 80.

79 The terminological shift from "possession" to "trance," which Lapassade frames around Franz-Anton Mesmer's notes on the exorcist Johann Joseph Gassner, signals his belief in the "progress" represented by the erasure of alterity. This is a regrettable instance of regression in his work in relation to the results of his experiential endeavors in Brazil. In his later reasoning, two distinct cultural entities – the devil and hysteria (both closely linked to particular techniques of intervention and, in the cases of Mesmer and Gassner, mutually incommensurable) – are to be placed along a historical continuum, in spite of not having any reliable scale to venture such confluence. By way of argumentative compensation, a transition is constructed from a mystical-religious phase (Gassner and traditional Christian exorcism) to a cosmo-scientific one (Mesmer and his theory of animal magnetism), which is supposed to include Lapassade's de-mystified orientation (cf. Georges Lapassade: *La découverte de la dissociation*, Paris, Loris Talmart, 1998, p. 13). But Lapassade candidly overlooks that cultural entities do not disappear simply because scientific concepts emerge with the sole aim of replacing them. Rather, they vanish when the world-configuration from which that specific kind of knowledge and understanding of the world emerges ceases to sustain collective modes of existence and behavior. In this sense, the possession symptom is not just a disguised hysterical symptom. It has its own structure, actors, and techniques of intervention, regardless of how these may be judged externally. Tobie Nathan is right in saying that the symptom is "a culturally

a sign that the performative qualities stemming from and characterizing the socio-religious life of "the others" have been reinserted into conventional value-judgements inherited from the time of colonial expansion, like the opposition between "belief" and "knowledge".

With regard to the last aspect, one should avoid falling into the assumption that the irruption of alterity depends on belief. It is rather the opposite: the intensity and scope of the experience irreversibly break open the belief-knowledge opposition and awaken the eyes of the participant-observer to multiple agents and entangled threads that permanently reconfigure the world and frustrate every attempt to fix absolute parameters (whether through science, evolutionism, or religious fanaticism). The observer no longer observes, and participation is as much internal as external. This is the closest Lapassade comes to the realization of a counter-cultural utopia mainly situated in his own subjective reaction to "oppressive convention", but there is an aporetic aspect in his project. His writing wants to become *macumba* without realizing the whole spectrum of that pluri-dimensional cultural complex involving cultic practices, social service, collective re-education, and another – specifically local – way of thinking and living. It is a writing whose loyalty to the logic of his desire is at the same time a barrier to producing and perceiving communal effects. I would venture to say that, in Lapassade's work, writing is the very gap that hinders *macumba* from becoming more than "a specific desire for *macumba*", that is, *macumba* tangentially experienced through marijuana intoxication, street sex, adrenaline shocks in favelas, and flirtation with lumpen proletarians. Lapassade's obsessive search for such black alleys paradoxically keeps at a distance the very entities whom he feels attached to, since their realization consists in a progressive recontextualization of the individual life (always narrow-minded and insignificant) for the sake of the (animistically expanded) agency felt and nurtured in traditional rituals – however "fragmentary" and "popular" they appear to be in the eyes of cultural tourists.

Lapassade's writing wants to become macumba without realizing the whole spectrum of that pluri-dimensional cultural complex involving cultic practices, social service, collective re-education, and another – specifically local – way of thinking and living.

Even though Lapassade – despite his initial Brazilian fervor – tended to empty *macumba* of its cultural referents in favor of a *minor literature*, his movement took a third – unexpected – direction after his return to Europe, which consisted in re-territorializing minor literature. He worked on a reconfiguration of the internal logic of his ethno-literary motives with an eye to *re-filling* his "desire of *macumba*" with concrete and socially valid elements[80]. This is the level of what he termed *trans*-analysis**,** a concept explored in the final part of his book *Socianalyse et potentiel humain* (1975) and further elaborated in *Essai sur la transe* (1976). In fact, his *Essai sur la transe* can be read as a historical development of the project he introduced not only in his work on socio-analysis but mainly throughout his broader engagement with the question of institutional subversion. The subtitle of that book is worthy of note: *Hysterical Materialism*[81]. In the context of that book, "hysteria" is no cultural endpoint of trance imposed by Western models (or more precisely: the shift from the broad spectrum of trance to the very limited and fully medicalized arena of "conversion disorders") but rather a mate-

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coded message" (Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres: traité d'ethnopsychiatrie clinique*, Paris, Dunod, 2001, p. 39), and Philippe Descola situates this clinical observation within a broader anthropological framework when he refers to the problem of cultural plurality grounded in a diversity of natures: "Our cosmology [i.e., the naturalist cosmology of modern Western thought] made science possible, but one must understand that this cosmology is not itself the product of scientific activity. It is rather a mode of distributing the entities of a world that emerged in a specific period and allowed science to develop" (Philippe Descola: *Diversité des natures, diversité des cultures*, Montrouge, Bayard, 2010, p. 69).

80 In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the Czech writer's minor literature as an artificial enrichment that relies on external resources (symbolism, oneirism, esotericism, etc.) to save narrative from its own referential void. In this sense, the anti-Kafka in the Austro-Hungarian context of the early 20th century is Gustav Meyrink (cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, p. 34).

81 Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance : Le matérialisme hystérique*, Paris, Delarge, 1976.

rialist foundation enabling Lapassade to sketch a *physiological theory of delirium (not delusion!)* and anchor it in the somatic realm without resorting to any negative etiology. Trance, then, is seen as "a bodily behavior [...] shaped by culture"; "a complex, over-codified [type of] behavior"[82] that, in the past, took the following hyper-relational forms: Shamanism (communication with animal and plant spirits); possession cults (communication with supernatural entities); prophecy (speech and/or behavior inspired by divinity); and Satanic trance (alliance with the shadow side of divinity)[83]. In the case of hysteria, all external cultural referents – affirms Lapassade – disappear, and the energetic discharge is focused on the individualized and suffering body. From this perspective, hysteria appears as a secularized type of satanic trance, a phenomenon adapted to the cultural referents of capitalism—out of which no emancipatory instance can arise**.** In this context, what kind of ecstatic behavior might serve as the basis and reference point for Lapassade's *trans*-analysis?

Just as Marx suggested that capitalism—as a mode of production and a conflict-laden social formation—would eventually lead to its own overcoming in communism, Lapassade claims that hysteria is the historical culmination of trance and at the same time a new horizon to envisage "the trance of the future" – that is, a form of ecstatic behavior freed from any historical and socio-cultural enslavement[84]. This "future" form of irruption, distilled over millennia and proliferating in the secular world, corresponds, according to Lapassade, to its primordial form. It is a kind of "naked trance" stripped of automatically imposed codes, which alludes "not exactly to full animality, but to a dissolving animality and an emerging humanity, to a transitional state at the dawn of culture, not yet fully detached from the state of nature"[85]. Guided by a materialist mythology that repeatedly echoes the main ideological motif of secularized colonial Western thought, namely the universal truth of modern *episteme* against the socio-mythical narratives of the past and of distant cultures, Lapassade assumes that hysteria is referentially minimalist. This assumption overlooks Freud's entire narrative construction of the topic[86], which, in fact, contains just as many cultural referents as indigenous shamanism, *macumba*, candomblé, or satanism. The minimalist character of hysteria is not referential but relational, and the analysts' narrative may be seen as compensating for the bodily implosion experienced by the patients when confronting the intensities of their energetic field—and the cultural poverty (which amounts to the naturalization of the phenomenon) that hinders them from using those experiences constructively. Once again, Lapassade's intuitions are much more fruitful than his further development, in which he unfortunately falls back on prejudiced and outdated models. When he universalizes trance by detaching it from any framework of traditional institutionalization and its associated cultural referents, he seems to make progress with a general theory but in fact he is losing focus and privileging Western prejudices disguised in scientific truths. But not everything is ruined and lost. He proposes at the same time to overcome hysteria by means of new references that de-pathologize symptoms and transform them into expressions of subversive desire (desire as movement of rupture with the *status quo*). Bioenergetic trance, whose origins lie in Wilhelm Reich's thought, and which gained traction in the Californian human potential movement, is the path that *Essai sur la transe* offers as a way out of pathological negativism—toward the construction of a *true desiring machine*, free of phantoms and destructive drives[87].

Lapassade's vitalist inversion of Freudian auto-eroticism presupposes a blind mysticism with absolute validity, a return to an primordial fusion – not that of child and mother, but that of culture and

82 Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance : Le matérialisme hystérique*, p. 15.

83 Cf. Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance : Le matérialisme hystérique*, pp. 17-19.

84 Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance : Le matérialisme hystérique*, p. 22.

85 Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance : Le matérialisme hystérique*, p. 211.

86 On the importance of this literary aspect of Freud's work (in contrast to the dry psychiatric reports of his contemporaries), see Irvin Yalom's commentary in his preface to the English edition of *Studies on Hysteria*: Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud: *Studies on Hysteria*, New York, Basic Books, 2000, pp. xii–xiii.

87 "After trance as energetic discharge, we are perhaps discovering – or rediscovering – the path that liberates an unconscious that is not a reservoir of phantoms, but a source of desires and projects" (Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance: Le matérialisme hystérique*, p. 19).

nature in the intensity of an impossible (and yet transversally conjured) *jouissance*[88]. In fact, his idea of *human potential*—not as a theoretical category but as the structural truth of our condition—is essentially linked to a recovery of the farthest meaning of trance. What are transversalists, after all, but conjurers of the most outlandish forms of transversality? Applying them to trance, an impossible "essence" of it should be peeled off from the marasmus of its cultural ebbs and flows. No symmetrically oppositional model to post-industrial society and the progressive virtualization of capital accumulation, but rather the emergence of antinomic flows at the interstices of a global deployment and reconfiguration of values. Lapassade's transversalism, which seeks to open the doors to a new conception of *ánthropos* based on unusual parameters of subjectivation, reveals itself at the same time trapped in an inverted mirror – or a discarded shell – of itself. Its expiatory trace, fascinating as it may be (especially in our time of conformist and mediocre commonplaces) is like blood stemming from a sacrificer's mouth when he bites off his own tongue. •

88 This *jouissance* coincides with what Lapassade calls "the fusional body of a consciousness in explosion" (Georges Lapassade: *Essai sur la trance: Le matérialisme hystérique*, p. 212).

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THE INNER TEMPLE AND THE CENTER(S) OF LIFE: PSYCHIC, MATERIAL, AND SACRED SPACE

What if, when we enter a temple, we were entering into the very space of our soul as well? What if the path from its threshold to its obscure inner nucleus is the same path that leads us from our normal perceptual field to the very center of our psyche? One might then conclude that, in a sense, the temple and the psyche share a common structure, and are articulated in relation to the same center. This center is the center of life — of all life: subtle and gross, psychic and material, human and animal, astral and mineral.

Emma Lavinia Bon elaborates on this question by referring to examples from ancient architectural traditions, aiming to show how sacred space is the plane where different dimensions converge and influence each other.

ON CENTERS AND POINTS

We move through space like points on a plane. Absorbed in the dizzying spiral of its own mental processes, each one of us experiences an unrepeatable and enclosed inner universe in perpetual struggle with the material world, which, being shared by all, is perceived as objective, inert, and inanimate. Yet only at a very superficial level is there anything like a subject who recognizes himself as the bearer of a psychic interiority opposed to the mere materiality of external things. One's psyche is nothing but the local intensification of a flow that expands throughout the totality of spatial extension: an effusive nucleus at the center of a pulsating field of forces. The psyche is not a point, but a radiating center within a constantly amplifying circumference – or vice versa, an infinitely expanded circumference converging on its own center.

Psyche ist ausgedehnt, weiss nichts davon[1]: as the well-known Freudian statement reminds us, the psyche is extended, but it tends to be aware only of its center – reducing it to an inextended, closed point – and not of its rays expanding through "exterior" space and matter. If the psyche-point is perceived by the individual self as its own, the extended psyche belongs to no one: what we call the subject is but a surface effect of it, a center that cannot see the infinite radius of its own circumference. The space of the world is a *psychic continuum* shaped by many power centers whose expanding circumferences produce, through their intersections, unceasing interferences, and reverberations – like the circular waves produced by different stones impacting the same water surface. This means that something that happens to another psychic center – person, thing, and so on – distant in space-time can produce direct effects on one's own psyche, and vice versa: different beings and things, each located in a particular place in space-time and embodied in a specific material form, can immediately communicate and act upon one another, producing concrete effects.

As suggested by the Neoplatonic concept of *psychè kósmou* or *anima mundi*, the world itself is an animated being. Everything is full of spirits: every entity, even those that seem inanimate, such as minerals and objects, is penetrated by the same psychic principle, which acts differently in each thing. All the spirits, nothing but centers of invisible power, are in communication, being expressions of a single spiritual flux penetrating every limb of space. That's why it's also possible to produce effects on someone's psyche by organizing "exterior" space into effective structures, like temples or shrines: because there is no "outside" of the psyche or Soul, only different levels of intensification or awareness.

In this view, the concept of *center* plays a crucial role, indicating an apex of power that – unlike the concept of "point" – *concentrates* a reverberating and unbroken spiritual flux in a pulsating core.

THE EMPOWERED SPACE

For the religious eye, as Mircea Eliade points out in his essay *Le sacré et le profane*[2], space is not the same everywhere. Fractures, discontinuities, points, or even qualitatively denser regions discretize spatial extension, which is by no means reducible to a *res extensa* made homogeneous by the uniform application of the same physical and mechanical laws at every point. There is a qualitatively discrete flux of spiritual power[3] embedded – though invisible to the ordinary field of

1 Sigmund Freud: "Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme" in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XVII, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, Fischer, Frankfurt a.M. 1999, p. 152.

2 Mircea Eliade: *Le sacré et le profane*, Gallimard, Paris 1965, p. 25.

3 The psychic continuum of the World's Soul – the fact that all beings are bearers of a psychic intensity,

perception – within the quantitatively measurable space where the gross phenomena that define the boundaries of our action and thought occur.

This invisible flux forms a network of powers that take on different roles, functions, and definitions across spiritual traditions and religions. These powers may appear – and operate – as "spirits", "demons", "angels", "gods", and so forth. What they share, however, is the capacity to be evoked, summoned, and concentrated in specific points and regions of space, time, and even the human body. To this end, various traditions have developed a range of devices to intensify the presence of these powers at selected points and in specific circumstances. Magical formulas, geometric diagrams, crafted objects, and elaborate buildings – as well as natural elements such as plants and stones – can all serve as catalysts and channels for these powers.

Spiritual forces, of course, are not *produced* by these tools, but rather evoked, intensified, and conveyed through them. Although always present in space and matter, our field of perception must be expanded and "educated" to perceive them – a task made possible precisely through the use of these instruments. Our attention – the capacity to "see" what is normally invisible – requires the *concentration* of this stream of power, its visualization, and its channeling into effective structures. As magicians, yogis, ritual performers, and temple builders have long known, these forces are not necessarily "good" in a moral sense: if employed with malicious intent, or channeled through inadequate or ineffective formulas and structures, they can become useless or even destructive. "There is nothing necessarily holy or prayerful", Arthur Avalon points out, "about a Mantra. Mantra is a power (Mantrashakti) which lends itself impartially to any use. A man may be injured or killed by Mantra"[4]. A magician, Marsilio Ficino observes, can channel the influx of an astral body and direct it through someone, even provoking pain or disastrous (literally "ill-starred", from the Latin *dis-astrum*) consequences in that person's life, without the star or planet itself being at fault[5].

In the Indian architectural tradition, the living body of the architect (*sthapati*) is identified with the structure of the temple being built: the various parts and functions of his body are directly related to those of the building, which in turn are imbued with specific powers or the presence of particular deities. The slightest inaccuracy in temple design or foundation rituals can cause pain in the corresponding points of the architect's gross and subtle body[6], as well as the ineffectiveness or even harmfulness of the temple itself. The "outer" space of the building is directly connected to the "inner" life of the builder in a way that makes this distinction superficial, if not entirely meaningless.

A sacred building, like a temple, is a portion of space molded into a structure that empowers it – that is, invokes and concentrates specific powers in it through the efficacy of its form. This empowered space thus possesses a psychic quality and, because of this, is capable of producing concrete effects

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and thus interconnected – does not imply that psychic power is distributed with the same gradient of concentration and intensity in every being, space, or circumstance. As Eliade remarks in the aforementioned passage of *Le sacré et le profane*, the role of sacred items is precisely to act as catalysts of power, which thus reveals itself to those who establish a ritual relationship with them. In this sense, the psychic flow is continuous — as it permeates all beings and realities — but also discrete, since it can be intensified and intentionally directed through specific ritual and contemplative operations. Empowering space thus does not mean "filling" it with a psychic intensity that it inherently lacks; rather, it means intensifying this power in specific regions, objects, and living beings so that it becomes more "effective" within the specific context in which it is activated. This idea is close to what Ficino and Bruno maintained: every living being is animated (*G. Bruno, La magia naturale* in *Opere Magiche*, ed. by M. Ciliberto, Adelphi, Milano 2000, p. 202) and part of a universal psychic continuum, so that the magician does not create out of nothing but aligns with existing correspondences, acting on the attraction that connects things across distance. This psychic bond, rooted in the Soul that pervades all, allows stars and planets to directly influence the sublunar world. In this way, through the magician's action, certain objects or beings undergo an intensification of their power to act. The magician draws and channels cosmic energies, directing them toward people or objects to produce effects.

4 Artur Avalon: *The Serpent Power*, Ganesh & co., Madras 1950, p. 83.

5 Marsilio Ficino: *Commentary on Plotinus*, Vol. II, ed. by S. Gersh, Cambridge-London 2018, IV, 4, 39.

6 Alain Daniélou: *The Hindu Temple. Deification of Eroticism*, tr. by K. Hurry, Inner Traditions International, Rochester 2002, p. 29; Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, Vol. I, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1946, p. 52.

on the psychic level for those who come into contact with it. "Temple" is the name for a structure that is no more an "external" space than it is an "inner" space. The two spaces – the "inner" temple of man and the "outer" temple in the world – are the *same space*: an invisible and subtle structure imbued with specific powers and meanings, simultaneously manifesting in different gross bodies – one human, one made of stone or other materials, one cosmic.

Of course, different traditions have used different tools and developed different models to produce different effects on the psychic dimension, and it is crucial not to blur the boundaries between them to the point where it becomes impossible to understand the specificity of these tools and models. However, a transversal comparative approach across traditions may help reveal how and why different ritual, magical, graphical, and architectural patterns can work on subtle and spiritual dimensions. In this sense, the temple – and sacred space in general – can be seen as an extremely powerful device in which ritual, magical, symbolic, and, overall, transformative elements converge, combining in a harmonious design.

BUILDING THE CENTER

Even if the invisible psychic flux that permeates all things and dimensions of reality is continuous, there are – as previously mentioned – certain regions where it intensifies into a concentrated force. These special places can either be pre-existing entities – as is often the case with natural elements such as trees, rivers, and stones – or they can be entirely constructed. Yet even when a particular object is perceived as intrinsically imbued with intense spiritual qualities, these qualities must still be summoned, invoked, and urged to manifest and act. This becomes even more evident when sacred space must be created from nothing[7]: not only must the powers be evoked and activated, but they must first be anchored and *concentrated* within that space, which in turn must be shaped according to rigorous forms in order to retain and preserve those presences. Rituals and magic formulas can serve this very purpose, generating a centripetal movement. A sacred place or entity is always a *center*: a core where powers expanded in space and located in different dimensions are concentrated.

The Latin word *templum* indicates, first of all, a sacred space that is defined and delimited through a ritual process, and whose consistency and duration are absolutely liturgical. In the ritual of *inauguratio* – the divinatory consultation of omens such as the flight of birds – the Roman augur traces, with a staff called *lituus*, a spatial scheme that delimits the field of consultation. This operation, performed with the necessary use of magical formulas – which vary from place to place – produces a cut in space, a delimitation whose boundaries are invisible but maximally effective. The apex of the ritual consists in the act of *contemplatio*, by which the four *templa* or cardinal points in the heavenly dome are gathered and linked in a unique squared scheme[8]. To *contemplate* originally means to ritually *concentrate* the spatial coordinates in a specific region of space – a region where something powerful and maximally meaningful manifests or happens.

The material structure of the temple – the one we can see and aesthetically appreciate – is a much later product in the history of civilization. The stone building is nothing but the gross sedimen-

7 In this case, spirits already in the territory often have to be preliminarily removed so as to obtain virgin soil suitable for the establishment of temple deities. This involves a series of rituals meant to expel these forces, as attested in the ritual and architectural traditions of ancient Rome and India. As Joseph Rykwert has pointed out, in ancient civilizations, the rituals for the founding of sacred places were often very similar — and in some cases even overlapped — with those for the founding of cities. As a space for the organization of (human) life, the city itself is, in a certain sense, a *templum*: a space arranged according to precise cosmic and divine correspondences. See Joseph Rykwert: *The Idea of a Town. The Anthropology of a Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and the Ancient World*, The MIT Press, 1988, pp. 65-68; Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 13.

8 Joseph Rykwert: *The Idea of a Town*, pp. 44-49.

tation of lines, structures, and correspondences whose main consistency is fundamentally ritual, and whose duration in time is solely liturgical, decided by the duration of the ritual itself. After performing its function, the Vedic altar – much more ancient than the Hindu temple – was totally destroyed: the center frees the power concentrated in it by dissolving it into the continuous flow to which it belongs. As noticed by Daniélou, "the temple is above all an abstract structure, corresponding to the power lines established on the plan and in space. Its reality lies in its proportions and measurements"[9]. "Abstract" here means "invisible", "dematerialized": sacred space is a field of powers linked by precise astronomical, numerical, and subtle equivalences, and fixed through exact magical formulas. In the "material" temple's structure, no element has a necessity which is *just* architectural: everything has a meaning dependent on the general structure and the powers present in it.

The ideas of "center" and "concentration" – from the Latin *concentratio*: "to bring together", "to gather" – are thus inseparable from the idea of a sacred space or entity: the temple – each temple – is, without contradiction, the very center of the cosmos. Each "world" – community, civilization, culture, etc. – gravitates around a core which decides its fundamental structure, articulation, distribution of forces[10]. As the center of the world it belongs to and produces, the sacred space repeats the primordial cosmogony, the process of creative emanation by which the manifest world is expanded, from a primeval center, through space and time –space and time being inseparable from this outgoing movement itself. This is why the same power penetrates all things: because it is the differential amplification of the same fundamental core in which it was concentrated.

The institution of a temple, consisting in a ritual *concentration* of powers, means the institution, once again, of the primordial center, and thus the repetition of the cosmogony itself. The ceremony of *inauguratio* – according to an idea transversal to many different traditions, each with its own specificities – subtracts a place from the influences that normally affect it, in order to insert into the ordinary flow of space-time a primeval, absolute time and space: the space-time of the origin[11]. Bringing space-time back to its origin, to the moment of its birth, means at the same time giving the origin a duration and extension in the originated, ordinary space-time. Every point in creation, if intensified through the right means, can be its pulsating center. The origin of time is not before time, the origin of space is not a transcendent space, but is their *center*. A center that can be activated and even "built" everywhere and at any time. The manifest world is not the result of a creative impulse that happened in time immemorial and is forever lost, but the recursive reactivation of its center, always pulsating at its core.

This mechanism of concentration of powers plays a crucial role in the edification of the fire altar (*agnicayana*) in the Hindu Brahmanical context. The structure of the ritual – and thus of the altar itself – is necessarily bound to Prajāpati, the figure of the universal procreator who dominates the meticulous prose of the *Brāhmaṇa*. Through the ritual edification of the altar, the dismembered body of Prajāpati – who sacrificed himself to give birth to cosmic differentiation – is reassembled into a unified form to ensure the solidity of the world against destructive tendencies. Prajāpati, the cosmic Person, *is* the altar of sacrifice[12], because he himself *is* the sacrifice from which everything derives.

The whole ritual gesture is grounded on a rigorous series of identifications and equivalences. It is not simply a matter of recomposing a lacerated *space*: Prajāpati is also the *year*, the fundamental unity of cyclical time. Its primordial fragmentation is also the fragmentation of time: no world could subsist in undifferentiated time, in an eternal, uniform present. However, this fragmentation of time into discrete elements can obstruct the cyclical flow of time: if day is separated from night, how can

9 Alain Daniélou: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 46.

10 Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, pp. 43-47.

11 Joseph Rykwert: *The Idea of a Town*, pp. 90-91.

12 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VI, I, I, 5; tr. by J. Eggeling: *The Satapatha Brâhmana*, Vol. III, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1894, p. 144.

they pass one into the other? In order for time to have duration, the joints between the parts of the year and the day – the point of suture between one season and another, between day and night – must be firmly sealed. These points are indeed critical: they are the moments when time might end, not prolong itself, falling into the empty interstice separating one time interval from the other.

The ritual performance must join each fragment to the other so as to fill all the voids. The five layers of the altar are, simultaneously, the five parts of Prajāpati's body, the five parts of the year – that is, the seasons[13] – and the five spatial directions – east, south, west, north and zenith[14]; every day, a brick – representing one day – and one enclosing-stone – representing one night – are added to the building of the altar[15], so that the total process lasts precisely one year: to build the year takes a year. This means that the year (Prajāpati) is inseparable from the ritual process of its edification: ritual action is not added to Being[16], but Being itself is nothing but a universal liturgy. The expansive, centrifugal, lacerating impulse of creation is ritually reversed into a concentrating, centripetal, unifying impulse that converges space and time at its center.

The ritual is never performed by the subject: the same structure in whose constraints what we may call subject touches its center which is never "subjective".

The constructed altar (*vedi*) *is* the center: the center of space, the center of time – the solar day or equinox (*viṣuvat*) – and the center of the Person, that is, the inner and spiritual center of Prajāpati and the sacrificer – the *adhyātman*[17]. The *ātman* is, itself, a center that emerges through a ritual act of concentration; this act requires absolute focus of the mind: the formulas must be pronounced in the right way, and so must the ritual gestures be made. The act must be thought out as it is performed[18].

The ritual is never performed by the subject[19]: it is something that happens simultaneously in the world and in the psyche, binding them in one and the same structure in whose constraints what we may call subject touches its center which is never "subjective". Ritual always takes place "before" the subject, in the sense that it operates in a profound space with respect to which the subject is a surface efflorescence. Ritual is not the object of the subject's action, but rather through it the subject is transformed: by internalizing new patterns of force correspondences, new psychic structures are produced. In other words, sacred space, and the temple in particular, functions precisely as a *maṇḍala*: it concentrates psychic forces into an effective scheme to cause a reconfiguration of their relations.

13 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VI, I, II, 17-18; tr., p. 152.

14 Charles Malamoud: *Cuire le monde. Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*, La Découverte, Paris 1989, p. 78.

15 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, X, IV, II, 27; tr. by J. Eggeling: *The Satapatha Brâhmana*, Vol. IV, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1897, p. 354.

16 Lilian Silburn: *Instant et cause. Le discontinu dans la pensée philosophique de l'Inde*, Vrin, Paris 1955, p. 56.

17 Lilian Silburn: *Ibidem*, pp. 71-76. "Originally Prajāpati immolated himself to the gods by giving them his own person (*ātman*). When he lay all fragmented and was no more than a heart (*hṛd*), it was for his person that he lamented: 'ah! my *ātman*!' he said. Then Prajāpati emitted a counterpart of this *ātman* that is sacrifice and, through sacrifice, he redeemed his person. [...] The sacrificer likewise redeems his own person through sacrifice and is reborn in the other world with a complete person (*ātman*)". My translation.

18 Here a remark by Roberto Calasso is particularly relevant: "Why were Vedic men so obsessed with ritual? Why do all their texts, directly or indirectly, talk about liturgy? They wanted to think, they wanted to live only in certain states of consciousness. Discarding all others, this remains the only plausible reason. They wanted to think – and above all: they wanted to be conscious of their thinking. This happens exemplarily in performing a gesture. There is the gesture – and there is the attention focused on the gesture. The attention conveys to the gesture its meaning". Roberto Calasso: *L'ardore*, Adelphi, Milano 2010, p. 31. My translation.

19 Lilian Silburn: *Instant et cause*, p. 57.

THE TEMPLE AS MANDAḶA

In the Hindu architectural tradition, the invisible scheme of forces upon which the temple's visible structure is articulated is determined by a specific kind of *maṇḍala* named *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*[20], whose symbolism derives from the Vedic altar. The term *vāstu* indicates the construction's site, while the term *puruṣa* denotes the supreme principle (*brahman*) in the manifest form it assumes so as to be shared by both the cosmic and the human dimension. In other words, man and the cosmos share a common form, that is, the *puruṣa*. The latter is the figure of this *equivalence*[21] between micro- and macrocosmic manifestation, the powerful diagram that establishes the relations between the elements that constitute the two spheres. This same diagram is transferred into the *maṇḍala* specifically designed to articulate the magical space of the *vāstu*, which serves as the basis for its material shaping. The *maṇḍala* itself is thus a delimited geometrical structure in whose scheme different deities and powers are embedded; it is employed as an instrument – a *yantra* – of contemplation and visualization that catalyzes and concentrates the psychic flux directed to it, ordering it into specific structures. These structures are the scheme of equivalence of different dimensions, combining astronomical, mythical, mathematical, and subtle elements into one great mechanism.

Even the Roman *templum* resembles a *maṇḍala* in the sense that a celestial and temporal structure – the apparent motion of the Sun around the Earth that determines the four basic spatial coordinates – is projected and concentrated in an earthly and spatial structure, thus creating a field of multidimensional correspondences. In the case of the Hindu temple, the *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* provides the metaphysical prevision prefiguration of the temple, establishing some exact links between the temple's physical measures and cosmic and human coordinates. The constructed temple is thus the material concretization of this system of equivalences – more: it is the *center* of these equivalences, the place where they converge in unity. In other words, the *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* is the plan of the temple in the sense that it provides the invisible structure of the relations of forces and correspondences that are to be used in the building of a temple whose material form is the concretization of the metaphysical structure it generates.

The centripetal structure is typical of *maṇḍalas* and *yantras* in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. These diagrams are generally dominated by some profoundly meaningful and operative basic geometrical elements – although *maṇḍalas* are often enriched with colorful representations of deities and other characters: the point, the circle (*maṇḍala* means precisely "circle"), and the square. These three elements are crucial in the visualization of the process of cosmic manifestation. From a Tantric point of view, the latter begins with the expansion of a central point (*bindu*) that is simultaneously beyond the manifest (*parā*) and also manifest (*aparā*)[22]. This center is a threshold in the cosmogonic expansion of Śakti, Śiva's creative energy, which unfolds in states of increasing limitation and material sedimentation. When the threshold is crossed, the first trace of manifestation appears in the form of a point of dense energy that needs to radiate into a circumference. The circle – which is necessarily related to the *bindu* as its circumference – represents the inchoative movement of manifestation, the process of its realization, within which it is maximally unstable and vibrant.

To be fulfilled, the creative impulse must be stabilized by anchoring itself to fixed spatial coordinates, namely the four cardinal points: the final form of the manifested cosmos is a square. The square represents cosmic energy frozen in an ordered, immobile form. It is the perfection of creation, its ultimate structure, and also the fundamental form of Hindu architecture. If the dynamic form of the

20 The *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala* is structured as a square diagram composed of many smaller squares, each carrying specific meanings, dedicated to a star, Vedic deity and other elements, and oriented in a cardinal direction. All the squares are arranged centripetally around the central one, the *brahmasthāna*. There are many types of *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, but the two most widely used and powerful, among an arithmetic series of 32 plants, are those with 64 and 81 squares. See Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 58.

21 Stella Kramrisch: *Ibidem*, p. 67.

22 Stella Kramrisch: *Ibidem*, p. 137.

circle has a temporal quality – being used to symbolize the motions of astral bodies – the square is essentially firm and thus spatial, terrestrial.

The Buddhist temple of Borobudur, in Indonesia[23], is a very peculiar example of this equivalence between the *maṇḍala*, the psychic and the temple's structure. The temple's plan is a built *maṇḍala*: the centrifugal expansion of the diagram (and the cosmos) from the central *bindu* to the final square, and at the same time the centripetal reabsorption of the manifest cosmos in its center, are solidified in the material shape of the temple. Its structure is formed by a concentric succession of square plans, one inside the other, followed by circular planes culminating in a central *stūpa*. For those entering the temple from the outside, the structure is centripetal and ascensional; it must be traversed from the square of cosmic manifestation to its inextended center, from bottom to top,: moving from the exterior to the center, each stage being accessible via stairs. The path inside the temple is a spiritual, contemplative ascesis, requiring the utmost concentration of the mind: transiting from a lower to a higher level means moving from a lower to a higher, increasing the level of awareness. The spheres of meditation are materialized in the temple's planes, from the grossest – hence "square" – to the most subtle, circular, all the way to the great central *stūpa*, empty and inaccessible.

It is a path that runs, simultaneously, through the meanderings of the temple and those of the psyche, the articulated space of the *maṇḍala* being shared by both. Through it, the centrifugal movement of cosmic and psychic manifestation can be reabsorbed by an inverse, centripetal movement from the square to the center, from the gross phenomena to the most subtle point of cosmic and psychic manifestation. The *maṇḍala* or *yantra* can in fact always be "read" in both senses, from the center to its ultimate square frame and, vice versa, from this latter to the center. The expansive, dissipating movement of cosmo- and psychogenesis as well as the concentric, intensifying movement of ritual, magic, and contemplative practice are sealed into one pulsative structure, in whose breath everything is produced, articulated and reabsorbed.

The maṇḍala is alive: it is not just a representation, but the active pattern of a process that takes place simultaneously at the cosmic level, in the material structure of the temple, and in the mind of those who contemplate it.

The *maṇḍala* is alive: it is not just a representation, but the active pattern of a process that takes place simultaneously at the cosmic level, in the material structure of the temple, and in the mind of those who contemplate it. A process that never ends, but is always recreated through ritual concentration, that is, through the ritual convergence of forces in a center.

As a tool for visualization, the *maṇḍala* compels psychic energy to creatively repeat the same process on the spiritual plane. In this sense, the concepts of *maṇḍala* or *yantra* are not restricted within the boundaries of the Hindu tradition but can be extended to various tools that perform a corresponding function – the concentration and "shaping" of psychic energy – in other spiritual traditions. Of course, the efficacy, structure, and purpose in the employment of magical diagrams vary from context to context, so it is impossible to make a rigorous comparison; in any case, the use of these spatial devices or patterns in the articulation of which specific powers are fixed and organized in harmonic resonance is remarkably transversal across cultures.

The *fact* that a ritually, magically, and graphically organized spatial extension can act on the space of the psyche is a wisdom shared and "acted upon" in many different contexts and in many different ways[24]; it is a *fact* that has immediate evidence and power as soon as one crosses the threshold of

23 See Mircea Eliade: *Barabudur, temple symbolique*, in "Revista Fundatiilor Regale", IV, 9, 1937, pp. 605-617. It is also necessary here to mention the monumental study by Paul Mus: *Barabudur: esquisse d'une histoire du bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes*, originally published in the "Bulletin de l'École Française de l'Extrême-Orien" and later, in 1935, by Éditions Paul Geuthner.

24 As Giulio Busi has pointed out in his exemplary study of what he calls "visual Qabbalah," Qabbalists over the centuries developed refined mechanisms for graphically displaying sacred combinations of mystical letters and signs. Some of these were totally generative, employed as tools for the discovery and production of

the "visible" space, the edge of the coarsest layer of phenomena. Through the *maṇḍala* or the *yantra*, as they are not two "things" or "objects" but structures of effective relations between forces, dimensions apparently separated are transmuted one into the other by the fact that they are magically impelled to converge in the same structure.

The temple is thus a bridge between spheres of forces, realms of meaning. As Daniélou underlines, "the artist, the architect, becomes a magician. Through the power of magical diagrams or *yantras*, he reaches the source of being, the divine. The temple built according to the *yantras* thus allows us to evoke the invisible and communicate with those transcendent beings we call 'gods.'"[25] "The activity of the temple is assured by priests – qualified magicians – who know all the appropriate formulas and rites to evoke the presence of a deity. Here the gods manifest themselves, and from here, prayers and the sacrificial smoke can reach them."[26] Although the divine presence pervades every limb of reality, the manifest cosmos being nothing more than its creative expression and sedimentation, we need bridges, special points of intersection, centers whose highest intensity allows us to go beyond the ordinary psychic frequency, to cross a threshold.

THE VERTICAL POWER

The manifest structure of a sacred place is determined, as already shown, by its peculiar role as a *magnetic center*[27] where different dimensions converge and communicate. There is an invisible, dematerialized structure that anchors and shapes the amorphous magma of matter from which the visible temple unfolds. Although the examples considered so far mostly belong to the Hindu architectural tradition, this does not make this idea any less transversal. A clear example of this is the role of *vertical axes* as the organizing principle of built sacred space. Pyramids, ziggurats, churches, menhirs, sacred pillars, and shrine superstructures are all shaped, in the vertical plane, according to a formal upward impetus. Once again, this invisible structure – the vertical direction – is a fundamental principle of organization for the invisible field of powers simultaneously present in the human, terrestrial, and heavenly domain.

In the human psychophysical body, it is the energetic and pneumatic axis that rises up to the top of the head (and even beyond); in the terrestrial sphere, it is embodied by sacred mountains, trees, and other entities whose shape is clearly dominated by an ascensional tension, but also by rivers – like the Nile in Egypt or the Ganges in India; in the cosmic realm, it is the *axis mundi*, the pillar that penetrates the Earth at its *center* and the heavenly and chthonian dimensions, thus connecting them. As it is the center of the cosmos, the temple or sacred place is the point of passage of the *axis mundi*, thus the point of convergence of the different dimensions it crosses.

As pointed out by Sigfried Giedion when discussing Egyptian architecture, "one of the great changes from prehistory, with its equal rights of all directions, was the advent of the vertical as an organizing principle to which everything had to be related. This occurred at the beginning of the high civilizations, with the rise of architecture. The pyramid, the ziggurat, and monoliths in the form of steles and obelisks expressed the vertical as the connecting link with the cosmos. The horizontal is the line of repose: the vertical is the line of movement. Yet horizontal and vertical belong together,

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new meanings previously hidden in the flow of the alphabet. In these diagrams, the letters have deep cosmological value: each is identified with a number, with a divine power, with an angel, with a planet, with a zodiac sign, with a day or month, with an organ of the human body. Orbits of consonants become cosmological maps and tools of meditation: the combinatorial operation requires a resolute concentration of the mind and stimulates a frenetic creativity. New combinations, dictated by strict numerical and symbolic necessities, impose themselves on the qabbalist's mind, until reaching an ecstatic state. See Giulio Busi: *Qabbalah visiva*, Einaudi, Torino 2005.

25 Alain Daniélou: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 3.

26 Alain Daniélou: *Ibidem*, p. 15.

27 Alain Daniélou: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 15.

connected by the angle of ninety degrees, which, together with them, acquired an extraordinarily powerful position. Axis and symmetry are consequences of this new principle of organization"[28]. Verticality implies dynamism, and dynamism implies transformative *effort*. This latter is provided by forms of practice whose aim is precisely to power the connection realized by the vertical force – practices that work to ceaselessly transform and elevate one dimension to another, or, vice versa, to bring down a dimension from above. The ritual effort of the sacrifice culminates in the rising of the vertical column of smoke to the sky, i.e. to the realm of the gods. The *kuṇḍalinī*, the cosmic creative energy rolled up at the base of the spine must be raised, "straightened" in order to experience different psychic states. All these operations require great ritual and mental effort and have direct transformative effects on the agent of the action.

Through the vertical axis, the different sacred spaces or entities that incorporate it as a structuring principle are synthetically connected, even if distant. The vertical thus becomes a principle of transphysical and transpsychical equivalence: the temple *is* the sacred mountain, because both embody in their manifest gross form the same subtle vertical axes.

The sacred mountain is a figure of the center transversally present in many different traditions, so much so that it would be impossible to recall all the examples here. Of course, in each tradition it is invested with different meanings and placed at the center of different ritual practices, thus producing, as it becomes the object of devotion, different effects. In any case, the equivalence between the mountain and the sacred building – based on the supremacy of the vertical principle – is surprisingly widespread.

This is also why many Hindu temples are named after sacred mountains, like the Kailāśanātha Temples of Ellora and Kāñcipuram, or the Aruṇācaleśvara temple of Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, located at the foot of the Aruṇācala sacred hill. As reflected in a tradition preserved in local myths, Tamil literature and some parts of the *Skanda Purāṇa*[29], Aruṇācala is considered the remnant of the column of fire – again, the *axis mundi* – in whose form Lord Śiva manifested himself to demonstrate to Brahma and Viṣṇu his absolute superiority. As the transit point of the world axis, Aruṇācala hill – also known as Aṇṇāmalai – is thus the very center of the world, like its built analogue, the Aruṇācaleśvara temple. More generally, the structure of typical North Indian temples is called *śikharaṣikhāra*, which literally means "mountain peak" – a fact that demonstrates how, regardless of the name, each temple repeats the metaphysical structure of the mountain.

In the field of the human psychophysical structure, the principle of the vertical as the powerful line of connection between different centers is at the core of diverse spiritual practices and views, which are in turn reflected by the manifest form of temples and sacred structures.

The cosmic center through which the *axis mundi* passes, and upon which the sacred mountain and the temple are located, are *the same spiritual center*, repeated in different bodies. The principle of the vertical is, in other words, derived from the principle of the center: the vertical line is nothing but the geometrical expression of the equivalence or connection between centers located in different gross bodies, in different parts of the same body, or in different dimensions. In this case, the "high" and "low" established by the vertical axis apply as principles of metaphysical and spiritual organization and spatialization of forces, not as mere physical locations.

In the field of the human psychophysical structure, the principle of the vertical as the powerful line of connection between different centers is at the core of diverse spiritual practices and views, which are in turn reflected by the manifest form of temples and sacred structures. Within the Buddhist

28 Sigfried Giedion: *The Beginnings of Architecture*, Princeton University Press, 1964, p. x.

29 *The Skanda-Purāṇa*, Vol. III, Motilal, Delhi 1951. The third part of the first *khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda-Purāṇa* is called *aruṇācala-māhātmya* and celebrates the holiness of the mountain Aruṇācala, which is here regarded as the transformation of Śiva himself into a hill.

framework, the structure of the *stūpa* should be understood as the material visualization of the *dharma* – the "law" taught by the Buddha – beginning with its vertical axis. This latter is in some cases physically represented by a high pillar or *yaṣṭi* that, standing in the exact center of the empty structure, emerges at the top of it from a hole. This is a crucial aspect, since the *stūpa* itself is likened to a skull – the Sanskrit *stūpa* also meaning "the top of the head"[30]: the hole at its top is the point – the *brahmarandhra* – through which the release from the vacuous world of conditioned existence and rebirths is accomplished – a world as empty as the *stūpa* itself.

This idea is akin to the view of certain Upaniṣads, such as the *Maitrāyaṇīya*. Although these texts start from a quite different metaphysical standpoint, they too insist on the need to free the *ātman* from the constraints of bodily and cosmic existence by bringing it out of the subtle – and not just physical – center located at the top of the head[31]. The vertical therefore expresses a spiritual direction that must be followed through various yogic practices to unite the soul, by transit through the "intermediate" center of *brahmarandhra*, with its supreme metaphysical center, which pulses beyond cosmic manifestation. This is not an immanent center – as in the case of the Vedic *ātman*, the center of the cosmic Person likened to the center of cosmic time and space – but a transcendent center[32].

In Tantric doctrines leading to the form of practice known as *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, the subtle, immanent center of energy enfolded in human bodies is usually multiplied to six[33] centers or *cakras*, each located in a specific point of the subtle body and carrying specific powers and meanings. The *cakras* are the nuclei of articulation and concentration enfolded in the energy flow that passes through the spinal axis, the *merudaṇḍa* – a name that, again, refers to a sacred mountain, Mount Meru[34]. The term *cakra*, meaning "wheel" or "circle", reflects its dynamic nature: each center is an operative diagram or *maṇḍala* in which are embedded different powers that resonate at specific frequencies, thus producing specific psychic effects. Each center, when activated, produces a creative reconfiguration of psychic space, thus of the cosmos itself, which is revealed to be transformed and empowered according to the type of forces exhorted to manifest through specific practices.

Each *cakra* is a pulsative core of sound vibrations, a center that irradiates in a qualified circumference and a circumference that reabsorbs into a simple center, the *bindu*.

As observed by Lilian Silburn, at the periphery of the circumference or wheel "there are the *kalā*,

30 Monier Monier-Williams: A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal, Delhi 1899, p. 1259.

31 *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*, VI, 20-22; tr. by E.B. Cowell: *The Maitri or Maitrāyaṇīya Upanishad*, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta 1935.

32 Both Lilian Silburn and Mircea Eliade couple *Vedas* and *Brāhmaṇa*s on the one hand, *Upaniṣad*s and Buddhism on the other. Whereas the first two develop a thought of the liturgical gesture committed to ensuring the prolongation of the life of the cosmos, the second two, on the other hand, focus on a set of practices whose purpose is to free oneself from the manifest world, realizing its ontological inconsistency: the cycle of rebirths, the alternation of day and night become tremendous, something that must be overcome. See Lilian Silburn: *Instant et cause*; Mircea Eliade: *Le sacré et le profane*, pp. 95-96.

33 Among the numerous texts that describe the *cakras*, their number can vary widely, each one possessing different features (Arthur Avalon: *The Serpent Power*, pp. 151–152). The six *cakras* referred to in the title of the treatise *Ṣaṭcakra-Nirūpaṇa* – namely *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna*, *maṇipūra*, *anāhata*, *viśuddha*, and *ājñā* – are tendentially considered the principal ones: the first five are associated with the gross elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether – while the sixth is linked to a subtle *tattva*, the *manas* (see *Ṣaṭcakra-Nirūpaṇa*, verse 33; tr. by Arthur Avalon in *The Serpent Power*, p. 398). To these must certainly be added the *sahasrāra*, the "thousand-petaled lotus," which is the seat of Parama Śiva-Śakti, the state of pure consciousness (*ibidem*, p. 103). Unlike the others, this center is totally unqualified. Its gross location is generally identified with the top of the head, close to the *brahmarandhra*, while between *ājñā* and *sahasrāra* there are said to be additional centers that correspond to *tattvas* specific to the mental sphere (*ibidem*). The human body, as a microcosm, mirrors the process of cosmic creation (and dissolution) as a progressive solidification and materialization of the vibratory stream of consciousness.

34 It is clear, Arthur Avalon points out, "that the Merudanda is the vertebral column, which as the axis of the body is supposed to bear the same relation to it as does Mount Meru to the Earth". Arthur Avalon: *Ibidem*, p. 147.

subtle energies to which correspond, at the level of speech, the phonemes or letters (*varṇa* and *mātṛkā*) of the Sanskrit alphabet. Second, there are rays that are the *nāda*, vibrant resonances, radiating from the center to the periphery or from the periphery to the center, depending on whether the energy is directed outward or, during the ascension of Kuṇḍalinī, directed inward. Third, at the center of each wheel, the *bindu*, extensionless point, dwells in the *suṣumnā* or median way. The Kuṇḍalinī practice tends to reunite all the energies of body, thought, and speech in order to blend them into a single current of intense vibrations, which carries them to the center, the *bindu*. Then, melting in the fire of Kuṇḍalinī and becoming *nādānta* (end of sound vibration), the *nāda* converts into an upward flow, the very flow of the *suṣumnā*. The same is repeated in the next center, whose *bindu*, awakened in its turn, joins the *bindu* of the higher center; and this process of unification goes on until there is but one unique *bindu*"[35]. The pulsation of each center pushes the energy flow vertically, toward increasing intensification; all centers are connected, and all are connected with different layers of reality, as they incorporate different figures, deities, sounds, and elements, thus creating an inextricable weave[36].

THE PERPETUATION OF LIFE

The temple is a living being. Its material shape is not just a "container" for invisible nets of powers; it's a *body*. More precisely, a human and cosmic body, whose subtle aspect is inseparable from the gross one, and vice versa. As already seen in the role of the *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, the plan of the Hindu temple is a *maṇḍala* expressing the *puruṣa*, the subtle body of both man and the cosmos; each part of the architect's body is related to a section of the temple, which is in turn connected with cosmic elements, deities, and other forces. Through the invisible structure of the *maṇḍala*, that they all share, these plans converge and influence each other according to a system of precise equiva-

35 Lilian Silburn: *La Kuṇḍalinī. L'Énergie des Profondeurs*, Les Deux Océans, Paris 1983, p. 49; tr. by J. Gontier: *Kuṇḍalinī. The Energy of the Depths*, SUNY, New York 1988, p. 32. As Stella Kramrisch observes, "Nāda, the principial vibration, is the immanent cause (upādāna), the primary substance of the world" (Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 136). Each letter radiating from a center is connected to a lotus petal, and is a powerful *mantra* that must be resonated in order to activate the particular qualities it embodies.

36 The view just expressed, by which the verticality of the *suṣumnā* culminates in the highest center, progressively "draining" the other centers of their energy to concentrate it all at the highest point, is at the basis of specific practices that emphasize the univocity of the vertical movement of subtle energies from below to the top. However, this is only one among diverse understandings and methods. As witnessed by the work that Adrián Navigante and Amanda Viana de Sousa are carrying out at *Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking* in collaboration with the *Fondation Alain Daniélou,* there is also what could be called a "shamanic" approach to the universe of *cakras*. According to this perspective, based on comparative fieldwork in different cultural settings as well as a particular reading of early śākta elements of Hindu Tantra usually subsumed in the canonical Śaiva understanding of such practices, each *cakra* should be activated and worked on according to its own energetic frequency or world-configuring conditions, and the key does not lie in the deities of the Hindu pantheon but rather in the nature (usually deemed "fierce female") forces which the canonical interpretation confined to the realm of *bhūtavidyā*. The aim is not a vertical piercing of the *cakras* but a full and structured ritual disclosure of the different animistic potentialities related to the practitioner, as presented in that pluriverse of personified forces. Here the goal is not to focus all energies on a higher, absolute center, and to get this energy out of the body by producing a final liberation from the magma of life and experience, the dissolution of this changing and eternally forming cosmos. The purpose is to achieve energetic reconfigurations as the *cakra* work (mainly consisting of ritual performance) unfolds, facing the challenges involved in that practice, which are not minor ones.

In September 2024 and March 2025, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in two workshops organized by Navigante and Viana de Sousa at the Labyrinth, the headquarters of the *Fondation Alain Daniélou*, which turned out to be inspiring for my reflection on some aspects treated in this essay. The first workshop focused on the issue of *ecosophy* (based on research and practices carried out in South Asia, West-Africa, and South America), which is central to the activities of the *Interstices* Center through a transversal and animistic approach; the second, entitled *Field Perception and the Relational Unconscious: A Transversal Approach to Traditional Cultures*, combined field-related research material and analysis of important (oral and written) sources an intellectual framework with collective and individual practice sessions.

lences. As Daniélou points out, "on the temple plan, just as in a person's body, must be found the crucial points corresponding to the various subtle faculties defined by the Yoga *chakras*. These are the points where the universal person and the individual person meet. The temple plan is thus conceived as a diagram on which the various energy centers are located and is consequently known as the 'plan-person' (*vāstu-purusha*)"[37].

The *cakras* are centers of intensification of conscious energy located in the subtle body, the *sūkṣmaśarīra*. Even if they are linked to specific vital organs and functions, located in the areas of the spinal axes where each *cakra* is enfolded, it would be erroneous to reduce a *cakra* to the gross physical plexus it corresponds to. As it is a subtle center, the *cakra* is primarily and essentially an expression of consciousness, a concentrated and qualified manifestation of Śakti[38], combining a vibratory, sound-like subtle "substance" with imaginative, numerical, geometrical, elemental, and other features. Only in a secondary sense – but no less "effective" – the *cakra* involves physical features, in the sense that its activity influences the corresponding physical region[39]. The *cakras* are thus the vital centers through which the flow of conscious manifestation streams and concentrates; as they are present in the temple's plan, the temple itself is the gross physical manifestation of a subtle structure of multiple vital centers, all dynamically connected.

As observed by Schwaller de Lubicz, the idea that the vital organs of the human body are centers of intensification and radiation of a spiritual force, of the invisible life of consciousness, is also the deepest core of the "pharaonic sacred science"[40]. In the Egyptian tradition, vital organs were considered sacred: not, of course, for their merely physical function, but as nuclei of transmission and articulation – according to various "vital functions" – of a flow of nervous energy. Ancient traditional wisdoms, such as the pharaonic one, hand down a kind of "education" that, by employing these centers of life force articulation, can awaken an intelligence of states beyond mere bodily forms[41].

These centers are all expressions of the *Neter*, the divine vital force that animates and nourishes the manifest universe, differentiated in many different *Neters* or principles that embody specific vital functions. They are usually marked with glyphs representing animals or other living beings, gestures, useful objects; each one is the matrix of many different symbols, all belonging, like living beings, to a common lineage defined by the function of that *Neter*. Each being is rooted in this mechanism of transmission and articulation of life, enclosing one or more vital functions: things are not "just" things, but sacred glyphs, that is, symbols of the One divine life that penetrates everything. Each glyph, being an element of a sacred writing – called *Medu Neter*[42] – is imbued with a specific sound, can be pronounced thus provoking the reverberation of the vital centers to which it is related[43]. Here the term "symbol" indicates the effective figure that immediately – not metaphorically – expresses the particular vital function activated by a specific *Neter*. Thus, the bird flying in the sky, for example, becomes the embodiment of a living function that is a specific intensification and qualification of the total movement of the universal living force, a modulation of it[44].

37 Alain Daniélou: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 15.

38 Arthur Avalon: *The Serpent Power*, p. 109.

39 Arthur Avalon: *Ibidem*, pp. 161-162.

40 The idea that physical organs are the gross manifestation of subtle functions and cosmic correspondences is transversal to many traditions, and endowed with an important role in alchemical, magical, and divinatory thought and practices. One example is the divinatory role played by the liver in many ritual cultures, from Mesopotamia to ancient Greece to the Etruscans.

41 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *Le Temple dans l'Homme*, Editions Dervy, Paris 2001; tr. by P. Lucarelli: *Il tempio nell'uomo*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2003, p. 16.

42 The Greek translation of the term, *hieros glyphos*, loses some essential elements of the original Egyptian meaning, such as the reference to the *Neter*, which does not simply correspond to the Greek concept of "sacred", but carries a well-defined significance and role within Egyptian ritual, magical, and iconographic culture.

43 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *Le Miracle Égyptien*, Flammarion, Paris 1963; tr. by P. Crimini: *La scienza sacra dei faraoni*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 1994, p. 214.

44 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *Il tempio nell'uomo*, p. 29.

This system of germination – a generative impulse that flows through every form, being, and gesture – connects all components of the cosmos into a living, evolving unity that is simultaneously organic, conscious, and symbolic. The temple, in this sense, is a microcosm that intensively repeats the same process: it is the "house of life"[45], a space articulated by subtle nervous energy, flowing through centers physiologically linked to specific bodily organs and functions, and symbolically expressed through sacred glyphs – sound vibrations made visible as forms. This space is both cosmic and human. As documented by de Lubicz, the plan of the Luxor temple reproduces the human body, including its vital centers, which form the very foundation of the symbolic organization of architectural space[46]. The temple is defined by the dynamic relationships between these centers, connected by a flow of conscious energy that radiates from the nervous center through all other centers according to their specific functions. In this sense, the temple is nothing but the pulsating interplay and cooperation among centers of power – not a structure outside of man, but a structure *within* man, the structure of life. The temple is inner: that's why we are able to build it in the outer world.

In this sense, the temple is nothing but the pulsating interplay and cooperation among centers of power – not a structure outside of man, but a structure within *man, the structure of life. The temple is inner: that's why we are able to build it in the outer world.*

This idea that the temple is the site of the perpetuation of life is also reflected in the first great stone temple built in Egypt by Zoser, the first pharaoh of the 3rd Dynasty. The temple, in fact, served as a mechanism for the preservation of his *ka*, a concept denoting the vital force transferred from the gods to the pharaoh and radiated outward to his subjects[47]. The *ka* hieroglyph, depicted by the two arms raised with open palms, is a very ancient, even prehistoric, symbol indicating precisely this transfer of life force from one being to another. This process extends over time: it is a perpetual gestation, a growth, a development of life that multiplies and expands, differentiating itself without leaving itself. Death is always the death of the single structure, but life is stronger: it returns to its core each time, flows back into its source and expands again in endless rivulets. It is not the form that is transmitted from the open palm of the hands, but it is the permanent moment – the Egyptian *ka* – which inscribes within itself the experience of the transitory form[48]. This permanent moment is eternal life, or living eternity: *āyus*, or *αἰών*[49], indestructible time. In the Vedas, the terms *āyus* and *āyu* denote the quality of time proper to life, the living duration: a time that wraps around itself,

45 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *La scienza sacra dei faraoni*, pp. 23-26.

46 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *Il tempio nell'uomo*, pp. 21-22.

47 Sigfried Giedion: *The Beginnings of Architecture*, pp. 89-94, 275-292. "As a further assurance of the afterlife, the soul was split into seven species. Each had a special function. Among them two had the leading roles: the Ba and the Ka. The Ba comes nearest to our Christian individual soul. In the New Kingdom, the Ba soul was represented as a sinister bird with a human face and often with human hands. At the moment of death, this soul left the body in the form of a bird. It is depicted sitting on a tree and pecking at the fruits of the earth. The notion of the Ba soul played a secondary role in Egypt. It is typical of Egypt that in the foreground should be not the personal, individual Ba soul but the Ka, which had a much wider cosmic significance. [...] It is a cosmic, divine force—a force which emanates from the god and which was serviceably built into the new social hierarchy. The king, at the summit of the hierarchy, received the Ka from the sun-god. He was the possessor of the Ka, which he then dispensed to the people. Through the Ka, the king was the human manifestation of the god" (*ibidem*, pp. 89-91). The *ka* does not have an autonomous and free existence (*ibidem*, p. 292), but needs a form in which to appear: after Pharaoh Zoser's death, his *ka* was "transferred" to the temple complex, where he could move from room to room. Its permanence was also ensured by periodic rituals whose purpose was to vivify the *ka*, to intensify and renew its strength. Of course, the notion of *ka* formulated in this way is specific to the Egyptian mindset and it would be pointless trying to compare it here with similar – but not identical – notions from other traditions. Instead, it is far more relevant to note that the Egyptian tradition elaborated complex ritual gestures, magnificent edifices and powerful formulas to ensure the perpetuation of a divine life in the human and, more generally, organic cosmos, and that this life expands through transmission from one mortal form to another.

48 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *Il tempio nell'uomo*, p. 129.

49 The Sanskrit and the Greek term seem to be etymologically related. See Émile Benveniste: *Expression indo-européenne de l'"éternité*, in "Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris", XXXVIII, n. 112, 1937, p. 103-112.

sewing together day to night, night to day – the components of the year that, in the *Brāhmaṇa*, are the components of Prajāpati. Through sacrifice and ritual, man participates in the weaving of this cosmic and liturgical time. The time of life.

Repeating the creation of the cosmos, the temple is a mechanism to generate life, a matrix. The *bindu* – the nondimensional threshold from which manifestation expands, the center of the manifest, living cosmos – is both *nāda*, the fundamental vibration, and *bīja*, the seed of everything[50]. The temple – the cosmos – is the rhythmic propagation of this vibration and the organic development of the primeval seed: it is, like a plant[51], a growing organism. The center of the Hindu temple is a square room called *garbhagṛha*: the house (*gṛha*) of the womb or germ (*garbha*)[52]. It is the place where life begins, the supreme and timeless instant of the animation of the cosmos, its vivification. There is no rational or intellectual understanding of this moment[53], for it is eternal and absolute – impossible to organize into intelligible meaning. It must be *lived*, not understood, because *it is life itself*. To truly experience it, one must enter the *garbhagṛha*, returning to an embryonic state, rewinding life onto itself – not to find its chronological beginning, but its center: the living germ that pulses through all life, moving it from deep within. "The Garbhagṛha is not only the house of the Germ or embryo of the Temple as Puruṣa; it refers to man who comes to the Centre and attains his new birth in its darkness"[54].

*

Life needs form. It is formless, yet it perpetuates itself through the incessant creation and destruction of finite, dynamic forms. But form can also obstruct the flow of life, diminish its intensity, and mortify it. In human life, this is what happens when the forms of the psyche – that is, of the soul, ψυχή – are in disharmony: when they are not organized into patterns capable of ensuring a virtuous organization of forces. Sacred space, as a *maṇḍala*, is an instrument that allows these structures to rebalance and shift into new forms that effectively channel – without obstructing – the flow of life. Not all psychic forms remain lastingly effective over the course of an individual existence: structures once beneficial can become the greatest hindrance to the creative propagation of life. It is then necessary to enact their ritual death, so that a spiritual rebirth may occur – a reconfiguration of psychic space that *creates* new forms. Entering the heart of the temple means accepting that something must die – that which is already mortal and finite – so that life can persevere in its own impulse, giving birth to new structures. Of course, this equivalence between the organization of psychic, subtle space and that of material, gross space does not apply only to the temple: all artifacts, buildings, and artistic creations embody a psychic structure. In the act of creation – the emergence of a new structure – the distinction between a mental pattern and the pattern present in the thing created, or in the instrument employed in a ritual act, such as a *maṇḍala*, is a later abstraction. Creation is a unique spiritual movement, only apparently split into two directions, one inner and one outer. But the invisible structure itself is neither inner nor outer: it is generative of these spaces, a center that radiates in different circumferences. The center of the psyche *is* the center of space and time – the center of cosmic life. To reshape the space of the soul means to free life from that which hinders its flow: to reactivate its creative center. •

50 Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 137.

51 On the definition of the temple as a living organism and, more specifically, as an organism that generates life, see also Vasilij Rozanov: *Da motivi orientali*, tr. by A. Pescetto, Adelphi, Milano 1988.

52 The Sanskrit term for "pregnant woman" is *garbhiṇī*. It is no accident that the archetype of the sacred mountain, to which the temple is assimilated, is complementary and inseparable from the equally powerful and transversal archetype of the sacred cave, which is precisely the womb containing the embryo and the innermost chamber of the temple, the *sanctum sanctorum*. The vertical axis embodied by the mountain is grounded in the center of life, embodied by the cave-womb.

53 René Adolphe Schwaller de Lubicz: *La scienza sacra dei faraoni*, p. 26.

54 Stella Kramrisch: *The Hindu Temple*, p. 163.

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL STOLLER
SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY: THE OTHER'S WAY

by Adrián Navigante

FIRST PART

Paul Stoller is an American anthropologist, professor emeritus at the West Chester University of Pensylvania (USA) and permanent fellow at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany). He received numerous academic awards and grants (Wenner-Gren Foundation, Fulbright-Hays, National Science Foundation), as well as special distinctions, like the Anders Retzius Gold Medal – in recognition for his contributions to anthropology – by the King of Sweden. His singular itinerary and his intellectual production transcend by far the special field of African Studies. He devoted almost two decades to the Songhay culture of Niger, West Africa, delving into the world of traditional healing practices (sorcery, herbal tradition, spirit possession) to the point of experiencing not only a methodological shift but also a kind of ontological shock leading to a deep reformulation of the very idea of "doing ethnography". His personal and professional elaboration of his ethnographic adventure is relevant for any ethnographic and scholarly context, since it touches upon one of the most significant aspects of

the human sciences: what does being (defined as) an anthropos *mean?*

Paul Stoller pleads for the practice of a "shared anthropology" which levels out the asymmetry between the scholar and the local. He also advocates the exercise of "narrative ethnography", which is not characterized by objective descriptions of the studied field but rather by an intersubjective account that places the reader in the living world of relationships where the ethnographer not only studies "the others" but also learns from them – a process which certainly includes being challenged on different levels.

This is the first part of a long interview conducted by Adrián Navigante, in which the main focus is Stoller's ethnographic experience and production from the 1970s to the 1990s. A second part will follow in the next issue of Transversal Paths (December 2025), which will cover the period from the 1990s to the present.

Adrián Navigante: Paul Stoller, my experience in reading your work was quite singular. From small and apparently insignificant details to remarkable insights and (self-)critical elaborations, you compel the reader to abandon taken-for-granted certainties and plunge into unexpected challenges, some of which may end up breaking cultural conditionings and weaving a new fabric for ethnographic work. I am very sensitive to such endeavors. Precisely because of this, I don't skip any detail, and in fact I have chosen to begin our discussion by mentioning an aspect of your early books that could have been overlooked by readers, the epigraphs. I think they need to be carefully considered, since they are in many cases fore-glimpses of the author's core argumentation. In your first books, the reader stumbles upon a peculiar combination of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical wit and Songhay traditional wisdom. Without any doubt, these epigraphs reveal a key aspect of your understanding and way of dealing with the Songhay people of Niger. Let me expand a little bit on this. Your early ethnographic work consists of four books: *In Sorcery's Shadow* (1987), *The Fusion of the Worlds* (1989), *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), and *Embodying Colonial Memories* (1995). The fourth essay, whose main subject is the embodied memories of colonial power in Hauka[1] possession cults, is not preceded by any epigraph, probably because it is addressed to a colleague and friend (French anthropologist Nicole Echard) whose untimely death remains epigraphically carved into those pages. The epigraphs of the other three books present not only the same choice of referents, but also a parallel structure: one quotation of Wittgenstein's and one Songhay proverb or saying, both composing a dialogic structure. Your quotations of Wittgenstein refer mainly to the impossibility of directly accounting for the phenomena we intend to describe[2], the constitutive gap between

1 The term Hauka, which literally means "crazy", refers to Songhay spirits who mimic European figures of colonial history. They became known to Europeans through Jean Rouch's most controversial film *Les maîtres fous* (1955). In his book on Jean Rouch, *The Cinematic Griot*, Paul Stoller writes the following: "From the Songhay perspective, the behavior of the Hauka spirits is crazy, indeed. In the bodies of their mediums, they handle fire, put their hands in pots of boiling sauce, eat poisonous plants. Sometimes Hauka spirits vomit black ink; saliva froths from their mouths. The Hauka also burlesque French colonial society. They often wear pith helmets and mock European behavior – especially French and British military behavior" (Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*, p. 145).

2 This is the first epigraph of *In Sorcery's Shadow*, which reads: "We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed" (source Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, § 426).

phenomena and the language that attempts to describe them[3], and the importance of actions rather than mental processes[4]. The mere fact of mentioning one of the most iconoclastic philosophers in Western history seems to me a way of affirming the heterodox and in a way disruptive character of your writing, at least in the face of what you call "ethnographic realism"[5]. In this respect, it would be convenient to remind our readers that Wittgenstein's thematization of a classical problem in philosophy, namely the gap between language and things, acquires a very concrete historical and anthropological stance in his notes on James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (written in the 1930s and 1940s, and never intended for publication). In those notes, he states that modern scientific discourse, in attempting to account for non-discursive practices of non-Western cultures (such as magic), fails at the very moment of explanation, precisely because it transforms a different form of life into an instance of cognitive or categorical inferiority. The Songhay sayings you quote appear to me as a complementary counter-point to Wittgenstein's statements: the first one from *In Sorcery's Shadow* ("the floating log never becomes a crocodile") refers to a space of alterity that persists and even expands once it has been opened; the second, from *Fusion of the Worlds* ("one does not study the spirits, one follows them"), to the necessity of inverting the asymmetry between worlds to bridge the gap toward the other; and the third, from *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* ("today you are learning with us, but to understand us you will have to grow old with us"), to the permanent effort required at interstitial spaces to come to terms with the challenge of alterity. The first Songhay quotation of *In Sorcery's Shadow* is something you resort to in the last part of your book as a response to a woman from Mehanna who tells you (as a compliment due to your language competence and your familiarity with their culture) "you are a true Songhay"[6]; the second and third quotations are words from your teacher Adamu Jenitongo[7] which allude to what you would later call "the interstices of the between"[8] – and their arduous change of status from "factual gap" to "possible bridge". I wonder whether you can expand on your choice of that epigraphic structure, as well as on the complex characterization of alterity that is artfully condensed in those epigraphs – especially in the light of the tension between ethnography's vocation of truth and the need to experientially question that truth by *re-working* the field. After all, your books seem to account much more for the vocation of a griot at the service of the spirits (or at least of an artful ethnographer engaged in indigenous wisdom)[9] than for the interest of a scientist attached to epistemic certainties.

Paul Stoller: No one has paid much attention to the epigraphs that I have used in many of my books. Your mention of them is thoughtful and compels me to think back to my early passion for philosophy. Indeed, the inclusion of these epigraphs derives from my reading philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, which was, and still is, one of the major centers of philosophical thinking in the US. Most of the philosophers there adhered to the strict study of epistemology and the search for a perfectly pure language. As a young man, I found this pursuit dry and uninspiring. Even so, I managed to find courses in existentialism and phenomenology that set the foundation for my past

3 This is what the reader can gather from the first epigraph in *Fusion of the Worlds*: "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing around the frame through which we look at it" (source Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, § 114).

4 The first epigraph of Paul Stoller's *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* stems from Wittgenstein's notebooks (cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Frankfurt 1977, English version: *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch, Chicago 1980) and reads: "I really do think with my pen, because my head often knows nothing about what my hand is writing".

5 "Ethnographic realism" is an expression that Stoller already uses in his first book, *In Sorcery's Shadow*, meaning the prescription of dispassionate analysis, exclusion of subjectivity, and disregard of extraordinary experiences (cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger*, Chicago: London 1987, p. xi). He comes back to this expression in subsequent books (cf. for example Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*, Philadelphia 1989, p. 47).

6 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 212.

7 See *infra*, note 15.

8 Paul Stoller: *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*, Chicago: London 2009, p. 6.

9 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times*, Ithaca: London 2023, p. 2.

and present thinking. I was especially taken with the writings French thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Back then, the philosophy students in my cohort would drink too much coffee and stay up all night and debating the whys and wherefores of *Being and Nothingness*, *The Stranger*, *The Second Sex*, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and especially *Eye and Mind.* Such reading and debate inspired me to become a writer. In those days, I often daydreamed about emulating Jean-Paul Sartre as I sat at a table at *Les Deux Maigots* and wrote philosophy and fiction.

Photo of Jean-Paul Sartre above the portal to the men's room at *Les Deux Maigots*, Paris. Photo by Paul Stoller.

As is often the case in creative endeavors, it took me years to circle back to my intellectual beginnings – philosophic and narrative approaches to scholarship – and, to borrow from T.S. Eliot, "know the place for the first time"[10]. My first detour by way of the US Peace Corps, took me to the Republic of Niger, where I had the good fortune to meet an old Songhay healer, Adamu Jenitongo, who would eventually become my teacher of things Songhay. During two-years of teaching and living in Tera and Tillaberi Niger, I learned the Songhay language and fell in love with the language, the people, the place, and the culture. I witnessed spirit possession ceremonies and immersed myself in a world the realities of which made me rethink my connection to European philosophy, which at the time seemed far removed from the mind-altering realities that I had experienced. My second detour propelled me back into the academic universe – first in linguistics (Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*,1957, and *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax,* 1965) and then in Social Anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropics,* 1955, and his four-volume *Mythologiques*,1964-1971). Debate about this body of work led me to a more scientifically structured pattern of thought as well as to logically coherent methods that might lead to the discovery of universally applicable theories.

10 Paul Stoller's reference stems from T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding", the last of his famous *Four Quartets* (1941): "we shall not cease from exploration / and the end of all our exploring / will be to arrive where we started / and to know the place for the first time".

My training eventually led me to structure an academically competent research proposal to conduct anthropological fieldwork in West Africa. I wanted to discover how rival religious discourses as expressed during Friday Mosque sermons and spirit possession ceremonies shape the local-level politics of Mehanna, a market town in Niger on the west bank of the Niger River.
During fieldwork, however, I stumbled into the world of Songhay healing, which introduced me to a parallel discourse and a new method of learning – apprenticeship, which, in turn, brought to the surface a different set of logical principles. When I wrote *In Sorcery's Shadow* and *Fusion of the Worlds,* I found it intellectually productive to use epigraphs that juxtaposed the wisdom of Wittgenstein's aphorisms in *Philosophical Investigations* to the wisdom found in Songhay proverbs and Adamu Jenitongo's idiomatic expressions. In that way, I attempted to frame those books as works that embodied a set of competing ideas that challenged those found in the history of Western Philosophy.

Adrián Navigante: The subtitle of your first book (co-authored with your ex-wife Cheryl Olkes[11]), *In Sorcery's Shadow*, reads *A Memoir of Apprenticeship Among the Songhay People of Niger*. In the prologue, you already refer to that peculiar genre: "This book is not a standard ethnography; it is a memoir. There are no Songhay informants in this story – there are individuals who behave in very particular situations"[12]. Your work, like any other ethnographic work, is composed of fieldnotes, transcribed tape-recordings, photographic material, maps, and sketches (of the Songhay country), and a chronological account of dates and places. However, the style of *In Sorcery's Shadow* is not descriptive but narrative, and you are one of the characters in that story – the main character, not only as an anthropologist but also (and, as the book progresses, *mainly*) as an apprentice of sorcery. The question imposes itself as to what you mean by "sorcery". The term is quite difficult to pin down, partly because of what is usually understood by or rather associated with that word in the West (harmful magic, black arts, evil supernatural deeds, etc.[13]), but also because of different levels or shades of meaning that appear in your work. The official definition in the Glossary at the end of *In Sorcery's Shadow* is quite pragmatic; it reads: "the conscious use of specialized knowledge to precipitate change"[14]. However, in chapter 11, the figure of the traditional sorcerer, or *sohanci*[15], is opposed to that of the witch, who is said to practice malevolent magic (illness causation, soul-eating)[16], so one could regard the main characteristic of Songhay sorcery as *counter*-sorcery – as Michael Taussig would put it, an apotropaic response to the active exercise of magic to do harm. In chapter 19, where you refer to measures taken by a *sohanci* to protect himself, sorcery appears in a much broader sense as a world of war where anyone can be the target of the other[17]. This is reinforced in chapter 21, where sorcery is said to be a world in which morality does not exist[18]. Finally, in your epilogue, you give a definition that reminds me of what Eric de Rosny wrote about sorcery in Cameroon: "sorcery is a metaphor for the chaos that constitutes human relations"[19]. Could you give the reader an orientation, maybe based on Songhay vocabulary (in your books I merely found the

11 The co-authorship is quite uneven, since Cheryl Olkes (who was researching the therapeutic uses of medicinal plants in Songhay country) joined Paul Stoller in 1984 – the last year of Stoller's fieldwork in Niger. Their collaboration covers the last six chapters (out of a total of forty-one) of the book *In Sorcery's Shadow*, on which Stoller worked from 1976 to 1984.

12 Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. xii.

13 Paul Stoller refers to such malevolent acts in Africa by using the term "witchcraft" instead of "sorcery". In this, he comes very close to the notion of witchcraft in Evans-Pritchard (cf. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford 1937, pp. 63-64), although for Stoller the phenomenon of witchcraft is not due to locals' lack of control over reality due to meager scientific knowledge, as Evans-Pritchard states.

14 Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 235.

15 The word *sorko*, which in Songhay means "master of the river" (because of the river spirits), is applied to griots or praise-poets of the spirits (cf. Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger*, Chicago: London 1989, pp. 100-101). Such fishermen are said to "live in the vicinity of the Niger river, which remains the Songhay spirits' source of life and power" (Paul Stoller: *Ibidem*, p. 92).

16 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 58.

17 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 101.

18 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 110.

19 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. p. 229.

term *korte*, which you translate as "magic"[20], and in Jean Rouch I stumbled upon the term *tyarkaw*, that is, "soul-eating sorcerers"[21]), to bear in mind the different nuances of the term (or the field) you translate as "sorcery" and still keep a somewhat unified sense (if that is possible)?

Paul Stoller: Like the concept of culture, the term "sorcery" is loaded with stigmatized associations that defy definition. Is it a metaphor? Is it a term that categorizes a set of practices? Indeed, is it important to define such a term? When practitioners or clients seek out "sorcery," what are they looking for? Steven Engler, my colleague at the Center Advanced Study at FAU-Erlangen recently suggested that people care less about a particular religious identity (Catholic, Sufi, Candomblé adept, or sorcery) than in the utility of religious practices. Put another way, definitions of sorcery are scholarly attempts, which are often imprecise or distracting, to comprehend seemingly incomprehensible phenomena. What really matters to both practitioners and clients is: Does it work? Will this practice solve my problems? Will it restore my health? The overarching concern in any kind of religious ceremony, then, boils down to the process of healing. In *Healing Stories: Healers and their Practices in a Troubled World*, which is my current work-in-progress, the notion of healing takes center stage. Indeed, the primacy of healing conforms to patterns of thought and action in the Songhay world. There is no word for "religion" in the Songhay language. Songhay people see what we call religion as a set of paths – the path of the *sohanci* (descendants of Sonni Ali Br, the magic King of the Songhay Empire (1464-1491) the path of the *sorko* (descendants of Faran Maka Bote, the 10th Century master of the River Niger, and the path of Muslims, which includes clerics (*alfaggey*) who make healing amulets. Among Songhay people, healers employ different sets of practices (*korte)*. There is also the path of the *cerkaw*, or witch, nocturnal soul-eaters who maim and kill their neighbors. The witch is a lethal disrupter of a community. All these intentional and unintentional healers among Songhay people are seekers of power. Their "work," which is a euphemism for healing and/or sickening practices, is judged by its effectiveness rather than by whether it is "good" or "bad." In this sense, a sorcerous experience represents the always already chaos of the human condition.

Adrián Navigante: The "specialized knowledge" implied by the term "sorcery" (according to your glossary definition of it at the end of *In Sorcery's Shadow*) is essentially related to a particular worldview and a form of wisdom that becomes manifest only when one delves into the traditional context – not as a detached observer but *as a practitioner*. This is a long and difficult path, which differs considerably both from the task of the classical ethnographer (forcing unusual, challenging, or even baffling phenomena into a standardized criterion of epistemic understanding) and from the personal accounts of "new age initiates" (capitalizing one's own exotic experiences as universal gospels). To focus on the aspect of "wisdom", it is only in your later (and less academic) books, where you leave aside the dimension of "individual empowerment", that the reader can grasp the deepest sense of the expression "Songhay sorcery"[22] and the core of your ethnographic work. Does *the knowledge of the practitioner* contained in your books progressively depart from ethnographic contents (as they are prescriptively reproduced in mainstream scholarship), or do you think it rather sheds new light on them? To this question I would like to add a complementary one: I have the impression that you write what you have reaped from an intense and long-standing immersion in a foreign world, but that the main revelation is the tensions of a singular learning process, where opposite worlds, contrasting sensibilities, and incommensurable ways of thinking and behaving play a key role. Do you think those tensions are mitigated at a certain stage by – unexpected or hard-earned – confluence points – or rather interstitial space emerging from such difficult confrontations?

Paul Stoller: The question of incommensurability has a long history in the Anthropology of Reli-

20 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. 49.

21 Jean Rouch: *La religion et la magie Songhay*, Bruxelles 1989, p. 301.

22 For example, in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, where Songhay sorcery is taken as "a body of pragmatic knowledge that can enable even the most physically compromised person to squeeze pleasure and happiness from an imperfect world" (Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, Boston 2001, p. 4).

gion. It is the key message in E.E. Evan-Pritchard's classic work, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937). In that memorable book, Evans-Pritchard grapples with the incomprehensibility of Azande witchcraft logic and the systematic and logically coherent systems of thought that comprise 20th-century British philosophy. In a famous passage, Evans-Pritchard sees the light of witchcraft streaking across the night sky. It disappears in his neighbor's compound. After dawn, his neighbor announced the death of his kinsman. Evans-Pritchard's neighbor then used the logic of witchcraft to explain that tragic event. A witch had landed in the compound, killing one of its residents. Evans-Pritchard wrote that he never discovered "the real" reason for the death of the neighbor's kinsman. There are many such passages in a book filled with these fascinating equivocations. The central question of Evans-Pritchard's book begs two questions: (1) how does a scholar who studies religion confront a set of apparently "irrational" beliefs, and (2) how does the scholar attempt to represent such systems? One of the best discussions of the first issue comes from Clifford Geertz's classic essay: "Anti Anti Relativism,"[23] in which he criticizes scholars who attempt to shape non-Western systems of thought into rational systems of universal application. He ends his nuanced argument with a reference to theory-seeking anthropologists: "If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home."[24] In other words, the experience of fieldwork creates (1) a set ethical issues (how does one show proper respect to the ideas and practices of non-western peoples?) and (2) a set of representational issues (can one describe non-western thoughts and practices using the age-old practice of writing in 19th century plain style?). My answer to the question of ethics is rather straightforward. If one becomes a healer's apprentice, she or he spends years establishing and reinforcing bonds of social trust – a necessary element in transmitting precious knowledge. During an apprenticeship, any ethical betrayal undermines that trust and ends the apprenticeship. Apprentices must open themselves fully to the healing experience and negotiate the existential risks and joys that healing entails. My answer to the question of representation borrows from the late Edith Turner who advised us to "Write about hot topics with a cool hand."[25] I would add that such cool-hand writing should honor the wisdom of healers.

Adrián Navigante: *In Sorcery's Shadow* is the story of a transformation, and it could even be read as a kind of ethnographic *Initiationsroman* – though with a notion of subjectivity that transcends *by far* the boundaries of a merely "individual story". The book contains precious information about Songhay cosmology, history, custom, and tradition; however, its central plot is the story of an American anthropologist (mainly an individualist Westerner with power ambitions) turned into a *sorko* (a man embedded in different sort of relations revolving around community and healing). At the beginning of the book, we meet an anthropologist whose main goal is to investigate the relationship between the use of language and local politics among the Songhay. At a certain point, he becomes the main object in a local interpretation of a presumably fortuitous event, and that instance drastically modifies his status – not only for local people but also for himself. Let's summarize the scene for the readers: one fine day, while you were typing your fieldnotes in the company of Djibo Mounmouni, a Zerma living in Mehanna who turned out to be a *sorko*, two birds defecated on your head. The episode might have been very annoying for you, but for the *sorko* Djibo Mounmouni it was miraculous. He had no doubt that you had been pointed out to him. In the Songhay cosmos, the birds were two powerful beings, Dongo (a deity of thunder) and Harakoy Dikko (a deity of the Niger River). Djibo recognized the sign and felt the need (or the obligation) to teach you how to become a *sorko*. It is interesting that, in that context, two authors crossed your mind: Edward Evans-Pritchard, who refused to become personally involved with Azande witch doctors for fear of losing his objectivity[26], and Carlos Castaneda, who transformed an ethnographic hoax on the Yaqui Indians into a

23 Clifford Geertz: "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti Relativism", in: *American Anthropologist* 86(2), pp. 263-78.

24 Cf. Clifford Geertz: "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti Relativism", in: *American Anthropologist*, p. 276.

25 Personal communication from Edith Turner to Paul Stoller.

26 This step was anyway impossible because of the anthropologist's own attitude toward the phenomenon, which reveals a good dose of dogmatic thinking. Evans-Pritchard was seeking an objective explanation of

spiritual best-seller[27]. Once again, we see a tension of opposites – neither of them quite convincing to you. For that reason, you decided to learn from the Songhay without imposing your own categories on them and without superposing spiritual platitudes onto their own contents. The world of traditional Songhay thought taught you that the learning process is not limited to verbal interactions with locals but takes place also among the spirits by means of different incantations, ritual meals, dancing patterns, and a profound refinement of perception and cognition. What took hold of you at first was a mixture of fear and fascination, and your task was to refine those impressions and feelings through increasing involvement in that "other world" – socializing with its agents the way Africans do. This is a clear passage from the Western model of natural science (linking epistemic validity with objectivity) to a model of what post-ontological-turn anthropologists would call inter-subjective epistemologies (linking interaction and performance with a non-ethnocentric and much broader type of knowledge). Could you perhaps try to delineate the spaces in which such epistemologies take place? In other words, how do terms like embodiment, imagination, and magic (among others) relate to each other, and in which way do they introduce other parameters of experience? Further, I would like you to say a few words – if possible – as to how those spaces end up displacing objectivity parameters and transforming the exercise of ethnography into an exploratory process and an exercise in ontological symmetrization of cultures that can barely be accepted by Western scholarship as a source of (epistemic) knowledge.

Paul Stoller: Soon after the death of my teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, I met a man who sold medicinal herbs at a market in Niger's capital city, Niamey. He knew that I had studied with Adamu Jenitongo and asked me to sit with him. I spent many days on his palm frond mat in the shade of an acacia tree. Clients would approach him and ask him for medicines that would treat both village (physical) and bush (spirit) illnesses. I immediately sensed Soumana Yacouba's kindness. In time, he told me that he was a *do,* a guardian of a certain section of the Niger River, and that the guardianship had been in his family for many centuries. As a *do*, he knew a great deal about the healing properties of plants, especially those found along the banks of the Niger River. After many days of sitting and listening, I asked Soumana Yacouba if I could learn from him.

> "I cannot give you an answer right now."
> I remained silent.
> Without further explanation, he stood up. "Come to my house. My wife is preparing lunch. She's a good cook."

We took a taxi to his compound, a cluster of mud huts with thatched roofs. We entered one of those huts and we sat on palm frond mats. Soumana's wife brought us lunch – rice smothered with a fragrant meat sauce. Soon thereafter, Soumana's wife returned. I complimented her cooking. She accepted my compliment with a smile and left.
Soumana looked up to the roof of his hut and began to talk to his ancestors. He asked his ancestors if they would accept me as his apprentice. Listening to words that I could not hear, Soumana attested to my character and my capacity to keep secrets. He looked at me:

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something that can only be disclosed through action, that is, from the inside: "The Zande notion of witchcraft is incompatible with our ways of thought. [...] That it kills people is obvious, but how it kills them cannot be known precisely. They tell you that if you were perhaps to ask an older man or a witch-doctor, he would give you more information. But the older men and witch-doctors can tell you little more than youth and laymen. [...] Their intellectual concepts of it are weak and they know better what to do when attacked by it than how to explain it. Their response is action and not analysis" (Edward Evans-Pritchard: The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events, in: *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation*, ed. by Roy R. Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner, Oxford 1997, p. 311.

27 Carlos Castaneda: *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, California 1968. This book was Castaneda's Master thesis in anthropology, but the reception of it classed its contents rather as a work of fiction. In the book, Castaneda describes himself as an apprentice of a Yaqui Indian sorcerer, Don Juan Matus.

"They say that you are okay. You can become my apprentice."
"But I didn't hear anything."
"In time, you'll be able to hear the voices of the ancestors."

I went on to study with Soumana Yacouba and didn't think too much about how I could explain what I had experienced. Terms like "embodiment", "imagination", and "magic" may have linkages in the objectified world of academic discourse, but in Soumana Yacouba's hut, they faded into the background. Placing my trust in the alternative logic of Soumana's world, I wanted to know how I might one day be able to hear the voices of ancestors.

I have written extensively about embodiment, the imagination, and magic, but only because of my sensuous experiences in the world of Songhay healers.[28] When I listen to scholars presenting their work, I am always struck by how much time they spend attempting to define terms, like religion, sorcery, embodiment, and so on. If you think about these terms from this "inside", which is the vantage of an initiated apprentice, these efforts seem to steer us away from a deeper comprehension of religion, embodiment, and sorcery. From the "inside," it is perhaps better to borrow the much-repeated line of TV's most famous mob boss, Tony Soprano: "It is what it is"[29].

Sohanci Adamu Jenitongo of Tillaberi, Niger.
Photo by Paul Stoller.

Adrián Navigante: The account of your experience as an apprentice among the Songhay goes beyond established ethnographic research criteria and hermeneutic parameters. At the same time, it discloses (at least to me) another way of doing ethnography, by means of "the extended gaze", irrespective of whether the contents of that reversed ethnography are accepted by Western academia

28 See also T.M Luhrmann: *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, New York 2012.

29 Paul Stoller refers to a fictional character of the HBO television series The Sopranos, portrayed by American actor James Joy Gandolfini.

or not. You approach essential aspects of Songhay life that are not objectifiable in the scholarly sense of the term; yet they remain an essential part of their tradition and way of living – usually inaccessible to Western researchers. These aspects – or contents, if we see them from the point of view of a living tradition – build the core of your instruction as a *sorko benya*[30]. That is why so much effort – not only intellectual but also bodily – was required of you to get deeply acquainted with them. The first aspect is sound, or rather the use of sound and vibration as vehicle of power (for example, in incantations, which serve to activate objects, harness the forces of non-human beings, and protect oneself or attack others). The second aspect is witchcraft, or more exactly the activation of a radar perception of witches in your body by means of a sacrificial ritual performed with a silver ring of yours and other ingredients (a small mirror, a sheet of white cloth, plants, twigs, roots, powders, incantations, etc.). The third aspect is related to Songhay healing rituals, like the shamanic retrieval of a bewitched man's double[31]. Such rites demand an expansion of the senses toward the invisible environment to pinpoint agents of distortion, locate the abducted double, and eventually retrieve it. This was all new to you, especially as a practice with concrete effects. Finally, you had to eat a magic paste called *kusu*, which your master, the powerful *sorko*[32] of Mehanna, Kada Mounmouni, prepared for you to fix the substance of sorcery in your body. There are other aspects, but the ones I have just mentioned suffice to formulate my next question. Don't you think that each one of those aspects enables you to get new – and otherwise fully inaccessible – ethnographic data precisely because the dominant perspective on the practice of ethnography is deeply questioned through the very discipline you are subjected to? To expand a little bit on this last aspect: I cannot imagine how any other ethnographer would have learned, for example, that sorcery attacks in the Songhay context enter the body of the victims through the third finger of the left hand other than by undergoing the same initiatory processes you describe in your memoir – the main corollary of which seems to me the realization that a detached observation can never do justice to the essential aspect of the living culture being studied.

Paul Stoller: I once wrote an essay, "The Sorcerer's Body"[33], which was my attempt to demonstrate the power of a more phenomenological approach to studies of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. In that essay, I contrast embodied and disembodied approaches to the anthropology of religion. I consider the ramifications of the distanced approaches of Lévi-Strauss, as presented in his essay "The Sorcerer and His Magic,"[34] and Evans-Pritchard in his book on the Azande[35]. In both cases, these notable scholars use "data" gleaned from archival sources or from fieldwork to build a case for a particular theory. Lévi-Strauss drew on the work of scholars studying Amerindian populations to demonstrate the analytical power of structuralism. Evans-Pritchard, who, of course, sent his cook to apprentice with a Zande witch-doctor, used that "data" to discuss the so-called logic of non-Western others, which, in the end, he considered interesting but irrational and contradictory. Faced with mind-challenging phenomena that threatened to sweep them away in the flood waters of an angry river, they opted to cling to the mind-saving branch of objectivity, a branch that promised measures of control in seemingly uncontrollable circumstances. Neither Lévi-Strauss nor E.E. Evans-Pritchard was ever "implicated" in the societies, groups, or systems that they sought to explain. That non-implicated

30 The Songhay term *sorko benya* means "slave of a *sorko*", and it is given to people pointed out to become *sorkos* who don't have *sorko* ancestry (cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 41) but have the capacities to receive that knowledge (*Ibidem*, p. 235).

31 In Songhay anthropology, the double (*bia*) is the essence of a person's humanity. It leaves the body while the person sleeps and when mediums receive spirits in their bodies, and it can also be stolen by witches during the night (cf. Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, p. 31).

32 The *sohanci* are high priests and guardians of the ancient Songhay culture. Adamu Jenitongo, Paul Stoller's second and most important teacher, defined himself a special *sohanci*, called *guunu*: "Because our fathers were *sohanci* and our mothers witches, we *guunu* are the most powerful *sohanci*" (Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 81).

33 Paul Stoller essay was included in his book *Sensuous Scholarship*, published in 1997.

34 This essay was part of Lévi-Strauss's famous book *Anthropologie structurale*, published in 1958.

35 Cf. Evans-Pritchard: Witchcraft: *Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford 1937.

scholarly path has long been followed by the great majority of anthropologists and their study of all aspects of social life, including, of course, the study of religious practices. What happens when a scholar becomes implicated in a religious tradition, when he or she is initiated, when he or she eats or drinks a transformative substance? Is initiation and the apprenticeship that follows it merely a methodological tool that gives scholars access to secret or semi-secret knowledge? For me, the notion of scholarly implication is linked to much larger ethical questions. If you are an apprentice-scholar, what are your ethical obligations? If you are entrusted with secret texts, the identity of "magical" plants, or important ritual practices, how do you link these elements to your scholarship? Can you simultaneously be a practitioner and scholar? The answer is an authoritative yes! There is no one way to write about subjects of magic, witchcraft, sorcery, or religion. For me, the best practice has been to adjust my writing to the subject and audience. When I have written about sorcery, which involves personal implication and private scenarios, I write mostly memoir. When I write about spirit possession, which involves a large cast of characters – both human and spirit – and public performance, I stick to fairly standard ethnography, with much foregrounded narrative. Even so, I cannot forget that, besides being an initiated apprentice, I am also an anthropologist, a scholar who reflects on the philosophical implications of my ongoing research. When I muse about anthropology or philosophy, I do so in narrative-laced academic essays. Above and beyond these attempts at broadly based representation, I am committed to adhering to high ethical standards which ensure that the trust I developed with my teachers, both living and dead, is not betrayed.

Adrián Navigante: What you have just referred to is a remarkable art of combination and delimitation of roles and functions, but it does not always turn out to be like that... In the same way in which certain aspects of your apprenticeship of sorcery are disruptive for Western scholarship standards, they may also be taken in a metaphorical sense and ultimately "explained away". Unprejudiced but still rationally minded anthropologists would say that the suggestive power of incantations is a social fact with its own effects, or that the discourse of sorcery (because of its very performativity) generates experiences co-responding to (or rather co-shaping) its own fictional reality, or that ritual ingestion creates the substance of sorcery by means of a transferential mechanism. I would like to go deeper now, that is, beyond the question of "methods" or "approaches" and the debates around them. There are incidents you experienced as a result of your practice which provoked a radical turn not only in your method as an ethnographer but also in your way of being in the world. If your objectivity was compromised the moment you decided to walk the path of a *sorko-sohanci*, the experiential reversal took place during your interaction with a magician and possession priestess in Wanzerbe. In the night after the first meeting, you felt a presence in the room, and when you started to roll off your mat and leave, you noticed that your legs were paralyzed. You recited a strong incantation that Adamu Jenitongo had taught you for protection, the *genji how*[36], for hours on end, until your body responded to stimuli and the presence left the room. Next morning, you confronted the priestess, called Dunguri, and she told you: "Now I know that you are a man with a pure heart [...]. You are ready. Come into my house and we shall begin to learn"[37]. After this episode, you write the following: "Wanzerbe had turned my world upside down. Before my paralysis, I *knew* there were scientific explanations of Songhay sorcery. After Wanzerbe my unwavering faith in science had vanished. Nothing I had learned in academe had prepared me for Dunguri"[38]. Can we say that the episode with Dunguri in Wanzerbe was an ontological shock that pulled away your materialist and rationalist leanings and revealed an animistic underground in your way of experiencing the world and relating to other beings?

Paul Stoller: Scholars are trained in the tried-and-true methods of social science that have a centu-

36 *Gengi how* means "to attach or tie up the bush", and it is "the most important incantation in a sorcerer's repertoire [among the Songhay]" (Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 234). Stoller provides a full English translation of this incantation in Chapter 19 of *In Sorcery's Shadow* (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 102).

37 Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 149.

38 Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 153.

ries-old history. Scholars are taught to write passionless prose in the third person. We are wedded to Aristotelian logic and its rules of argumentation. Social scientists are taught to use systematic methods to gather data on political systems, economic exchange, kinship, and spirit possession. Once we gather the data, institutional expectations compel us to use it to refine theories of politics, exchange, kinship, and/or spirit possession. Clifford Geertz famously called this phenomenon "the dead hand of competence."[39] For many years, I took up the burden of these institutional expectations. Although I had been initiated by Sorko Mounmouni Kada and *Sohanci* Adamu Jenitongo and had experienced events that defied comprehension, including near-death episodes in Wanzerbe, the pull of 200 years of (social) scientific practice was, at that time in my life, stronger. Those ingrained traditions compelled me to write a "dead hand of competence" book manuscript on Songhay sorcery. That draft had an introduction, a review of the relevant review of the literature, a presentation of results, and a discussion of the study's theoretical significance. My love for my teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, however, compelled me to rethink my draft. I wondered what he would think about my untitled monograph. And so, I traveled to Niger to translate my academic work to my teacher.

Adamu Jenitongo at work in his Tillaberi Spirit hut.
Photo by Paul Stoller.

I began the arduous task of translating my text. It took me more than two months of late-night translation to complete my project. During the process, my teacher would listen for a little while, yawn, and tell me to return the next day, but he offered no commentary. On the eve of my departure, I

39 Paul Stoller refers to Clifford Geertz's book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, in which the latter thematizes the need to go beyond the canonical framework in anthropology of religion (Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Bronislaw Malinowski), even at the risk of incurring in eclecticism, theory-mongering, and confusion, and "escape the dead hand of competence" (Clifford Geertz: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, p. 88. Geertz's maxim is a quotation of Morris Janowitz's article "Anthropology and the Social Sciences" (in: *Current Anthropology 4*, 1963, pp. 146-154, p. 139).

nervously asked my teacher about the work:

> "Baba," I asked, "I've translated my work, and you've said not a word about what you think?"
> The old man smiled: "Well, it's not so good."
> "What's wrong with it?"
> "There's not enough of me in it. There's not enough of you in it. Write something that tells the story of our relationship. Write something that your grandchildren and my grandchildren will read and discuss."

That comment presented me a challenge that I strove to meet in *In Sorcery's Shadow*, a narrative in which I attempted to describe the whys and wherefores of the Songhay world through the prism of my relationship – of love and loss – with Adamu Jenitongo. That is why *In Sorcery's Shadow*, which is a book written by a young man, has no footnotes or references. It is the story of the evolution of my relationship with Adamu Jenitongo. Although the University of Chicago Press published it more than 35 years ago, it is still in print. When my granddaughter sits down to read it, I will look forward to our conversation.
I should also add that a more profound ontological shock occurred when I was diagnosed with cancer in 2001, which precipitated yet another shocking confrontation with mortality. That experience led me to a deeper understanding of Songhay healing and a clearer comprehension of how I should proceed on the path of life. I will discuss those issues in the second installment of this interview[40].

Adrián Navigante: *In Sorcery's Shadow* is a very rich book because it contains not only ethnographic data and accounts of personal experience with local priests, healers, and witches, but also an ethical question encompassing all the experiences mentioned in the book. If the world of sorcery (i.e. traditional Songhay methods of effecting change and the *Weltanschauung* related to them) does not respond to any moral criteria established *a priori*, if healing and harming are closely interrelated, if the visible human warfare we witness in history and politics knows a continuity in the invisible world and is perpetually fed by occult procedures, what orientation can be followed to gain "Songhay wisdom"? It seems to me that this question can only be answered in a twofold way: with regard to one's own actions (with the scope of harmonizing oneself) and in relation to the group's habits and customs into which one is inserted (to create and preserve a collective balance). You accepted to become a *sorko baya* for different reasons: at first to gain more and better ethnographic data, then to empower yourself and influence others, subsequently to become a hard man (like a spiritual warrior), and finally to cope with the problems arising from the tension between the social and the spirit world. To this last aspect, we can add the one you mention in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, although a detailed discussion of that book will be part of our next conversation. In that book, you say that a *sorko benya* is able to cope with his own mortality in the best possible way. What "guided you" throughout this long-standing progression so that you did not relapse to earlier ambitions or were led astray by false projections and promises, and what changes took place in your perception and understanding of the task of a *sohanci-sorko* from the 1980s to the present?

Paul Stoller: In the Songhay world, it is said that the *sohanci*, a master healer and guardian of the moral order, can defy death. When a *sohanci* joins the ancestors, his or her apprentices receive the objects that belonged to him (rings, bracelets, lances, special sandals, and satchels of medicines). *Sohanci* rings, which embody centuries-old power of Sonni Ali Ber's descendants, are significant, for it is said that they link the person who wears them on the third finger of the left hand to her or his teacher. While he was alive, *Sohanci* Adamu Jenitongo gifted me some of his medicines and a few of his ritual objects. He also gave me several rings, which I wear on the third finger of my left hand. Following his instructions, these are rings that one doesn't sell or give away. They are the everlasting

40 A second part of this conversation with Paul Stoller will be published in the fourth issue of *Transversal Paths* (December 2025), in which the the question of his illness and its relationship with his anthropological work will be treated at length.

tangible link between me and my teacher. Put another way, *Sohanci* Adamu Jenitongo has "had my back" for many decades. He taught me much when he was alive, and even though he died decades ago, he has continued to help me on the sinuous path that is my life. Such a connection is not at all uncommon among Songhay healers and their apprentices. Even so, it has taken me a long time to recognize the deep lessons that my teacher conveyed to me. As a young apprentice, I thought that Songhay healing entailed the use of specialized knowledge to heal, sicken, or kill. My introduction to the Songhay world of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft convinced me that that world was a space of murderous competition. Who might know the most powerful incantation, or where to find and how to use the most potent medicines? As a young man, I lacked the life experience to understand the fundamental principles of Songhay healing. When cancer gripped my body in 2001, I found myself in a place in which Adamu Jenitongo's words and acts took on new meaning. I no longer considered sorcery as a murderous competition for power, but as a set of practices that enabled the healer and her clients to feel "comfortable in their skins." I realized that as one ages, the healer's obligations shift from primarily healing clients of physiological and spirit illnesses to those of being a mentor – conveying to the next generation what knowledge he or she has acquired. The sacred obligation of Songhay master healers, then, is to convey wisdom to the next generation.

Adrián Navigante: We will deal with the question of a healer's obligations – which is a key issue in your work – in the second part of our conversation. Now, I would like to go back to *In Sorcery's Shadow.* A very interesting aspect of that book is what I would call your "limit experience" with the most powerful sorceress of Wanzarbe, Kassey. I think that episode is worthy of being recounted because it triggered part of your consequential reflections in the last part of the book. You had tried to meet Kassey for seven years without success (when you stumbled upon the other sorceress of Wanzerbe, Dunguri, you were actually looking for Kassey). Now, Kassey came to you one day in 1981 quite unexpectedly, while you were in Mehanna, through a messenger who told you that she had already met you, that she had seen you. This man gave you a present sent by her, a green powder which you were supposed to eat to gain protection against bullets, accidents, and evil people[41]. You thought it could be poison and consulted your teacher, Adamu Jenitongo. To your surprise, he confirmed the authenticity of that powerful *sohanci*[42] powder and told you that the present was Kassey's way of inviting you to meet her at Wanzerbe. When that encounter finally took place (a year later, in 1982), she received you with words of approval[43], which inspired you to surpass your anthropological ambition (you wanted to record, among other things, her vast knowledge on medicinal plants) and open your heart to her. This means, as far as I could understand, to adopt the opposite position of Western anthropologists who travel long distances and face lots of difficulties out of sheer ambition, that is, in order to get valuable information from local people and produce a scientific work. In your case, you decided to learn from Kassey by re-situating yourself (as a *sohanci benya*) within the universe of sorcery. The result was, as I said, a "limit experience". The last chapter of the period 1982-1983 ends with Kassey's words "come back tomorrow, we shall continue"[44], but we don't know what happened next. The following chapter begins in the following year, 1984, which took you for the last time to Wanzerbe. Your description of Kassey that year is quite different. She was reluctant to transmit knowledge to you; her behavior was odd and increasingly suspicious; it became threatening at a certain point... In the night after your last meeting with her, you experienced a sorcery attack (of the type sent by Dunguri), but this time it was no test. You recited the *genji how* to deviate the destructive forces, and the next day, you learned that two close relatives of your property caretaker, Idrissa Dembo, whose family was originally from Wanzerbe, had died during the night. The news is even more shocking if the reader knows, as you mention in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, that Kassey

41 Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 175.

42 The *sohanci* are the descendants of the first Songhay king, Sonni Ali Ber, well versed in sorcery (cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 235).

43 "I am opening my heart to you, Paul, because of your patience, because your heart is pure" (Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 194.

44 cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 195.

was Idrissa's stepmother[45]. About the night's episode you write the following: "One night and two deaths. What I had done, I agonized. People had sent death to my house and in warding it off I had diverted it elsewhere. The world of sorcery was too much with me"[46]. Many questions come to my mind in recalling that episode: Was there any concrete learning process with Kassey between 1982 and 1984? If there was, why do you pass the whole of it in silence? If there was not, what did your dialogue consist of? As to the limit experience, I am curious to know whether the "limit" goes beyond what you yourself said to Cheryl Olkes at a certain point: "I know my limit and I've reached it"[47], which is a personal confession. What I read in the Kassey episode, and I hope my assumption is not wrong, is the limit of trust between "*boro bi*" and "*anasara*"[48], the unavoidable and unsurpassable tension between locals and foreigners, and also the limit of transmission of knowledge in the world of sorcery, where nobody is reliable[49] – and teachers are therefore constrained not to transmit too much for fear of being destroyed by their own disciples. Do you agree with these aspects?

Paul Stoller: Following the death of Adamu Jenitongo, life in Niger became sad, and for me, more personally dangerous. After falling sick with a case of "malaria that wasn't malaria," a potentially lethal sickness that someone sent to me, I decided that continued fieldwork in Niger posed too many potentially life-threatening problems. For that reason, I decided in 1992 to begin a research project on West African street traders in New York City. I spent most of my field time with traders from Niger and Mali on 125th and 116th streets in Harlem[50]. During my time in Niger, I had known the relatives of many of the street traders. During fieldwork we sat, talked, trading stories of rural Niger, Niamey, the capital city, and, of course, their adventures in New York City. I began that project in 1992 and have continued to visit and learn from what people in Niger call, "Les New Yorkais".
I developed a close relationship with one man in particular, Issifi Mayaki, who sold jewelry and incense at the 116th Street Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market. We talked on the phone regularly, and he would ask me where he could find a good French-speaking physician or an attorney who excelled at immigration law. We talked about the trials and tribulations of our families. In short order, we established a real friendship during which we shared our hopes, dreams, and fears. After several years of friendship Issifi had saved enough money to fly his younger brother from Niger to New York City. He soon found a security guard job and moved into Issifi's Harlem apartment. One evening I phoned Issifi to catch up. His brother answered the phone.

> "Hello," his brother said.
> "Hi, this is Paul, Issifi's friend."
> In the background, I heard Issifi ask: "Who's on the phone?"
> "It's Paul," his brother said.
> "Oh, the white man," I heard Issifi say, not knowing that I could hear him.
> A moment later, Issifi picked up the phone: "Hello, my brother," he said. "How are you?"

At that moment of truth, I came to realize that no matter the extent of my linguistic and cultural competence, Issifi and I would never completely cross a cultural divide that has long separated black people from white people, the colonized from the colonial, and research subjects from their anthropologists. An anthropologist, for example, can learn a great deal about another group of people. He or she can even learn cherished secrets about medicines, incantations, and ritual practices. Even so,

45 Cf. Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things,* p. 88.
46 cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 226.
47 cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 226.
48 Cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, pp. 4-5. The term *boro bi* means "black man" (cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *Ibidem*, p. 5); *anasara* is derived from the Arabic *insara* i.e. Christian (Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *Ibidem*, p. 233), and it refers to Europeans or white people.
49 The world of sorcery, says Paul Stoller's teacher Adamu Jenitongo, is a world of war. "Every person on the path is a target for the bad faith of others" (cf. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 101).
50 That research project led to the publication of a book entitled *Money has no Smell: The Africanization of New York City*, published in 2002.

there is an invisible boundary that one cannot cross. I became an initiated apprentice. I ingested magic cake (*kusu*), mixed potions, and learned how to read messages spelled out in the configurations of divinatory shells. Even so, Songhay people like to say: *Lamba tondi, a si boro te jaanah,* that is, "the landing stone will never make a person a *jaanah*".
Fisherman look for round semi-submerged stones to moor their dugouts in the shallows of the Niger River. The *jaanah* is a kind of mollusk that looks like a landing stone, but, of course, isn't one and will never become one. And so my relationships with Songhay healers (Adamu Jenitongo, Kassey Wanzerbe, Moumouni Kada, Djibo Mounmouni, and Fatouma Seyni) led me deeply into their worlds, but at some point, I reached a barrier beyond which I could not venture. My telephone encounter with Issifi Mayaki brought me a megadose of cultural reality. Although I am an initiated apprentice to Songhay healers, I do not live in Niger, and I no longer treat clients. My telephone encounter with Issifi Mayaki convinced me that my personal and professional obligation was to mentor anthropological initiates and convey the wisdom of my teachers to anyone willing to listen, read, or watch my work – old world messages to new world audiences of people living in turbulent times.

Adrián Navigante: There is a lot to say about what the message an anthropologist like you can and should convey to a young audience in these times of general crisis. That is the subject of your book *Wisdom from the Edge* (2023), which we will approach at length in our next conversation. Now let me go back to *Fusion of the Worlds*, which can be read as the complementary side of *In Sorcery's Shadow*. Your book on sorcery is a memoir in which subjectivity, secrecy, invisible entities, and other aspects of the more esoteric dimension of the Songhay tradition play a key role. *Fusion of the Worlds* is a book on possession, which in the Songhay tradition is a public affair with an aura of carnival as well as bright costumes, energetic dancing, and pulsating music. In this book, your appearance in the first person is scant. Far from being the main character of the book, you are rather a marginal figure. The main character is collective, a possession troupe of Tillaberi in Niger, and there is, as in *In Sorcery's Shadow*, a narration. This renders the epithet "objective" (in the sense of an ethnographic report) quite difficult to define in your book. As Michel Leiris said with regard to Zār possession in Northern Ethiopia[51], such cults have an undoubtedly theatrical aspect, and *Fusion of the World* begins by presenting its *dramatis personae* – both from the social world and from the spirit world, which are separated in everyday life and fused in possession. As I was reading the book, I realized that the collective character has two sides: not only the human mediums of the Songhay troupe you were related to, but also *the spirits* (Tooru, Genji Kwari, Genji Bi, Hargay, Hausa Genji, and Hauka)[52]. As the narration unfolds, the spirits gain more and more space, and your own association with the human group becomes more multifaceted, sensual, and poetic. The epithets I am using are not metaphorical at all: the spirits are manifold, and their dynamic is a challenging assemblage for anthropological understanding; the sensuality is in the medium's bodies (as embodied spirits) and in the musicians (as a sensual bridge linking the social and the spirit world); finally, the word "poetry" refers to the words of power obliging the spirits to take the bodies of their mediums. When you refer to this last aspect, there is a revealing passage in which you write: "because of their word-power, *sorkos* do not give their praise-poetry to scholars in exchange for money. To record possession praise-poetry, scholars must learn it themselves. In this way, I learned spirit praise-poetry"[53]. This defines your position in the narration and links you as a character to the character "Paul" in *In Sorcery's Shadow*. *In Fusion of the Worlds*, you are barely visible; you are not part of the possession troupe, but you are *inside their world.* You are not only reporting on Songhay possession culture but also following the spirits (which are the neglected side of them, neglected by an anthropology that imposes rational criteria to make sense of the "irrational" others). Your attitude takes the reader back to the Songhay epigraph (by Adamu Jenitongo) at the beginning of the book: "One does not study the spirits, one follows them". What is it like following the spirits in the strict sense of the word? What does it mean, anthropologically speaking? In other words: when one realizes that it is not about respecting the

51 Cf. Michel Leiris: *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*, Paris 1958.
52 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, pp. xx-xxii.
53 Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, p. 101.

beliefs of others but rather about sharing their world-experience from the inside, how does the anthropologist (despite the defense mechanisms of his/her "cognitive ego"[54]) gain corporeal, affective, imaginative empathy toward the others to the point of breaking not only methodological but also ontological barriers?

Paul Stoller: In my view, scholars can gain corporal, affective, and imaginative empathy towards others by taking a more artful approach to their scholarship. The great Swiss artist Paul Klee often discussed how he envisioned painting a forest. In his lectures, he said he had to open himself to the trees in the forest. In so doing, the forest gets entangled in his being, and he paints to break free – painting from the "inside" to get to Cezanne's truth that "nature is on the inside." In a turbulent world in dire need of wise counsel, is it important to produce work that gives us an artful glimpse of "the inside"? Consider what the great Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

> "Socrates and his successors, down to our day, have considered all moral and sentimental accomplishments – noble deeds, compassion, self-sacrifice, heroism ... to be ultimately derived from the dialectic of knowledge and therefore teachable ... But science, spurred on by its energetic notions, approaches irresistibly those outer limits where the optimism of logic must collapse ... When the inquirer, having pushed to the circumference, realizes how logic in that place curls about itself and bites its own tail, he is struck with a new kind of perception, a tragic perception, which requires, to make it tolerable, the remedy of art"[55].

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities can access this new kind of perception about which Nietzsche wrote through the framework of narrative--stories that the sages told to convey wisdom from one generation to the next. If narratives are well crafted, the words can jump from the writer's hand, represented by words on the page, to the reader's mind, enabling him or her to think a new thought or feel a new feeling. I'll have more to say about these issues of representation in the second instalment of this interview.

Adrián Navigante: One of the most interesting parts of *Fusion of the Worlds* is your description of the Songhay cosmology, where the reader can clearly see the tension between the animistic core of the local tradition (thematized by Jean Rouch as early as in 1945[56]) and the progressive Islamization of the Songhay world. If the Songhay world consists, as Adamu Jenitongo told you, of seven heavens, seven hells, and the earth, it is on the twofold level of the earth where the animistic elements come to the fore, whereas the Islamic ideology dominates the speculative architecture of the farthest cosmic levels. In fact, the distribution of the agents or actors of hell and heaven is dictated by Islamic doctrine: Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostic, and atheists belong to the nether realms[57], whereas the higher spheres are occupied by Islamic entities (let's say angels and ultimately Allah), except for the first one, the spirit world, which closely interacts with the social world of living hu-

54 This is an expression of French anthropologist Maurice Godelier. Against Michel Leiris' conviction that what anthropologists find in the field is an "other" as mirror of themselves (which becomes manifest if one subjectively deals with his own phantoms to achieve another level of self-critique), Godelier thinks that anthropologists can shatter their own projective mirrors through the construction of a new (non-subjective or neutral) ego, "a cognitive ego which will be added to the other egos, the social and the intimate" (Maurice Godelier: *Au fondement des sociétés humaines*, p. 54). This "new ego" should be built before going to the field, and it consists of ideas, concepts, theories, reading material, debates and controverses related to the intellectual milieu of the anthropologist. Godelier blindly trusts the objectivity of Western epistemic thought and its "cognitive cleansing function" as well as the effectiveness of what he calls "critical vigilance" (Maurice Godelier, *Ibidem*, p. 55) as the cornerstone of anthropology.

55 Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Francis Golffing, New York 1956, p. 93.

56 Jean Rouch: Apercu sur l'animisme Sonrai, in: *Notes Africaines*, Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire, Dakar, Octobre 1943, N°20, pp. 4-8.

57 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, pp. 30-31.

man beings[58]. Parallel to that, the first level of hell appears a chthonic waystation populated by the souls of the recently dead, not yet severed from the world of the living[59]. The world of possession (as the world of sorcery) is, in this sense, an animistic world in which all action is focused on the earth and the forces within and around it (the dead, the spirits, the mediums). In that context, the monotheistic God (Allah) becomes a *deus otiosus*, and Koranic elements have concrete use only if integrated (apart from prayers, in written form or as craftsmanship) into magical procedures like fabrication of amulets or talismans. This tension of these two worlds in the Songhay cosmology is not precisely a "fusion" (like the one between the social and the spirit world in possession cults). It seems rather a dynamic of dislocation. Mediums are considered devil worshipers, and some Islamic clerics resort to sorcery (another form of the "devil worship" they denounce in the animists!) with the aim of destroying traditional communities[60]. My impression is that the more distance one takes from the animistic (that is, ambivalent, performative, and living) environment of human and non-human relationships, the more important Islamic theological speculation (based on metaphysical and moral principles devoid of concrete relations) becomes. Could you expand on this complex aspect of Songhay religious life?

Paul Stoller: Spirit possession among Songhay people is a symbolic reenactment of Songhay experience in the world. It is a performance of living history. The pantheon of spirits, divided into five groups, mirrors the social order. In both the spirit and social worlds, nobles and captives engage in master-slave relations. In both worlds, there are shepherds, Fulan pastoralists, and Fulan spirits. There are, as well, migrants and spirits from the East (Hausa-speaking people and spirits) and the North (Tuareg, Bella (Tuareg captives), and Arabs.

There is a long pre-Islamic history among the Songhay people. Although Islam was first introduced to Songhay people in the 12th century or so, it did not spread far and wide during the Songhay Empire (1464-1591). In the recent past, one found Islam practiced in larger cities and towns. As Muhammad's religion spread slowly to the countryside, new spirits, representing the impact of Islam in West Africa, began to take the bodies of Songhay spirit mediums. When the French military occupied Songhay land during the late 19th century and colonized Mali and Niger in the early 20th century, the Hauka spirits – who represented colonial identities (military and political officials, military officers, truck drivers, physicians and nurses and laborers – began to colonize the bodies of spirit mediums. In this way, when a spirit possession ceremony takes place, it recounts in powerfully symbolic terms what can be termed the Songhay "being-in-the-world". Put another way, among Songhay people, the social worlds and spirit words are not distinctly separate. They intersect. Such a complex interpenetration of history, social change, and social-spirit relations is played out dramatically every time a spirit possession ceremony is staged.

In this way, Songhay spirit possession, or *holey hori,* represents the establishment and reinforcement of cultural memory, a dimension of spirit possession that is often neglected in the literatures of anthropology and religious studies. Moreover, it is a cultural memory that is established and reinforced sensuously through sound, taste, smell, and touch, and vision—the sensuous evocation of memory.[61] Spirit possession also underscores the epistemological flexibility of Songhay religious practices in the world – a flexibility that has emerged from the historical profusion of diverse beliefs in West Africa. I have already mentioned that there is no word in Songhay for religion. Instead, there are many "paths", which are not mutually exclusive (sorcery, magic, witchcraft, Islam, Christianity) that

58 "The juxtaposition of the first heaven and earth creates in the world two contiguous domains: the world of social life and the world of spirits. These worlds are fused during possession ceremonies when the spirits leave their world – the first heaven – to visit the social world by taking a medium's body" (Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, p. 31).

59 "The first hell is a way station. When a person dies, he or she waits in the first hell for God's decision" (Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, p. 30).

60 Paul Stoller's teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, denounces Islamic sorcery to block Dongo's path (the path of the rainstorm bringing fertility to the land), cf. Paul Stoller: *Fusion of the Worlds*, p. 185.

61 Cf. Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989) and Stoller in Vannini 2023 (ed.) *Routledge International Handbook of Sensory Ethnography*.

Songhay people can follow in the negotiation of their life paths.

Adrián Navigante: Your book *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* can be read as a propaedeutic supplement to your early ethnographic work. The title itself is, to put it philosophically, clearly "anti-Platonic". Things are not there to be grasped conceptually (as if they had a preexisting and immutable essence) but to be "tasted", that is, approached sensuously and from different angles – taking permanent detours in order to enrich our experience of them. You seem to postulate a continuity between ancient metaphysics (with Plato as its most important figure) and modern episteme (whose shining example in anthropology is Lévi-Strauss's structuralism). Even if scientifically-minded anthropologists could object that they do not speak at all about immutable essences (*universalia ante rem*) but rather about methodological frameworks (*universalia post rem*) to make sense of "the others", you see in the very operation of establishing order through conceptual models – which goes hand in hand with the conviction of the universal value of such descriptions – an essential connection with the ambitions of the past. In other words: immutable essences become anthropological invariants, metaphysical principles become formal rules of intelligibility, etc. Both metaphysics and modern episteme eliminate the subjective component of learning processes (which they consider unreliable and arbitrary), they leave out multiplicity and becoming (which they regard as confusing and unmanageable) for the sake of a unified idea of their research object, and they tend to avoid mimetic and narrative components to ensure a "neutral" account of their *explicandum*. In your opinion, all this fails to really grasp "the things of the others", because the very *aisthesis* (i.e. the use of the senses and the domain of perception) of ethnography should be modified. Subjectivity must not only be included in ethnographic accounts but also brought to the front, since it is in concretizing the relationship with others that one can learn valuable things while doing fieldwork. The others should not be "described" as if they were objects; they are subjects with a specific kind of agency, so the interaction process with them should be turned into narrative material capable of accounting for their own complexity. You plead for recurring human contact (against pragmatic use of informants), vivid descriptions (as opposed to neutral observation), valorization of singular cases (instead of generalizations), first-person narrative (in opposition to detached reports), poetical and theatrical accounts (in place of scientific expositions). This is fine and to a certain extent necessary, but at the same time you speak of a "shift toward Others and against ethnographic realism"[62]. This does not only mean that the account of the others should become more subjective, more affective, more engaged in processes that do not accept mere descriptions and require more attention to variants, details, and singularities. It also means that the ontological assumptions leading to epistemic accounts should no longer be privileged as *sine qua non* conditions of ethnographic description. To mention two cases that you introduce in your book, it is fine to tell the story of a *sorko* woman like Fatouma Seyni, whose trust you gained after seven years of assiduous contact and small talk with her[63], or of the possession priest Amadu Zima, who revealed certain things of his religious life to you after five years of frequenting him[64]. But what your "reformation of ethnography" requires is more than that. It concerns, as far as I can see, an ontological shift through the experience of the others by means of which many (if not all) conceptual tools of Western anthropology – even those concerning fieldwork descriptions – are brought to a point of collapse. Western ethnography, even in the most empirical kind of fieldwork, will never accept a symmetrical inter-subjective process between the ethnographer and non-human agency of the culture being studied. If that type of agency is not deemed "metaphorically relevant" (to know social hierarchies, religious ways of behavior, psychological factors of belief, etc.), it becomes an ontological risk bordering on superstition, pathology, or unbridled imagination. We have clear examples of how scholarship reacts to that in cases like Edith Turner, Eric de Rosny, Jean-Marie Gibbal, Kabire Fidaali, and other authors who were cancelled as scholars

62 Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, p. 140.

63 Cf. Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, pp. 128-129. Paul Stoller tells the story of this woman with many details in the second chapter of Wisdom from the Edge (cf. Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, pp. 44-61.

64 Cf. Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, pp. 140-141.

the moment they dared question such ontological presuppositions of Western epistemology. My question is whether you have a way of integrating that other level of "inter-subjective epistemologies" (for example receiving knowledge from plant-spirits, deceased members of a lineage, gods in the shape of birds, or other entities manifesting themselves in rituals) into the task of ethnography without radically changing (if not destroying) the basis of knowledge reception and transmission in the modern West. Is this last aspect related to what you call "the sensual"[65] (as opposed to the visual) and in later books "sensuous narrative" and "tasteful ethnography"[66]?

Paul Stoller: There is certainly an institutional risk for scholars who dare to question the ontological presuppositions of Western epistemology. Is such a risk worth taking? If you follow a here-and-now approach to the academy, the institutional risks, which cannot be ignored, seem too great: limited research funding, rare journal article acceptances, no book contracts, no promotions, and patchy respect for your work. And yet, Songhay people like to say: *cimi fonda, a ga cuu*, which means "the path of truth is long and tall". Put another way, it's important to take a slow and long view of one's work among healers, spirit mediums, or, for that matter, any group of people or subject of study. There has been no shortage of intellectual derision projected at the pioneering work of Edith Turner, Eric de Rosny, Jean-Marie Gibbal, Kabire Fidaali, among many others, including me. And yet, ongoing attempts at academic humiliation have not resulted in authorial cancellation. Recalcitrant academics may well object to the work of my dear friend the late Jean-Marie Gibbal, but people continue to read his words, which still provoke them to feel or think differently. There is a whole host of younger scholars who dare to think, cite, and write otherwise[67]. They are advocating a more creative ethnography that embraces the messiness of social life – of not knowing, of unlearning, of the ruptures of longstanding academic traditions. Here, a key question remains: Is the scholar implicated in the field? Is she or he entangled in a set of social and cultural relations that create a deep sense of obligation? In these times, how do we produce ethical scholarship?

Let me digress for a moment. Like the Harmattan, the desert wind that periodically blows south and covers everything in West Africa with a fine dust, the academy is a space through which the winds of change bring new clouds of dust that permeate many of our intellectual nooks and crannies. During my time in anthropology, I have witnessed much dust removal. Think of the dust of so many theoretical paradigms that colonized our consciousness only to be swept away – structural-functionalism, French structuralism, ethnoscience, symbolic anthropology, cultural materialism, interpretative anthropology, reflexivity, the experimental turn, post-modern anthropology, post-humanism, the ontological turn, and most recently the decolonial turn. The practitioners of these intellectual movements saturated the academic atmosphere with their particles of dust. In time, the messengers of new paradigms would sweep the dust of the old paradigm into the dustbin of intellectual history. Even so, traces of that old dust remain, and they continue to contribute to our comprehension of the human condition. The decolonial turn, which has been front and center in recent social science discourse, is no exception to this pattern. In time, its dust will also be swept away, leaving a residue that makes us much more conscious of our ethical obligations as scholars and human beings.

When we clear a space of its dusty residue, what is left? This question brings to mind an apt Songhay proverb: *Boro si tama, laabu si*, "one cannot walk where there is no ground."

In the history of anthropology, there have been many head-spinning "turns." But when the spinning stops and the air clears of dust, do we not stand on the ground of ethnography, which, for me, is anthropology's imperfect gift to the world? This dust-clearing realization begs the question: What constitutes an ethical ethnography in our turbulent times? In my experience, an ethical ethnogra-

65 Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, p. 9.

66 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, pp. 30 and 93, respectively.

67 Cf. Cook, Cicek, Murphy, Offen, Sander Puustusmaa, Van Roekel, Thornton and Wardell, May 2025, "Beyond the Footnote: Citation as Disruption in Creative Ethnography. Allegra Lab (https://allegralaboratory.net/beyond-the-footnote-citation-as-disruption-in-creative-anthropology/).

phy is shaped by love and loss, one in which ethnographers are emotionally implicated in the lives of the people they are attempting to describe. If ethnographers have felt the joy of love with all of its personal, social, and political implications, and if they have felt the sorrow of loss with its deep well of palpable memory, then, as scholars and human beings, they are emotionally and philosophically well positioned to take up the ethical burden: to convey carefully, faithfully and artfully the ethnographically inspired wisdom of others, a wisdom that can make the world a better place. For me, this ethnical burden is a risk worth taking, a burden that will produce works that remain "open to the world."

Adrián Navigante: The implication of the ethnographer with the others is many-sided, isn't it? The process of learning, or rather of un-learning (that is, deconstructing one's own prejudices) not only includes the way the ethnographer sees but also the way he/she is seen, and the kind of reflexivity that may result from that. The fifth chapter of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* is entitled "Songhay Visions of the Other". In that chapter, you attempt a reversal of gaze to depict yourself as *the other of the Songhay* and tell the reader how you were seen by them. There is a remark of yours that deserves to be quoted: "'savages', after all, enjoy savaging their ethnographers". This is a kind of wake-up call against the automatism of certain anthropologists who carry out all their research with a deeply ingrained conviction that *alterity is always on the other side* (despite their writing papers asserting the contrary to secure a digestible political position). There are many levels of approaching what I would call "double alterity", and you begin with a personal anecdote. At a certain point in your Songhay apprenticeship, you were called *sohanc'izo*, that is, "son of a *sohanci*", for it became known that you were not merely an ethnographer but a practitioner under the guidance of Adamu Jenitongo. Now, before that epithet was attached to your person, you had been called *rouch'izo*, which translates "son of Rouch"[68]. With this epithet you introduce French filmmaker and ethnographer Jean Rouch into your own narration, the first ethnographer of the Songhay, who spent more than sixty years working *on* and especially *with* those people in Niger and Mali[69]. One could say that Rouch really deserved the epithet *l'homme du Niger*[70] – if we consider that his first encounter with the Songhay took place in 1941, that he worked incessantly in that context first as a colonial engineer, afterward as an ethnographer, and subsequently as a filmmaker, that he died in 2004 during one of his Nigerien sojourns, and that he was not buried in Paris but in Niamey. It is no surprise that he was at first a burden for you (since the Songhay decoded your person exclusively on the basis of the traces left by Rouch's work), but as you progressed on your path, he became more and more an inspiration and the burden fell rather on the practice of sorcery[71]. Shortly after the publication of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, you devoted a whole book to Jean Rouch, *The Cinematic Griot* (1992), which was reputedly the first book systematically addressing Rouch's contribution to anthropology[72]. In the first chapter, you announce something similar: "*The Cinematic Griot* is a broad

68 Paul Stoller: *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, p. 91.

69 For practical purposes I leave aside his work on the Dogon as well as his speculations about a possible connection between the Songhay of Mali and the Dogon. Suffice it to say that, as early as 1949, Rouch wanted to establish a link between his ethnographic inquiries in Hombori and Marcel Griaule's work on Dogon metaphysics (cf. Jean Rouch: *Alors le Noir et le Blanc seront tamis: Carnets de mission 1946-1951*, Paris 2009, p. 65).

70 This expression is the title of Alain Gheerbrant's introduction to Jean Rouch's first mission notebooks (1946-1951), cf. Jean Rouch: *Alors le Noir et le Blanc seront tamis*, p. 9.

71 The expression "the sorcerer's burden", which appears in Stoller's early ethnography, became the title of a book published in 2016, which became his third anthropological novel. It has many layers of meaning referring to the difficulties involved in the path of sorcery: dealing with the jealousy of others who seek power, having to deal with spirits on a regular basis, protecting the village from bad people and bush spirits, etc. A key passage in Stoller's novel, uttered by its main character, Omar Dia, the song of a Niger farmer and professor of literature in Paris who eventually becomes a *sohanci* (traditional sorcerer), can be said to encapsulate the core-meaning of the expression: "I'm a spiritual guardian for the people there [in Niger] and [...] I'm supposed to help people wherever I might be. [...] I am now someone who takes on other people's pain" (Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden: The Ethnographic Saga of a Global Family*, New York 2016, p. 160)

72 Cf. Jean-Paul Colleyin (ed.): *Jean Rouch : Cinéma et anthropologie*, Paris 2009, p. 13. Colleyin emphasizes the merit of Paul Stoller's book, which was to show that Rouch had an intuition of subjects that imposed

and integrated analysis of Jean Rouch's ethnography of the Songhay as it is realized in his books and his films"[73]. A conventional reader would expect a scholarly book on Jean Rouch's work, but that is far from the case. Your optics are quite different. Apart from the term "griot" used for the title of your book, which strikes me as semantically opposed to that of "(conventional) anthropologist", your approach to Rouch seems to me motivated by the way in which the Songhay saw him: the one who followed the spirits with the camera, the one who delved into the "truly surreal" world of Songhay possession, the one who fused camera and notebook to nurture a participatory (artistic) approach to ethnography, the one who rejected the increasing professionalization of anthropology in Europe, the one who defied methodological and political boundaries (fact and fiction, tradition and modernity, Africa and Europe), etc. The more scholarly Rouch, the "son of Griaule"[74], appears as the less interesting aspect of the amazing personality that he was. Let me try to formulate a couple of interrelated questions based on what I have exposed so far. How much and how deeply did the griot tradition of the Songhay permeate Jean Rouch's work? I know you embrace the griot's perspective that you emphasize in your book, but do you embrace it to the point of renouncing all forms of observational ethnography and replacing it with an ethnography of juxtaposition, or more precisely, by a poetic ethnography based on alternative resources like montage, mosaic, or analogy? Can the textual order of the Western experience (of the other) be inherently subverted by the powerful images of its transgressors?

Paul Stoller: The impulse to subvert the intellectual order has a fascinating history. Your question makes me think of the surrealists, whose grotesque imagery in painting, poetry, film, and theater sought to disrupt the social order and offer a more deeply felt alternative. Although the surrealists continue to spark our collective imagination, can we say that they changed social values, then and now? Disruption is nonetheless a powerful tool to use in the creative quest to see and feel the world anew. My mentor, Jean Rouch, lived with a productive tension in his life. On one side, Rouch was fascinated with the technical advances of 20th-century science. His father was an oceanographer who sailed on *Le Pourquoi Pas* for a turn-of-the-20th-century French scientific expedition to Antarctica. At his father's insistence, Rouch studied civil engineering at L'École Nationale de Ponts et Chaussées, where he learned to build artful bridges and roads. His mother's family, by contrast, was artistic. His uncles befriended the between-the-war surrealists, many of whom the young Rouch met in the cafes on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. Combine these associations with Rouch's family links to anarchists, and you get someone who used art and technology to make more than 150 films (mostly documentaries but some feature films) that disrupted the French colonial and post-colonial order. In so doing, he created new genres like ethno-fiction to challenge a deeply entrenched French racism that underscored colonial and postcolonial relations in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Cote d'Ivoire. Given their narrative power and inspiring cinematic innovations, like cinema verité and sound synchronization, Rouch's films, most of which were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, still provoke audiences to question conventional reality. They are narratives that remain "open to the world" because they highlight the things that define the human condition: fidelity and betrayal, love and loss, honor and shame, and the establishment and dissolution of social trust.

In short, Rouch was a cinematic griot. In West Africa, griots are important guardians of history and the moral order. They have long brought the past – and its historical lessons – into the present, instructing listeners to respect their ancestors such that the links that connect past and present are not

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themselves only thirty years later in the scholarly milieu of anthropology. Previous studies on Rouch had focused exclusively on his films.

73 Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*, Chicago: London 1992, p. 4.

74 "Son of Griaule" is the title of Paul Stoller's introduction to his book on Jean Rouch. The expression reaches its clearest explicit formulation in a passage where, after pointing to the ambiguities of Marcel Griaule on the question of participant observation (the demand of intensive and extensive research among the indigenous peoples coupled with skepticism about blurring the distinction between "the European" and "the native" and the firm conviction on the neutrality of ethnographical reports, cf. Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot*, p. 19), Stoller writes the following about Rouch: "In his fieldwork and writings, [...] Jean Rouch is indeed "the son of Griaule". His written work on the Songhay of Niger has little literary character" (Paul Stoller: *Ibidem*, p. 21.

severed. Rouch's pioneering work paved the way for West African filmmakers, many of whom are celebrated today, to use film/video to perform the work of contemporary griots.
In the end, transgressors – filmmakers, a new generation of creative anthropologists, podcasters, and/or bloggers can sometimes disrupt the social order, which begins but does not complete the process of social transformation. The social, political, and ecological turbulence of today threatens to destroy the society as we know it – mass extinctions, superstorms, massive floods, extensive droughts, incessant war, and persistent genocide. As Morton and Boyer (2021) suggest, persistent disruptors, most of whom are artists, can produce work that looks beyond scenes of contemporary social, economic, and ecological destruction to envision a new social order that will rise from the ruins of contemporary social life. They foresee a new social order in which we learn once again to become human. I will discuss some of these issues in the second installment of this interview.

Adrián Navigante: Now that you have mentioned Jean Rouch as a transgressive and disruptive artist of the mid XX century, let me proceed with a question about your relationship with him and the influence of his work on your "ethnographic taste". In a collective volume called *L'autre et le sacré* (1995), you wrote an essay entitled "Artaud, Rouch, and the Cinema of Cruelty", in which you attempt to bring Jean Rouch's ethno-fiction very close to Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty. Despite Artaud's preference of theater over cinema (that is, embodiment over image) and the clear identification of his theater of cruelty with (Balinese) possession rites, you affirm that Rouch's cinema is a prolongation of Artaud's radical project[75]. In the life of both authors, there are clear intersections: Artaud had a cinematographic moment with Robert Desnos, and Rouch was briefly trained by Yves le Gall into Artaud's theater of cruelty[76]. Reading your essay, one is tempted to think that, in the case of Rouch, you ascribe a deconstructive power to the image, but not in the philosophical sense of Derrida's deconstruction. Quite the contrary, you think that Rouch managed (through his ethno-fiction) to de-familiarize the way we go about with images, breaking down the taken-for-granted register of relationship to something incorporeal and ultimately illusory. Through his camera, Rouch managed to bridge over the distance of the gaze, to fill the gap between the imaginary and the real. You say there is something "embodying itself" (and actually you use the French expression *prendre corps*) in the images composing Rouch's *cinéma* vérité, as if those images were inscriptions revealing the other side of what one can see in terms of representation. In his essay *Le vrai et le faux* (1989), Rouch refers to the "moment of truth, when the eye is on the camera"[77], but the truth is in this case something quite different from re-presenting reality. It is a re-arrangement of the whole situation and the penetration into a level of experience that is quite singular. It is on that level that I can understand your analogy with Artaud, with the embodied reality that takes shape, with a kind of other side making irruption. Is the "moment of truth" a kind of breakthrough? If so, of what kind? And closely connected with this aspect: don't you find it paradoxical that the passage, the awakening to an almost inaccessible level of embodied vitality, and the breakthrough to that *excess of the real* that invades the spectator in films like *Les maîtres fous* (1955), is ultimately achieved by an "artificial eye" belonging to the world of technique, the eye of the camera?

Paul Stoller: There is single-take Rouch film, *Les tambours d'avant: Tourou et bitti* (1971), which cuts to the heart of what Rouch enigmatically called "cine-transe." The 12-minute film begins with an evocative image. We see Rouch, his camera perched on his shoulder, moving toward the scene of a

75 "Rouch's political films [...] are in my opinion a cinematographic prolongment of the theater of cruelty conceived by Artaud" (Paul Stoller: Artaud, Rouch et le cinéma de la cruauté, in: C. W. Thompson (ed.): *L'autre et le sacré: surréalisme, cinéma, ethnologie*, Paris 1995, pp. 315-332, quote p. 316.

76 Cf. Jean Rouch's own testimony in his essay "L'autre et le sacré : jeu sacré, jeu politique", in which he describes his own experience (leading to a theatrical performance at the Vieux Colombier, where Artaud made his last public appearance) and refers to the theater of cruelty as a reduced model of Songhay possession rites (Jean Rouch: L'autre et le sacré : jeu sacré, jeu politique, in: Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.): *Jean Rouch : cinéma et anthropologie*, pp. 29-47, especially pp. 29-30.

77 Jean Rouch: Le vrai et le faux, in: Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.): *Jean Rouch : cinéma et anthropologie*, pp. 111-121, quote p. 115.

spirit possession ceremony in Simiri, Niger. In his voice-over, Rouch explains that the members of Simiri's possession group had been staging the ceremony for several days without a single possession episode. The group wanted to seek the advice of the *genji bi*, the "black spirits" (original inhabitants of the land, who control soil fertility and pestilence – elements that can ensure a good harvest of millet in a drought-plagued land). In the hope of inspiring the spirits to take the body of a medium, Simiri people begin to play ancestral instruments, the *tambours d'avant*. They used these special drums to play spirit possession music. A *sorko* sings spirit praise poetry. Despite these extraordinary efforts, no spirit will come into the bodies of dancing mediums. As Rouch brings his camera close to the musicians and dancers, one of the mediums begins to shake, a sign that he has been taken by a spirit. Another medium, a woman, is also possessed by her spirit. In exchange for small gifts, vials of perfume, the spirits in the bodies of their mediums instruct Simiri residents about the steps they must take to ensure pestilence-free harvest. As the sun sets on Simiri, Rouch and the camera slowly recede.

Rouch believed that the presence of the camera was the catalyst that brought on spirit possession that day. For him, the camera could provoke *cine-transe* – a state of being in which the camera is an intermediary that temporarily closes the gap between self and other, between village and bush, and between seen and unseen. So yes, for Rouch, the camera had magical properties that could unexpectedly take the filmmaker, the filmed, and the audience into another dimension of reality.

Adrián Navigante: The previous question compels me to go briefly into Jean Rouch's ethnographic film *Les maîtres fous* (1955), which – on the occasion of its first presentation at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris – shocked not only European but also African spectators, among others Jean Rouch's academic mentor Marcel Griaule and Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra. In *The Cinematic Griot* you define this work as the most controversial of Rouch's career[78]. The film is about the migration of the Songhay and Zerma peoples from Niger to the colonial Gold Coast, and it focuses on the Hauka spirits[79]. A possession ceremony is filmed in detail, with violent scenes including the sacrifice of a dog whose blood is drunk and whose meat is eaten by one of the Hauka mediums. It is interesting to analyze the reactions to such scenes. African scholars opposed the commercialization of the film on the basis that it would nurture racist stereotypes (the "wild Africans" eating a dog[80]), while scholars like Griaule were shocked by quite another aspect, namely the way Europeans were portrayed by the Hauka spirits in the film. Both aspects are complementary, I think, but do they refer to the same level? I think the objection of Rouch's African colleagues touches a surface level, that is, commonplaces that are susceptible of being reproduced through lack of differentiated appreciation of complexity. In fact, the "wild ones" in Rouch's film are not the African mediums but the content of what is depicted by the Hauka spirits, that is, the behavior of European colonialists. This double displacement is very connotative, but somehow the viewers can only understand it if they are prepared for that. My question revolves around this paradox. In your book on Rouch you write against French anthropologist Jean-Claude Muller's critical review of *Les maîtres fous* (in which he objects to lack of contextualization): "I cannot agree that films are the complements of written ethnographies", but at the same time you add the following: "his review [...] reinforces a major theme of this book [*The Cinematic Griot*]: that Rouch's films, including *Les maîtres fous*, cannot be considered apart from his painstaking longitudinal ethnographic research"[81]. Can we value "ethno-fiction" or "eth-

78 Cf. Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot*, p. 145.

79 The Hausa term *hauka* means "crazy" and refers to the behavior of these spirits, which according to Stoller have a kinship with the Songhay deity of thunder, Dongo. In their animist cults, Hauka spirits mimic European colonial figures grotesquely and mockingly enough to have been interpreted as a form of cultural resistance against colonial rule (cf. Paul Stoller: "Horrific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger", in: *Ethos*, Vol. 12, N°2, Summer 1984, pp. 165-188; and *The Cinematic Griot*, pp. 145-146).

80 This is actually what happened almost immediately. Senegalese director Blaise Senghor reported having been verbally attacked by white spectators who looked at him saying "here's another one who is going to eat a dog" (cf. Dan Yakir: "Ciné-transe: The Vision of Jean Rouch", in: *Film Quarterly 31 (3)*, 1978, pp. 1-10, quote p. 3, also apud Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot*, p. 151).

81 Paul Stoller: *The Cinematic Griot*, p. 153.

no-trance" (to use Rouch's terms) as an epistemologically relevant turn in ethnography that goes far beyond the limited logic of a linguistic model and at the same time demand from such works that they provide the necessary (textual) explanations to avoid undesirable effects in their reception?

Paul Stoller: The images of *Les maîtres fous* created quite a stir in late colonial France. There is a standard notion in literature: the intentions of authors are not always understood by the people who read their words or see their films. This lack of connection between authorial intent and the audience's subjective response is something that most authors and filmmakers find frustrating. Ethno-fiction goes way beyond the limitations of the linguistic models of representation. The images and sound of film, it is said, create a special connection between the filmmaker and the audience of viewers, sometimes creating a visceral response. Many visual anthropologists and documentary filmmakers claim that the sensuousness of film cannot be reproduced in written ethnography. They suggest that films "show" and ethnographies "tell." I profoundly disagree. Yes, the aesthetic dimensions of film and text are different. Even so, writers can produce texts (narrative ethnographies, creative non-fiction, and fiction that evoke or show other worlds). By the same token, filmmakers can produce tedious films that, through extensive voice-overs, denote (tell) other worlds. There is a movement among younger anthropologists to produce more evocative texts –essays, poetry, art installations, and narrative ethnographies – to expand the readership of scholarly works.[82] Can an evocative, creatively produced ethnography be both necessary and sufficient to avoid academic condemnation? The power of narrative devolves from the fact that no matter what form it takes, stories can economically and powerfully depict a complex reality. The most powerful literary texts show, rather than tell us about social theory – think Kafka, Kundera, Morrison, and Baldwin. These are texts that remain open to the world. Through my Weaving the World Writing workshops, I have been advocating for creative approach to ethnography – ethnography that conveys to multiple audiences the wisdom of rigorously researched ethnographic insight. Linguistically contoured theory is important but tends to be short-lived. Narratives that evoke theory have legs. •

82 Cf. Fiona Murphy and Eva van Roekel: *Anthropology and Humanism* 49(2), December 2024, pp. 78-82, "Editor's Note: A vision for *Anthropology and Humanism's* next three years".

Gioia Lussana
Indologist, Former FAD Grantee, and Yoga Teacher

YOGA: THE ART OF CONTEMPLATION THAT BECOMES A FESTAL CELEBRATION

To Raffaele Torella, mentor and inspirer of my yoga as a ceaseless festal celebration.

This essay highlights some aspects of a contemporary practice of Kashmiri non-dual yoga steadfastly linked to the lineage of its mediaeval masters. Gioia Lussana's exploration, based on long-standing experience in research and practice of the Kashmiri yoga tradition, focuses on its specific interpretation of ritual in the Hindu tantric context – closely related to game, art, celebration, and contemplation. Behind each of these terms is concealed a melting-pot of philosophical implications, some of which resonate both in Western philosophical and mystical as well as Indian religious traditions. Gioia Lussana's essay shows that, in Kashmiri yoga, the realisation of one's deepest essence is truly comparable to the creative process in any form of art. The yogin, like Śiva creating the world in the ecstasy of dance, is revealed as the artist par excellence.

> "Part of the celebratory aspect is splendor. Properly speaking, however, splendor derives from the shining and appearance of the essential. (...) Play and dance are part of the splendor of celebration." — Martin Heidegger[1]

> "O Lord of yoga, the best among the knowers of yoga, I wish to hear a yoga that is exempt of fatigue (*anāyāsa*), has no 'constructive' action (*anārambha*), no means (*anupāya*), [but nonetheless] yields great results (*mahāphalam*)" — *Mālinīvijayottaratantra*[2]

THE ART OF PLAYING

Is yoga something one does? What we call yoga in its modern interpretation inspired by transmission from mediaeval Kashmir is not a form of activity in the usual sense of the word, but rather an expression of the inner creativity of the human being which, through the motionlessness or dynamism of the body, brings into being the most intimate part of the self, one's own authentic nature. Authentic literally means "which makes itself". Likewise, mediaeval Kashmiri yoga was defined as *akalpita*, "not constructed", *akṛtaka*, "spontaneous", "which makes itself"[3].

The free flow of breath, unconstrained by our will to control it, reveals the intrinsic luminosity of each living phenomenon. The flowing motion of breath becomes dazzling light.

> "The spontaneous flow of breathing: this is the wonder of yoga. Once I have experienced the absolute Splendour of divine energy, what will not shine for me?" (Abhinavagupta - *Anubhavanivedana*).[4]

The ardour of Śiva, who according to tradition is dazzling light and Lord of *prāṇa*[5], spreads through the breath of life like radiant joy into space (*ākāśa*). His splendour may be revealed only in a space that is open, unobstructed, terse. In the temple of Chidambaram in southern India, Śiva is, for example, portrayed as *ākāśa-liṅga*, the symbol of boundlessness. *Ākāśa* is the first element of manifestation, the most subtle, extending in all directions and penetrating all that exists. It is shining space, like Śiva present in all things. 9 pt corresponds to ether, a term etymologically connected to ardour, being portrayed as a clear sky in which blazes a flame (Greek *aitho* = "blaze", "burn", "shine". *Aithra* = "clear sky", cf. the Sanskrit root *idh*-). Śiva makes the space of reality vibrate and catch fire. The vital breath (*prāṇa*)[6] through spontaneous or voluntary breathing conveys heat, light, emotion, and

1 Martin Heidegger GA 52*: Hölderlins Hymne 'Andenken'*, Frankfurt 1992, pp. 66-67 (*my translation*).

2 This passage is not included in the partial translation of the text: *The Yoga of Mālinīvijayottaratantra*: *Chapters 1-4, 7-11, 11-17*, Critical Edition, Translation and Notes by Somadeva Vasudeva, Pondicherry 2004, but in: Raffaele Torella: "Abhinavagupta's Attitude towards Yoga". In: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [139.3] 2019.

3 Non-dual yoga in Kaśmīri tradition appears as a celebration of life and an exaltation of the vital principle (*prāṇa*), regarded as identical with consciousness itself. The yogic ever-vigilant (*svodita*) contemplative attitude nourishes awareness, so as to unfold into a full awakening, embodied in the very ordinary life. The highest degree of yoga is then spontaneous (*akṛtaka*) and requires neither effort nor technique. This is not a 'performative' yoga, but felt, lived, experienced at first hand with full attention and 'heartfulness'. Yoga is Life. See Gioia Lussana, "Yoga is Life. The flowing course of consciousness in Kaśmīri Śaivism". In: *Transcultural Dialogues* (FIND) [n° 3], 2019.

4 Cf. *Hymnes de Abhinavagupta*. Traduits et commentés par Lilian Silburn, Paris 1970, p. 38.

5 On the conception of *prāṇa* as omni-pervading vital energy, we find comparisons and matches between the tantric and the Chinese Taoist view. François Jullien, in all his works, describes the centrality and characteristics of the vital principle. See for example: François Jullien: *Nourrir sa vie: à l'écart du bonheur*, Paris 2005.

6 On the relationship between *prāṇa*, dazzling light and the illuminated mind in Abhinavagupta (*sattva as prāṇa*), see D. Cuneo and E. Ganser "The Emotional and Aesthetic Experience of the Actor. Diderot's *Paradoxe*

mental presence in the physical gesture of the yogin, as free as the boundless space of consciousness.

Prāṇa running with its own natural rhythm dissolves the knots and tensions accumulated over time and then the yogin lives the experience of luminous freedom of his inner energy, which is also propagated all around him, beyond his body. The flash (*sphur-*) takes place in an instant (*sphur-* means literally "sparkle", "quiver", and "spout", at the same time). Shining does not belong to time but pulsates in the present instant, like a beating heart, quivering with light at each new beat. The *āsana* of Kashmiri yoga is configured as a formless twinkling in the space freed by the breath, in which every feature dies out, leaving a shining opening as inviting as a vast heaven. In its passage, natural breathing liberates the bodily space, which is thus revealed as vivid, dazzling.

The craving for what is spontaneous, highlighted particularly by non-dual tantrism, is already present *in nuce* – albeit not apparent – also in the later commentaries to the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*. By way of example, in his *vivaraṇa*[7] Śaṅkara harks back to the description of the *samādhic* mind present in *Vyāsa* and affirms that it *svayam eva samādhīyate*[8] (by herself the mind becomes contemplative). Without any help from outside, the mind manages to enter into harmony with itself, since it depends on nothing but itself. Through yoga, from the deepest vital core of every being, is activated and freely comes forth compellingly and in an unfiltered manner that creative craving, our centre, usually hidden or unexpressed. In non-dual yoga it sheds light, emotion, gesture, posture and dynamic sequence in space.

YOGA, THE ART OF PLAYING

And in what way can we define yoga as an art form?[9] Any free expression that flows from our inner vitality may be considered art. In this connection we may use Kant's apt expression[10], defining both the living being as such and the work of art as a "purposeless objective". We may thus consider yoga art *par excellence*, the free manifestation of being alive, in the intrinsic sense of what is understood as "living". Alive is what is spontaneously self-produced in a continuous manner and spreads itself creating relations. In this outside interaction with other living things it increases its vital capacity, just like some kind of yeast. Yoga is wholly art since, in becoming an expression that pours out into space, becoming a bridge between the inner vitality and the outside world, it has a physical, psychical, philosophical and spiritual meaning.

We may consider yoga art par excellence, the free manifestation of being alive, in the intrinsic sense of what is understood as "living". What is spontaneously self-produced in a continuous manner and spreads itself creating relations.

The art of yoga as the free expression of the self – like poetry, music, dance and all other artistic forms – is thus not merely activity, but rather "shared intensity". Yoga is a living intensity that intensifies in relating. Discovering, creating links is, moreover, one of the original meanings of the root *yuj-* from which the word yoga derives. It is art since it "awakes", "sets in motion" and compiles coherently and harmoniously what we fundamentally are. The Sanskrit root *ar-*, from which the word art derives, summarises all these meanings.

The art of yoga is ultimately that pure expressiveness, the emotion that is an "end in

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sur le comédien in Sanskrit Dramaturgy, in: F. Sferra and V. Vergiani (eds) *Verità e bellezza. Essays in Honour of Raffaele Torella*, Napoli 2022, pp. 193-272.

7 Cf. Śaṅkarācārya: *The Vivaraṇa Subcommentary to Vyāsa-bhāṣya on the Yoga-Sūtra-s of Patanjali: Samādhipāda*, edited and translated by Trevor Leggett, Boston 1981.

8 *Sa ca sārvabhaumaḥ cittasya dharma iti | cittasya dharmo nātmādīnām | tac ca cittaṃ svayam eva samādhīyate 'ntaranirapekṣatvāt | |*

9 On the concept of an 'aesthetic' rather than ascetic yoga, see Gioia Lussana: "The Art of Yoga: to incarnate Beauty", *Transcultural Dialogues* (FIND) [n°1], 2019.

10 Cf. Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Berlin 1790, Introduction.

itself", which we may define as a "ceremonial of inaction"[11], since its action is not functional, not intended to achieve something. It is *ars liberalis* or action that serves no purpose, but finds its scope in its own self-sufficiency.

Yoga, to quote an expression from F. Schiller's poem *Elegie zur Friedenszeit,* acts like "the butterfly's uncertain wing"[12]. The butterfly drifts uncertainly because it goes where it is called at that moment, with no strategy, no intention, freely, or rather, playfully. Playfulness is the *modus operandi* of every artistic expression, sharing with the natural world a productivity unencumbered by any obligation of achievement. Nature, like art, while producing its fruits in a mysteriously harmonious and coherent manner, is not only freed from our control, but is essentially free from being beneficial. In its evolution, the natural world thus follows patterns that are rigorous in themselves, even while they intertwine, incessantly altered by other paths of growth and expression, with the freedom that only the creativity of art possesses.

In its contemporary reformulation,[13] Kashmiri yoga, while following its mediaeval transmission channel, in its gestures embodies its own free expression, without any other goal than that of manifesting itself. This recalls very closely some of the spiritual intuitions of mediaeval Rhenish mysticism, from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius, and to the latter's celebration of the rose that "flowers without a reason".[14]

In mediaeval Kashmir, where aesthetics reaches the heights of extreme refinement, art is the gate leading beyond the limitations of one's individual horizon by virtue of *sādhāraṇa*, a generalisation of single experience, no longer tied to one's own personal needs, but identifying with a vaster horizon. Through *rasa*, aesthetic experience, we are freed from our little world and live in a state of pervasive plenitude, without censure or judgement, that of any manifestation of art, whether produced or contemplated. Simply we forget (the Sanskrit verb to describe this experience would be *lī-*, meaning to melt, to dissolve) the confines between us and the other, spreading into an experience that includes both. This state of "forgetting" the confines – a non-functional attitude together with a highly focused presence on what is being experienced to the exclusion of all else – is what Abhinavagupta attributes to the artist, to the consumer of art and to the yogin who, as we have stated, is an artist in the wider sense. In such a context, forgetting is a state of mental repose, absorbed, totally engrossed in consuming the experience and rendering the latter inclusive and impersonal.

The emotion generated in the artist or yogin is called *bhāva*, a term that Bharata, the legendary author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (II cent. BCE-II cent. CE) the great treatise on the arts, derives from the causative of *bhū-* (= to be, to become) with the meaning of "bringing into being", "causing", "pervading", just as a scent spreads and imbues the mind of him who creates. The oblivion to all else in whoever is immersed in this specific creative/emotive experience recalls – albeit with due differences – that oblivion or open suspension (*Vergessenheit*) described in the mystic writings of Meister Eckhart[15]. The mystic's distracted mind can be compared, as it were, to that of a child absorbed in the enjoyment of his play, untouched by whatever takes place around him. So too, the yogin in āsana forgets everything that is not the present experience.

We may also recall that, in the 8th century C.E., at the Buddhist Council of Lhasa, for both schools contending for the first place in meditative experience, the Indian school with its progressive view represented by Kamalaśīla and the Chinese *Ch'an* of Ho-shang that championed the direct path, the acme of experience for both was the doctrine of transcendence of discursive thought into a state of 'forgetfulness'(*asṃṛti*) and non-mind (*amanasikāra*). This "empty mind"

11 Cf. Byung-Chul Han: *Vita contemplativa*: *oder von der Untätigkeit*, Berlin 2022. Chapter 1: *Visionen der Untätigkeit*

12 The original expression in Schiller's Poem is "*die unsichere Flügel der Schmetterlings*"

13 See in this respect Gioia Lussana: *Lo yoga della bellezza. Spunti per una riformulazione contemporanea dello yoga del Kaśmīr*, Bologna 2021, cap. XII, p.111 et seq.

14 "...[*die Rose*] *blühet weil she blühet* " ("it blooms because it blooms "). Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, ed. by Wilhelm Bölsche, Leipzig 1905, p.39.

15 See Meister Eckhart, *Von der Vergessenheit*, in: *Deutsche Werke*, Stuttgart 2023, pp. 124-125.

closely recalls the state of *nirvikalpa* or pre-discursive mind referred to by the *Vijñānabhairava-tantra* (8th century C.E.), a seminal text of non-dual Śaivite tantrism. It should also be specified that, in this context, unlike most philosophical schools, even the proliferation of thought is not in the end negative, since it is the fruit of the free expression of the mental potentialities and its creative refinement. In the view of the *Paramādvaita*, the most radical dualism, everything, even what may appear useless or negative, has its own *raison d'être* and is, in any final analysis, divine.

Furthermore, even in the *Yogasūtra* (4th-5th centuries C.E.), a text for ascetics devoted exclusively to inner practices, Vyāsa deems it to be a particular type of *samādhi*, which Bhoja (11th century) in a later commentary of the text, always in the section on *samādhi*, attributes to the Gods. We are dealing with the *samādhi* known as *vikṣipta*, the prerogative of a distracted mind16. The Gods have no incumbencies or problems to solve in ordinary life and may thus adopt a non-functional mind, the thought-free state of a child absorbed in his play, forgetful of all else. Their existence is *līlā*, play, an activity as free as that of Śiva who creates the world by dancing, *līlayā*, out of pure amusement[17]. The same word "play" is etymologically linked to the Sanskrit root *dīv-* (from which *diocus*, *iocus*). *Dīv-* is "self-amusement", "play". Abhinavagupta in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gītā*[18] even creates a derivation of the word *deva*, God, from this very root. The Gods are thus, by definition, those who "love to amuse themselves", to play.

Śiva, supreme yogin and quintessential artist, in order to have fun, in a playful and brimming ecstasy, decides to create the world, the *theatrum mundi*, which is none other than *saṃsāra*, the conditioned existence of common mortals. Here is how he is saluted by Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, one of the most direct inspirers of the aesthetic theory of Abhinavagupta, who lived in Kashmir in the 11th century:

> "Homage to Śiva, the poet who creates the whole universe.
> Thanks to him, people every moment enjoy the rasa of the world's dramatic performance". [19]

In these verses, the human adventure of common mortals on this Earth is compared to the aesthetic emotion (*rasa*) of one who enjoys an artwork, of one who is part of the Supreme Lord's creative dance and actively participates in his play. It is understood that this playful enjoyment includes the whole range of feelings, even what are deemed negative emotions. In impersonating the various roles that life demands of him to stage, the common mortal should truly awaken to the knowledge that such roles are actually interchangeable, as occurs in playing. Identifying oneself with one of them clashes with the variegated phantasmagoria that each individual life actually beings into being. Like water flowing freely, as though in play, the qualities of adaptation and elasticity are those required for the actor's mastery on stage. He knows how to assume the part assigned to him, with all the appropriate feelings, while remaining always conscious of his own self. Paradoxically, if the actor identifies rigidly to a single role, he loses sight of his own self, his own intrinsic liberty. Only through flexibility in the play between his own self and his other self can he find himself[20]. It is Śiva himself who is *prasara*, *kriyā*. He is motion that runs ceaselessly

16 *Vyāsa*, *Yogasūtra bhāṣya* I,1. See Michel Angot, *Le Yoga-Sutra De Patanjali: Suivi Du Yoga-Bhashya De Vyasa: Le Yoga-Bhasya de Vyasa*, Paris 2008.

17 These considerations on art as play are matched and confirmed in the work by Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, Stuttgart 1977. First part, chap. I, II, III, *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*.

18 *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Gītārtha Saṁgraha*, trans. Boris Marjanovic, Delhi 2005.

19 Cit. in Sheldon Pollock: *The Rasa Reader*, *Classical Indian Aesthetics*. New York 2016, p. 149.

20 On the aesthetic theory of the Kashmiri masters, and particularly Abhinavagupta, even today a basic reference is still Raniero Gnoli: *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, Varanasi 1968. Cf. J. L. Masson, M. V. Patwardhan: *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics*, Poona 1985. Cf. also Daniel H. H. Ingalls (ed.): *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, translated by D. H. H. Ingalls, J. M. Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan, Cambridge (MA) 1990; Sheldon Pollock: *A Rasa Reader. Classical*

and spontaneously through existence, identifying with only one thing, while flowing in all things. This is his nature, according to the Kashmiri masters.

Playing the serious game of life, letting oneself transform unresistingly into the different roles, changing part without abandoning self-awareness, is the art of living that each one of us is called upon to learn. It means taking oneself seriously, but not too seriously. It is the dance of Śiva. And Śiva in his multiform creativity is in fact a living paradox.

In an even more engaging way than the common man, the artist and the yogin, through the creativity of gesture, free and unmindful of any activity other than that of giving substance to their own inner world, actually personify an *alter deus*, imitating the playful dance of Śiva who creates the world.

Freed from ordinary stereotyped codifications, the gesture of the yogin, like that of the artist more widely speaking, is imbued with the quality of joy (*bhoga*), the same superabundant joy that flows from Śiva's desire to shape the world. Whatever the particular type of emotion brought into being, whether positive or negative, everything that the experience brings with it is enjoyed and, as it were, 'tasted' by the Divine Lord. In the view of mediaeval Kashmir, it is first and foremost the emotion of living that is intensified in such tasting, in the same way as one who creates / enjoys a work of art, or for the yogin[21]. One may relish delicious food, a sunset, a starry sky, or even sadness or the intensity of sorrow. In aesthetic or religious experience, however, when our emotional state reaches the apex of expression, there is a surplus as compared to everyday emotion, however intense in itself, exceeding in a measureless intensity that disrupts the ordinary categories of space and time[22].

So, what happens to our perception of reality? In these two extraordinary contexts, things unexpectedly acquire *their real taste*, experienced precisely for what it is: *what is bitter, bitter and what is sweet, sweet,* as Bernard of Clairvaux would say[23], a Western mystic who was a contemporary of Abhinavagupta. On the pinnacle of experience, reality is paradoxically even more real than ordinary perception. In the Kashmiri view, however, it is always the awareness of daily intensity, always highly valued by these schools, that nourishes, sustains and allows access to the extraordinary nature of ritual time. Life is intense by definition.

Āsvāda, the fulness of tasting, as Abhinavagupta clearly shows, thus has a noetic value. A. Baumgarten, the founder of philosophic aesthetics, speaks of a *cognitio sensitiva*, a sensitive, non-verbal awareness, capable of opening wide universal knowledge from a single detail.[24] The artist, the enjoyer of art and the yogin embody the privilege of knowing things more deeply, things as they really are. They intuit and know reality by tasting it, marvelling[25]. As Utpaladeva maintains, reality seems to us opaque, unfeeling – and thus unknowable – due to a lack of wonder. In the Kashmiri schools of *Śhaivite* philosophy, the category of wonder assumes a whole constellation of meanings and implications. Basically, wondering implies a deeper awareness of the reality in which we live, a delighted insight into the nature of the real. And knowing implies

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Indian Aesthetics, New York 2016; Elisa Ganser: *Theatre and Its Other. Abhinavagupta on Dance and Dramating Acting*, Leiden: Boston 2022; and Raffaele Torella: "Passions and Emotions in the Indian Philosophical-Religious Traditions", in: Purushottama Bilimoria and Alexandra Wenta (eds.): *Emotions in Indian Thought-Systems*, London 2015, pp. 57–101. In this respect see also Raffaele Torella: "Beauty". In: *Burlesque of the Philosophers. Indian and Buddhist Studies in Memory of Helmut Krasser*, ed. by V. Eltschinger *et al.*, Bochum, Freiburg 2023. pp. 755–779; and "Variations on nartaka ātmā", Bulletin d'études indiennes 36: Hommage a Marie-Claude Porcher, 2024, pp. 389-414.

21 Cf. Gioia Lussana: *Lo yoga della bellezza, op. cit*., cap. V.

22 On the sacredness of every vital phenomenon, not only in reference to the purely ritual dimension, but also to everyday life, see Gioia Lussana: Yoga is Life. The flowing course of consciousness in Kaśmīri *Śaivism*", *op. cit*.

23 Bernard of Clairvaux: *Sermones de diversis* (Miscellaneous Sermons), Collegeville (U.S.A.) 2008.

24 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Die Aktualität des Schönen.* Chapters I, II and III: *Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*.

25 On the concept of *camatkāra*, a term usually translated by marvel, cf. Raffaele Torella: Camatkāra, in: *Journal of Indological Studies*, Kyoto 2022, *passim*.

self-knowledge[26].

Through art, through the art of yoga, we see more, we understand more, we know the world more, and also ourselves. To mention a parallel with Western philosophy, Hegel considers art as a form of self-knowledge of the spirit[27]. In his view, in line with the epistemology of the Kashmiri schools, every encounter with a work of art is therefore an encounter with the mystery of one's own authentic nature.

Utpaladeva[28], a great master of the Kashmiri medieval lineage, uses the term *ghūrṇana* (*ghūrṇ-* means to move driftingly) to describe a rhythmic and undulating movement of the body, referring to the *bhakta* or yogin's state of ecstatic absorption. Abhinavagupta[29] uses a term with a similar meaning, *āndolana*, which we may translate as "oscillating". Utpala uses *ghūrṇana* to mean a movement like the dancing body, a rhythm like a swing, like rocking a baby, due to the transfer of a distended gratification to the gesture. For the Kashmiri master, such dynamics – also mirrored qualitatively by the immobility of the āsana – is triggered by the amazed tasting (*camatkāra*), like a fragrance (āmoda) that imbues the whole of being. The gestural art of this yoga is *ullasatā*, a Sanskrit term that fully expresses the characteristics of bodily dynamics in space. Literally, *ullasatā* means "gush out", "come forth". This is the energetic quality of the yogic gesture, causing the original vital breath to circulate through the body. *Lal-* means to move freely, thoughtlessly. And this is the gestural art of the yogin, prompt and attentive (*sādara*), but "without letting it show", playfully spontaneous, never ostentatious, hurried or rigidly mechanical. *Ullasatā* includes the meaning of coming to light, irradiating, resounding, playing, dancing. When the bodily movement gushes out directly from within, it pours out like a festive light in space.

THE TIME OF CELEBRATION[30]

In ancient India, as for us in the West, art arises as a festal celebration. The extent of the celebration relates both to existential and artistic as well as to contemplative and religious expression. And Kashmiri yoga can be defined as a festal yoga, a pure act of celebrating the miracle of existence, its sacral nature evoked through bodily experience. Etymologically, festal celebration is a time that is full, self-sufficient, celebrating first and foremost our deepest inner being, our inmost dwelling. Festal celebration in Sanskrit is literally *vastya*, the domestic hearth, the innermost point of the home, its centre. Every celebration also has a unitive, universal value. Celebration means fellowship. It escapes time that is used usefully, for the practical needs and purposes of each, and finds its own common space-time, shared, choral. Every celebration is essentially the relationship between us and ourselves and between us and the world. Celebrating is an art, as emphasised by Gadamer in contemporary philosophy of aesthetics and festal time takes us back to aesthetic experience as the rite of expressing self.

In his *Phaedrus*[31], Plato praises *the grace of playing and of the festival*, connecting the two concepts which we have linked with the expressive art of non-dual yoga. It is playfulness that makes festal time free and significant. The Dutch ethnologist Johan Huizinga, in the 1930s, published a famous essay, *Homo ludens*, in which he affirms that the procedure of play underlies ev-

26 As a rule, also in the Western tradition contemplation is deemed a knowledge that is accompanied by wonder and marvel at the discovery. See Bernard of Clairvaux: *De consideratione*, book 5, last chapter: *Admiratio est actus consequens contemplationem sublimis veritatis* (*On Consideration*). II, II, 180, 3 ad 3: https://www.ecatholic2000.com/bernard/on-consideration.shtml (2024, July 5).

27 Cf. H.G. Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*. Part two, chapter 2 *"Ästhetik und Hermeneutik"*.

28 See Raffaele Torella, Bettina Bäumer (eds): *Utpaladeva, Philosopher of Recognition*, Delhi 2015.

29 Abhinavagupta: *Tantrāloka*, chap. 37, 48. See also *Luce dei tantra. Tantrāloka*, edited by Raniero Gnoli, Milano 2017.

30 On the concept of festal celebration, inspiration is found in some considerations of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, *op. cit. passim*, and also J. Pieper: *Muße und Kult*, München 1947.

31 Plato, *Phaedrus* 276 b 5. See also Josef Pieper, *Zustimmung zur Welt. Eine Theorie des Festes*, München 1963.

ery culture and every truly creative act. Furthermore, the Dutch Indologist Frits Staal has shown that the complex rituality of Vedic India derives in reality from meaningless gestures whose scope lies only in their being acted out in the ritual context. This is precisely what happens in play and in the rite of yoga, where the function of the gesture emerges at the instant from the relation between the dense body and empty space. This gratuity with no pre-established meaning is the matrix of all creativity, it is the weft of festal time, the soul of non-dual yoga.

Festal time, like play time, is the time of squandering, when our actions in the world no longer aim at obtaining a profit, but are donated as a free offering, solely for celebratory purposes. Time offered is not time lost or banally useless, but can rather be defined as sacrificial time, in which the dedicated gesture simply renders thanks to existence. Festal time is an emancipation from daily duty, from everyday pressure, to stay at last in a "restful now", an unexpected gift. In this sense, the celebration can be considered something sacred, which makes possible what would otherwise be inconceivable. The sacredness of the celebration with its dilated perception of time can be found not only in the *Psalms*[32], but in the Dialogues of Plato[33], where the celebration is understood as a time made by God. In some way, in celebration, time is suspended and there opens wide an infinite experience in which one's wholeness is found: an embrace that includes the whole of life. Each *āsana* in Kashmiri yoga embodies this suspended and boundless sacredness. A thanks whispered to existence with all the pores of one's skin, already announced by that *ananta samāpatti* of the *Yogasūtra*. The *āsana* is accomplished (*nirvartayati*) when, reducing effort, the mind expands to the infinite[34]. The emotion of this cosmic embrace that releases the yogin from ordinary space-time is that rapt forgetfulness that joins the art of play with the mystic's inner aptitude, on which we have already dwelt.

CONTEMPLATION IS A FESTAL CELEBRATION

In the solemn time of festal celebration, the visual-contemplative act becomes central. Vision becomes more acute and is shared by the whole being, reuniting with everything that takes place outside us. The very art of the theatre, which includes all the arts, was born in ancient Greece as the festive way to evoke and relate to the sacred, allowing it to be contemplated. The festive celebration of praise to the Gods was called *theoría*.[35] In the philosophical language of ancient Greek, *theoría* meant contemplation (*thea*, sight + *orao*, see). More exactly, it meant watching the priestly procession preparing to pay homage to the Gods with hymns, dances and praises. *Theoría* was also the term used for the culminating vision of the Mysteries in honour of Dionysus. *Theoría* meant joyful contemplation of the sacred, emotionally shared: a vision concretely experienced, rather than being merely 'theoretic', as we would now say, distorting the original meaning of the word. The contemplator became one with the object contemplated, taking part with one voice, in a single hymn of praise.

In ancient India, the artist, like the petitioner in archaic Greece, contemplated the divine, celebrated, imitated the divine and identified with it, rendering festive homage through ritual gestures.

In ancient India too, the artist, like the petitioner in archaic Greece, contemplated the divine, celebrated, imitated the divine and identified with it, rendering festive homage through ritual gestures[36]. Here, traditional dance and yoga find a common ancestor. Through the rite that

32 Cf. *Psalms* 117, 24.

33 See for example *Laws*, 653 d 1; 828 a.

34 Vyāsa, *Yogasūtra bhāṣya* II, 47. See Michel Angot, *Le Yoga-Sutra De Patanjali: Suivi Du Yoga-Bhashya De Vyasa,op. cit.*

35 Cf. Josef Pieper: *Glück und Kontemplation*, München 1957, Cap. IX.

36 Cf. Elisa Ganser: "Dance as yoga: Ritual offering and *Imitatio Dei* in the physical practices of classical Indian theatre", in: *Yoga and the Traditional Physical Practices of South Asia: Influence, Entanglement and Confrontation*, edited by Daniela Bevilacqua and Mark Singleton. *Journal of Yoga Studies (Special Issue, Vol. 4)*, 2023 pp.

binds him to the God, the contemplator – but we could equally say the dancer or the yogin – is saved, i.e. becomes *salvus*, whole, sheltered from the anguish of the separation that reigns in ordinary life, in which the divine is experienced as other-than-self. In festal contemplation, *homo aestheticus* and *homo religiosus* rediscover their own lost integrity.

In light of more recent studies, we might even say that the most ancient meaning of what we call yoga is the rite of devotion and homage to the divine that the gestures of the dancer, the poet, or the artist bringv into being through the various expressive colourings of his inner self. Historically, traditional Haṭha yoga took root originally around the 6th century BCE, with the appearance in India of new groups of renouncer ascetics, called *śramaṇa*, "those who practise", or "those who toil (*śram-*)", who started spreading most probably from today's Allahabad, over greater Magadha. These groups largely attracted Buddhists and Jains, partly influenced by Vedic Brahmanical traditions. Their aim was to end the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) and suffering determined by *karma*, that characterised human existence. For this purpose, they developed a set of meditation techniques (*dhyāna*, deriving from *dhyai-*, a verb quite similar to the Greek *theorein*). Before becoming ascetic, however, there was an ecstatic and aesthetic yoga, probably of a more ancient origin. From this viewpoint, harking back to an ancestral India, already expressed to some extent by producing the mystical hymns of the *ṚgVeda*, the rite of yoga must have developed from an original *bhaktirasa*, the emotional afflatus that becomes the supreme art, that of establishing and making manifest the relation between man and God, elevating the human body to the stage for the transmission and experience of the spiritual dimension.

The divine was equated with splendour. In such a context, the celebration of light, attested without exception in all archaic societies, was rooted in the primordial art of invoking and paying homage to the sun, the light principle of life[37]. Most probably, the priest performed an archetypal, precursory dance, although documentary sources are lacking, of what was to become celebratory yoga, a veritable incarnation of a hymn of praise. Mediaeval Kashmir seems to draw on that very same attitude – both aesthetic and religious – that stamps yoga with such unmistakable originality. Momentum rather than exercise, tasting rather than fatigue. Through vital pulsation (*prāṇa*) inner heat/splendour becomes emotion, an aware presence, gesture and, ultimately, an evoking of the sacred. Dwelling in the immobility of the *āsana*, free self-expression becomes contemplation of the most intimate part of us, the sacred within.

The most ancient meaning of what we call yoga is the rite of devotion and homage to the divine that the gestures of the dancer, the poet, or the artist bring into being through the various expressive colourings of his inner self.

The yogin, particularly in Kashmiri yoga, is a *bhakta*, literally so in the meaning stemming from the root *bhaj-*. *Bhaj-* means "participate". Thus, the *yogin* participates, shares the sacred, by performing a conscious gesture that originates from *prāṇa*, the vital breath. This type of ecstatic/aesthetic yoga is radically ethical, since the *bhakta*/*yogin* forgets his own personal interest and abandons himself in the *āsana* to an availability without reservations, we may say without expectations, a prayer without petitions, an offering of the self to existence just as it is, to Śiva. The ethics of non-dual tantrism is merely the disclosure of our deepest essence in relation to whatever is outside us. And as such, it is naturally expansive. The Western Middle Ages would describe it in the words of St Thomas[38] *bonum diffusivum sui*, the Good that spreads by its own nature, by itself. Virtue, again according to the thought of St Thomas is merely a disposition to follow, in the right way, our natural inclination[39]. This condition, content with itself, is elevated beyond time and space, which is what happens to the *nartaka*, the actor or dancer on

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137-171.

37 Prior to the success of the mediaeval lineage of Śaivite masters, the cult of the sun (*Sūrya*) is documented in Kashmir, subsequently assimilated to the cult of Śiva, but maintaining several salient characteristics. The sun worshippers (the *sauras*) worshipped the sun in the temple of *Sūrya Mārtanda*, whose ruins can still be seen near Anantnag.

38 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 5, a. 4. ad 2.

39 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, *Ibid.*,Ivi, II, II, 108, 2.

stage in the Hindu theatre, embodied in the role to be performed and temporarily forgetful of his own personal affairs.

CONTEMPLATION IS THE HEART IN FESTAL CELEBRATION

Contemplation is Meditation. *Dhyai-* in Sanskrit, the ancient root from which derives the classical term for meditation *dhyāna*, meaning "contemplate", "observe", "see close up", "recall to mind and to the heart", "think", "meditate". In the lexicon of non-dual tantrism, the terms describing the experience of meditation are *anusaṃdhāna* or *anusaṃdhi*, both of which mean "memory", but also "investigation", "introspection", "awareness", "reflection" and – according to some commentators – "visualisation".

According to a well-known etymology, "contemplate" derives from *cum* + *templum*, evoking the lifting of his gaze to the heavens of the priest designated to circumscribe a small portion of it (i.e. the *templum*) and read the omens of bird flight in that area. Lifting one's gaze in contemplation becomes the raising and opening of one's attention and one's heart. To the original imprint of seeing is added the exaltation of the heart, the festal aptitude. Such is the yogin's aptitude in non-dual Śaivism, a joyous alertness of heart and mind within an eminently contemplative yoga. The natural energy of attention in these schools is an upward propensity, an impetus (*udyama*) of the heart. When everything needed in daily life is achieved, one may sit quietly with a participating and attentive heart, doing nothing further, and celebrate, which is one of the meanings of the verb ās-, "sit", from which derives the term *āsana* in Sanskrit, the posture of contemplation.

In the 4th century BCE, the pre-Socratic Anaxagoras replied to the question as to why one comes into the world: for the sake of contemplating (*eis theorian*), i.e. for that special activity that is tranquil inactivity, with a participatory attentiveness. We might add that he is echoed first by Aristotle40: *we are working hard to have otium.* Then St Thomas when he affirms that the contemplative life is the true goal of human existence (*finis totius humanae vitae*) [41].

In *The City of God*, Augustine evokes a "timeless time" in which we can finally rest, see, love, praise. In Augustine, looking and loving constitute a single path, evoking that opening of the heart that alone allows us to see into the depths. Only where love opens one's eye does one's gaze rest on the beloved object. And love, the expansive form of being, can gush forth in profusion from a heart at peace, freed from needs, raised above the logic of the useful on which our daily life turns. When everything has been done, one discovers the perceptive dilation of the game, the festal fulness of purposeless felicity, the saving art of dwelling on the object contemplated, the celebration of existence.

Contemplation means lingering[42]. Letting our gaze linger on something, we discover the infinite details – unseen by the distracted eye – kindling their meanings and a wondering interest in what we are looking at. Lingering produces consensus with the object, like self-identification with what we are contemplating. We are mirrored in what our intention is free to linger on. And this recognition generates a sort of enhanced vision. From the observer and from the object contemplated an overflow is produced, a diffused perceptive horizon that includes both ourselves and the object contemplated. By contemplation, we know more deeply not only the object observed, but ourselves observing it, creating a kind of synergy between the contemplated and the contemplator, in which both share with the other and enhance the other.

Before a mental description of what we are contemplating arises, we see ourselves simply with our joy in the object contemplated. Contemplation is knowing, contemplation is recognition, contemplation is reuniting. For the Pythagoreans, by way of example, a single act of contem-

40 *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, 7. The Artistotelian *otium* corresponds to the contemplative life. It is vigilant repose, *skolé*, or the leisure of not having to do [anything].

41 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologica*, II, II q. 180.

42 On the practice of lingering in relation to the the contemplative aptitude, cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen,* first part, chap. III, *Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*.

plation favours identification with a cosmic order, with the symbolic relationship of a universe of vaster meaning that included the single individual.

When things are free from any purpose, they become festal. According to Heidegger, they have no function, but shine and sparkle.[43] Liberated from the stranglehold of gain and routine, they emanate a contemplative quietude that makes lingering possible, a grateful rest. And one remains lingering; the emphasis on self is silenced, leaving space for a festive, impersonal and undisturbed gaiety. The rite of contemplation widens in the architecture of a festive, blessed, immortal space-time that perpetuates itself rhythmically, marking the sacredness of an eternal present.

In contemplating the other, we discover the greatest joy, the intensity of the original whole, in a disposition of non-action which, as we have seen, Thomas Aquinas also considers as constituting the true goal of our being in the world. Moreover, the object contemplated, to which a sharing attention is devoted, becomes the beloved object of an authentic love, since it is uncalculated. This very gratuitous loving attention reveals compete joy in the contemplator[44].

The live repose of contemplation implies an emptying of the self to make room for a focus on the festal celebration of nature, relinquishing to the background the very subject of contemplation. Only by lingering in this condition can we grasp and see the shining of something new.

The contemplator of the divine, the *theoros*, is thus the contemplator *par excellence*. For the great mediaeval Kashmiri master Utpaladeva, only if we are aware of having light within us can we see it and recognise it in an external object, thus recognising the same light that illuminates ourselves and everything else in the world. Similarly, in ancient times contemplation of the divine was a real and proper *mimesis*, an *imitatio Dei* in which one saw oneself and recognised oneself in the light of the God celebrated.

According to Aristotle, the human being is capable of the contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*) since he already has in himself something of the divine. Through the rite of contemplation (*theoretiké*) he discovers himself, since he is mirrored in what he observes, recalling his true nature, his divine root. This dwelling in the intimacy of the self (which brings us back to the Sanskrit etymology of the term festal celebration) is the greatest and most perfect happiness, since we no longer seek anything of what we are, restoring it to our memory, returning it to our heart. He who sees, who contemplates experiences in this simple action (or non-action) true happiness. This was the view of Aristotle, confirmed in the comment of St Thomas in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: to him who sees, nothing is lacking, *omnia secum portat*.[45]

A famous Japanese *haiku* captures the essence of the contemplative attitude we are describing:

Sitting quietly,
doing nothing,
Spring comes
and grass grows by itself[46]

In such a context, sitting and doing nothing makes one ready for an alert quietude in which everything happens by itself, without any need for our intervention. This is the spirit of contemplation, to remain in that delicate balance between inaction and attention. In the *haiku* quoted above, the live repose of contemplation implies an emptying of the self to make room for a focus on the festal celebration of nature, relinquishing to the background the very subject of contemplation.

43 See Martin Heidegger: *Hölderlins Hymne 'Andenken'*, (Wintersemester 1941/42), band 52, *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*), Frankfurt am Main 1992. pp. 66-67.

44 This is matched in the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux. Cf. *De diligendo Deo*, ed. Waktin W. Williams, Cambridge 1926, pp.32 *et seq*.

45 See Josef Pieper: *Glück und Kontemplation,* pp. 87 *et seq*.

46 See Robert E. Lewis (ed.), *The Book of the Zen Grove*, with Japanese translations and commentaries by Shibayama Zenkei, selected by Shimano Eidō, Livingston 1984.

Only by lingering in this condition can we grasp and see the shining of something new, never seen before. This lack of emphasising ourselves, opening up to what is outside us, is the authentic source of joy. Contemplation is joy because the self does not interfere. It is without intention. Meditation makes us feel that wherever we are we have everything, we are in syntony with the movement of everything, we are everything.
This is the contemplative attitude that the Kashmiri masters also intuited. The emotive intensity of just being in the experience is itself the whole experience.

The Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, quoting Heidegger, affirms that prior to any thought activity, there is in us a background emotion, a *pathos*, our innermost core, from which thought itself and hence action come to life[47]. According to Abhinavagupta that background emotion is *śānta rasa*, the emotion of tranquillity, the matrix – quiet, but vibrating with every other emotional state. Somānanda, the great initiator of the *Śaivite* lineage, already describes in his *Śivadṛṣṭi* the background of being as a tranquil sea where the water's surface reveals a subtle ripple, barely perceptible That first ripple will swell to a wave that is more easily visible. That slight initial vibration is already action, we might say, returning to Abhinavagupta, it is already emotion. All eight basic emotions, described by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, arrive as waves on that tranquil sea, *śānta rasa*, considered by the Kashmiri masters as the ninth emotion, the fundamental one, the original.

Sitting tranquil in immobile *āsana*, but with a softly beating heart: that is the attitude of contemplation, when one ceases action in order to feel the pulsating life that moves the immobility from inside. That feeling, lingering in the posture, will become emotion, participation, celebration, the festal celebration of our being in the world. From that living and luminous presence is born every thought, every action, everything! •

47 Byung-Chul Han, *Vita contemplativa*, chapter 3: Vom Handeln zum Sein.

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