

Trees, Birds and Other Non-Humans Mythological Entanglements with Landscape, Flora, Fauna and Spirits of the Himalayas

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Abstract This paper takes into account ideas about landscape and environment as they emerge from the study of beliefs, mythology and ritual activities of religious specialists of the Himalayan region, showing a deep and enduring web of relational entanglements between human and other-than-human communities. The notion of personhood seems, in fact, to transcend the human dimension in order to include a wider and larger set of other-than-human communities, including mountains, waters, plants, animals and other classes of beings.

Keywords Himalaya. Indigenous people. Mythology. Folklore. Shamanism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Blood Relations: Multi-Specific Narratives and Cosmopolitics. – 3 Conclusions.



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181

1 Introduction

If the landscape we inhabit, as written elsewhere (Torri 2021), is the residual reassemblage of physical elements after eons of cataclysmic events, it should not be a surprise to look at mythological narratives and stories as powerful tools to reflect upon sudden changes.¹ At the same time, human reflections include not only the landscape, but also the collectives of beings (flora and fauna)² and extend the boundaries of perception as to include also other entities. If this is not true for those cultures embracing a naturalistic approach, it is certainly true for those communities following other ontological approaches (Descola 2005), or those combining them in a nuanced and creative effort in order to understand the world around us. This is the case of several Himalayan indigenous groups, variously exposed, in contemporary times, to diverse and diversified worldviews: Hinduism, Buddhism, indigenous religions and the already mentioned naturalistic paradigm. It would be unjust, in fact, to describe indigenous knowledge only on the basis of the ‘traditional’ views expressed by their elders and shamans, when we know really well that many are scholarised and in full command of geological, zoological and botanic knowledge

Few years ago, while I was hiking a newly opened trekking route called the Tamang Heritage Trail in northern Nepal, I used to employ the resting time speaking with the local Tamang people about the flora and fauna of the region, nested on the western boundary of the Langtang National Park, on the left bank of the Bhote Khosi. Now and then, I casually inserted questions on local shamans and their practice. Local shamans are known in this part of the country as *bombo*, a word obviously deriving from the Tibetan *bön po* (follower of *bön*), but here used to describe religious specialists engaging with the cult of local and clan-deities, performing healing and exorcistic rituals, with no formal links to the established traditions of Tibetan Yungdrung *Bön*. These religious specialists, in fact, are closer to those known in Nepali language as *jhankri*. One evening, a man pointed to a solitary tall tree, standing in the middle of the rocky slope, surrounded by smaller trees and bushes. “That’s the *ri bombo*”, he said. The *ri bombo*, the ‘bombo of the mountain/forest’, is the equivalent, in Tibetan-related languages, of the Nepali *ban jhankri* (literally, ‘forest shaman’). We could say that the concept of the “for-

1 On the Himalayan landscape and its transformation, see also Smadja 2003.

2 With the rise of multi-species ethnography, several scholars have been addressing critical entanglements between human and non-humans in the South Asian context. Particularly rewarding are, among others, the pioneering works of Jalais (2011) Locke and Buckingham (2016), Govindrajana (2017).

est shaman”³ exemplify, in a sense, the notion of an environment, a landscape, imbued with agency and will, typical of many indigenous ontological views of the Himalayan region. In that case, the tree we were watching was also something else: a potent place and a potent being (Allerton 2017).

It is interesting to note that, among the Tamang people of Nepal, one creation story sung by shamans describes the coming forth of the world in terms of vegetation sprouting, blossoming and flowering:

From the five roots the five tree stems sprouted. From the five tree stems the five branches grew. From the five branches the five buds grew. From the five buds the five leaves grew. From the five leaves the five flower buds grew. From the five flower buds the five flowers grew. On one flower the god Tingi was offered a place. On one flower the water-serpent spirit (*lu*) of the vale was offered a place. On one flower the middle *tsen* spirit was offered a place. On one flower the mother goddess (Kaliama) Damsi Dolmo emerged. With mother Damsi Dolmo father Naru Bön lived together. From the union with father Naru Bön people originated. (Campbell 2013, 118-19)

The vegetal world exemplifies the matrix of a world of entanglements, trees and plants being the interconnective tissue out of which life arises in its manifold animal forms. This is not a metaphor, but a scientific truth, to which the Tamang myth adds an additional level of speculation, associating non-human beings to flowers. Everything is embedded in flux and caught in transformation. The conceptual boundaries of modernity, predicated upon a separation of Man and Nature seem to collapse: as in the famous example set by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing with her *Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), we live in an interconnected world. Again, this is not a metaphor.

While this paper incorporates data and reflections from a number of scholars who have been researching the Himalayas, it draws also from my own fieldwork among some Himalayan *adivasi* groups⁴ between 1997 and 2015. The main focus of my research has been shifting over the years, but my errands always had shamanic practices and beliefs at its core.⁵ In recent years, and after the input of the so-called ontological turn, I turned my attention to the implications of indigenous knowledge and cosmovision, and to the meaning attached to it in terms of entanglement with the environment. As the effects of

³ On the *ban jhankri* see also Riboli 2000, 83-90.

⁴ Namely, the minorities of the Hyolmo of Helambu, and the Lepcha people of Sikkim (India).

⁵ See, for example, Torri 2015; 2020; Riboli, Stewart, Strathern, Torri 2021.

climate change seem to increase day by day, indigenous knowledge appears more and more important for the understanding of how to find our place into a complex ecosystem that is now turning tables on us (Riboli, Torri 2021).

Despite being embedded into an essentially Buddhist-oriented worldview,⁶ based on the idea that every sentient being suffers birth, death and rebirth according to the ethical retributions automatically produced by the weight of one's own actions, Tamang and, to a certain extent, Hyolmo cosmovision reveal glimpses of a parallel and partially hidden ontology drawing from what has been defined as an ancient form of *bön* – whose links with the organised Bön are still under investigation and a theme for debate among scholars. In my opinion, the form of popular *bön* prevalent among the Tamang and Hyolmo people, and exemplified by the role and functions of traditional religious specialists known locally as *bombo* or *pombo*, is part and parcel of that wide, yet diversified, ensemble of religious expressions variously defined 'Himalayan shamanism'. While acknowledging the multi-faceted and extremely diversified nature of those religious experiences defined by that expression, I nonetheless like to point out at least few of the traits that legitimate the use of such denomination. Moreover, Himalayan indigenous communities were not equally exposed to the influence of Tibetan Buddhism: in certain areas the influence was minimal, in others non-existing, while in several others we find religious systems variously defined by scholars as *nature worship*, animism, or similar terms.⁷ For the purpose of this paper I will employ the expression 'Himalayan shamanism', defining it as an expression focusing on the role and functions of a specific religious specialist claiming to possess a peculiar relationship with a class of entities (e.g. ancestors, tutelary deities, nature spirits, etc.). The aforementioned relationship explicates itself mainly during ritual events, through non-ordinary states of consciousness (variously defined, in modern scientific terminology, as trance, ecstasy, possession, mediumship etc.). The rituals are often conducted for the sake of expelling illness or misfortune from an individual, or a household. Illness and misfortune are often conceived as the action of non-human entities or witches.

Non-human entities share the cosmos with the human beings and inhabit the same landscape, living side by side. Stan T. Mumford (1989), in his analysis of the Gurung⁸ religious life entailing shaman-

⁶ Like some other *adivasi* groups of the Himalayas, Hyolmo and Tamang people define themselves as 'Buddhists'.

⁷ For example, in the Nepal Census, we find many indigenous religions defined as *prakriti*, translated officially as 'nature worship' (Nepal Census 2011).

⁸ The Gurung, also known as Tamu, are an *adivasi* group of central Nepal. Their religion include shamanic elements, *bön* and Buddhism. On the religious dynamics among the Gurung people see Mumford 1989.

ism and Buddhism, calls for the interpenetration of a pre-Buddhist, or non-Buddhist, layer of religiosity, which he calls the *archaic matrix*, with the later interposition of an ethically oriented Buddhist layer. What he defines as the archaic matrix is the apotropaic, non-soteriological religious dimension that the Himalayan shamans manipulate through therapeutic rituals, exorcisms, divination and rites of appeasement: this kind of intervention reaches out to the daily needs of the people, welfare, sickness, traumatic events, and ordinary economic activities such as hunting, farming, husbandry, building, foraging.⁹

The dimension thus described is what has been commonly defined as animism, here to be understood in Nurit Bird-David terms as a *relational epistemology* (Bird-David 1999). The kind of relation I am going to explore in the following paragraphs refers to the web of entanglements enabling human and non-human life as expressed in the rich mythologies and folklore of some indigenous groups of the Himalayan region. These myths and stories about humans and various non-humans highlight indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and highlight the background or the ideological premises upon which a kind of indigenous conceptual environmentalism is predicated. On the other hand, it would be simplistic to assume that all indigenous people are oriented towards a kind of environmentalism as intended by international organisations and NGOs. Reality is more nuanced, and the indigenous people of the Himalayas try to find, through their own activists, an alternate third way between social representation, access to services, development and exploitation of natural resources. As it happened for example in other parts of South Asia, indigenous minorities are locked in a debate with the state over the management of natural reserves and national parks.¹⁰

We could easily say that Buddhism, as well as Hinduism, incorporate many themes that are closer to a religious environmentalism of sort. In the present paper, I will not discuss these issues, but I will focus instead on the indigenous religious expressions that, despite being more or less influenced by the religious traditions mentioned above, managed nonetheless to retain a certain autonomy. This relative autonomy is expressed sometimes also in terms of dialectic oppositions

9 It is not by chance that I limit myself to include in the list of economic activities only those related mainly to village or rural life. The urbanisation process, with new lifestyles and economic activities, seems to encourage the shift towards a more established, canonical religion, i.e. Buddhism or other, which is considered more acceptable in a middle-class context.

10 For the specific case of Nepal, see the report of the Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (LAHURNIP) entitled *Assessing the Impacts of Advocacy Initiatives on Indigenous People's Development Agenda in Nepal* (2021). <https://indigenousnavigator.org/sites/indigenousnavigator.org/files/media/document/in-impact-assessment-in-nepal.pdf>.

and adjustments, for example adopting certain customs and refusing others. Among the Tamang and Hyolmo, this parallel stratum of rituality and ideology is subordinated to the Buddhist arch-narratives, and yet retains a degree of autonomy and even conflictuality. Analysing shamanic ritual texts, it is possible to find traces of such conflicts, paired with relics of an ontological approach resting not, or rather not exclusively, on an ethical cosmos that rests on the laws of *karma*, but which is firmly grounded on relational entanglements between human and non-human beings, landscapes and entities.

One set of stories that is particularly popular among the Himalayan Buddhist *adivasi* communities is the one about the taming activities¹¹ of Buddhist masters of the past. If we look at these stories as the consequence of the diffusion of the new religion over the rugged terrains of the Himalayas, we could easily interpret it as the domestication of local deities and other non-human entities and their incorporation into the Buddhist pantheon. What is being domesticated is actually the landscape, of which the aforementioned entities are at the same time essence and manifestation. The Buddhist tantric master and arch-exorcist Padmasambhava exemplifies the spiritual tamer, subduer and conqueror of indigenous deities enabling the diffusion of Buddhism in the new lands. The local deities, once converted to the *dharma*, become the keepers and custodians of the new religion: as a result, for example, fierce, warrior-like mountain deities worshiped by local populations are given a place in the new spiritual landscape thus facilitating the assimilation of the indigenous people into the folder of Buddhism.¹²

The Tibetan Buddhist cosmological view subsumes the local deities into a complex system, based on the notion of *samsara* (i.e. the cycle of life, death and rebirth), which rests upon the idea of *karma* and karmic retribution (i.e. each rebirth is depending on the effects and consequences of one's own action, *karma*), and dependent origination (Skr. *pratityasamutpada*). But these worldly deities (Tib. *jigten pa'i lha*) occupy the world and share it with the human beings, inhabiting diverse zones and exercising power over different areas of influence, possibly defined in terms of ecological zones or niches. For example, we find several gods (Tib. *lha*) associated with mountain peaks, but the mountain is not just the residence of a god or goddess: it is a visible manifestation of his or her body.¹³ Certain regions are considered to be under the jurisdiction of country gods (Tib. *yul lha*), while specific parts of the terrain are under the control of some earth masters (Tib. *sa bdag*). Rocky ridges and hills are the

¹¹ On the figure of Padmasambhava as tamer of demons see also Dalton 2004 and 2011.

¹² See Balikci 2008, 288; Ruegg 2008; Torri 2019.

¹³ See, for example, Tan 2020, 150.

home of fierce and dangerous classes of entities known as *tсен* and *nyan*, while rivers, waterfalls, lakes and subterranean spaces belong to serpentine beings (Tib. *klu*). The result is a complex grid of territorial parcels overlooked by distinct entities. It is exactly because of this that, assessing a similar parcelization of the terrain between diverse gods and spirits in South-East Asia, Paul Mus employed the expression “cadastral religion” (Mus 1933).

So occupied by humans, flora, fauna, deities, and spirits, the land is seemingly overcrowded. As Graham Harvey notes, “the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human” (Harvey 2005, xviii). In such a context, the chances of trespassing into the legitimate domain of others are indeed rather elevate. Among Himalayan indigenous groups, local theories about the reasons for illness, misfortune, disasters etc. are attributed, in most cases, to the disrespect of other fellow living beings. Just like nothing good ever arise from gossip, quarrel and misbehaviour between humans, felling trees, polluting rivers, digging the soil, killing animals indiscriminately are sure ways to invite retaliation at the hands of the various ‘owners of the land’. Shamans are those who are called to compose controversies through rituals, and through the conveying of amends and compensations, according to a set of rules that has mythical antecedents. It is for this reason that I have chosen to analyse some myths and stories, still part and parcel of the shamanic repertoires of the Himalayas, in order to highlight indigenous attitudes towards the environment and the understanding of the mechanics regulating beings entangled in the web of life together.

2 Blood Relations: Multi-Specific Narratives and Cosmopolitics

It is not uncommon in the extended Himalayan region to find examples of a kinship system incorporating the non-human dimension into the folder of human relations. An interesting case is that of the Lepcha people, inhabiting the ridges and slopes of Sikkim (India), some parts of the Darjeeling District of West Bengal (India), and the easternmost part of the Ilam region (Nepal). The word ‘Lepcha’ seems to have been imposed on them by neighbouring groups, as the community prefers to define itself as ‘Rongkup Rumkup’ (children of the mountains, children of the deity). In their myths of origin, the creative agency, called ‘Itbu Rum’, use the uncontaminated snow of the peaks to shape the original couple, placed to live in a secluded place and sacred spot on the lap of mountain Kanchenjunga. The two, a man and a woman, are supposed to live like brother and sister, but soon enough they start to have children, whom they abandon in the forest, for fear of reprisal by the gods. Following this event, they moved out-

side the sacred valley of Mayel Lyang, an event that marks the beginning of Lepcha/Rong society. The seven abandoned children become demon-like (Lep. *mung*) agents of illness, plague and madness and wage a bitter war against their human relatives. It is at this point that the gods create the first shaman, to help humans in their war against the demon-like beings. This conflict is of pivotal importance, since it is from it that, according to the stories and legends, the diverse clans come into being (see Bentley 2008). The clan structure of the Rong society is strictly intertwined with the local landscape, since every clan is related to a snowy peak and a mountain lake. Shamans (Lep. *bongthing*, *padim* and *mun*)¹⁴ intervene several times during the Lepcha life-cycle, as mediators between the communities and their clan-deities, the deities and spirits of the fields, forests and waters, the dead and so on. But it can also be the other way around: certain birds, for example, act as messengers from Mayel Lyang, the land of ancestors, and their appearance mark the beginning of certain activities (hunting, farming, etc.). The recent events (e.g. the 2011 earthquake, the frequently recurring floods, the construction of a system of dams harnessing the Rangit and Teesta rivers) has sparked a revival of the Lepcha's role as custodians and protectors of the environment (see Bentley 2021; Lepcha 2021), renewing the attention for and the spiritual meaning of the sacred landscape.

There is an inherent tension between human communities and the environment they live in. This is expressed in the narratives of conflict and kinship, as we have seen in the case of the Lepcha relations with the demons on one side, and the mountains and lakes on the other. Other Himalayan groups articulate this tension with similar stories.

The story of Gorapa and Serapa, part of the shamanic cycle of Western Nepal analyzed by Gregory Maskarinec (1995), describes the partition of the land between the descendants of two brothers. This partition allocate different species across space, identifying diverse areas over which each species has jurisdiction. Village and fields, forests and rocks, bushes and waterfalls become associated with different beings. Remarkably, the songs sung by shamans tell about those who stayed in the village, i.e. the humans, and how those who moved to cliffs, trees, bushes, swamps and the like became snakes, bees, wasps, tigers, bears, etc. This division is at once what we could term as the great culture/nature divide, but it is a divide

14 There are several words, in the Lepcha language, which describe diverse shamanic religious specialists, each with different abilities, powers and functions. The diverse terms are employed with some fluidity and some regional variations, for example there are differences between Dzongu in Sikkim and Kalimpong in West Bengal. In Kalimpong the word *bongthing* refers primarily to a male ritualist, while the word *mun* indicates a female ecstatic specialist, although certain individuals known as *mun-bongthing* can assume both roles. In Dzongu I encountered more often the term *padim*.

grounded on an original co-specificity, expressed as kinship. Moreover, it posits trespassing as a breach of the rule granting harmony and equilibrium: shamans are called to amend the breaching of the agreements ensuring peaceful coexistence. The tiger place is not the village, the human place is not the forest, the snake place is not the house and so forth. Since beings of diverse species move around, and sometimes prey on each other and on each other's resources, every time a crisis unfolds (in the form of sickness, misfortune or bad luck), it is the shaman's role to identify the cause, and to ritually remember each of the agents involved in the mythic agreement, thus re-establishing more or less peaceful coexistence once again.

The cycle of Abo Tani, the cultural hero of the Apatani, recorded by Stuart Blackburn in the Indian region of Arunachal Pradesh (2008), moves along similar lines. Abo Tani is married to Piisi Tiimi, herself a forest spirit, and sister of Doji, the chief of the forest beings. They share a long house, with two fires, but problems soon arise because the domesticated animals of the one are wild game to the other. Hence, Abo Tani hunting in the forest invariably kills what he perceives as wild animals, while he is in fact hunting Doji's domesticated cattle. The opposite is true for Doji: when he goes hunting, he kills the domesticated animals of Abo Tani. Here the divide culture/nature reveals itself for what it really is for many indigenous ontologies: only a matter of mere perspective, as theorised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998). Abo Tani and Doji start a bitter conflict, but no one is able to overcome his rival. The conflict can be compounded only after establishing a truce and setting clear rules for living, herding and hunting. It is a frail truce, since, as in the previous case, trespassing is inevitable and leads to retaliations, but at least it ensures the possibility for amendment and the continuation of a more or less peaceful coexistence.

Interesting stories including interspecies relations, kinship and marriage are to be found also among the Magar of north-western Nepal. A good example is the shamanic song of Barchameni (Oppitz 1983). In the myth still sung by local shamans, Barchameni is the sister of a group of seven brothers, who are the husbands of seven witch-sisters. The girl is forced to do all the chores for her brothers and their witch companions, receiving only scraps for food. Out of pity, a cow feeds her with her dung, which magically transforms into rice and lentils. Once discovered, the brothers decide to kill the cow. Before the slaughtering, the cow tells Barchameni not to eat its meat, but to keep its bones and bury them. From the buried bones, eventually bamboo sprouts, and from bamboo, a wild boar arises. The wild boar becomes the protector of the girl, together they engage in collecting medicinal herbs and travel South to sell them. During the trip, the boar resolves to kill the girls' brothers and to marry her. In a final confrontation, the wild boar manages to push the seven brothers

and the seven witches down into hell, and, to this day, the wild boar Galde Vir is one of the helper of the Magar *rama* (shaman). During the healing rituals, shamans still embody Galde Vir, and carry their patients on their back, mirroring and re-enacting the travel of Galde Vir and Barchameni to the South (Oppitz 1983, 204-7). It should be noted that in South-Asia, the South is the direction associated with the land of the dead. Galde Vir, the wild boar spirit, is here envisioned as one of the shaman's auxiliary spirits, helping the *rama* to reach the underworld in order to save the patient from illness and death.

The two animals, the cow and the wild boar, appearing in this shamanic song are very interesting because they appear in many Magar clan genealogies, albeit with different roles in relation to different economic activities, i.e. farming and hunting (Oppitz 1983). Black and brown cows emerge with their human ancestors from a cave. The cave closed just before yellow cows were about to exit, so at present they do not exist in today's world. From the original couple, seven sons were born. In their roamings to find a place to settle, they engage in wild boar hunting, since wild boars were destroying the fields and spoil the harvest. They move from place to place, and find places where to settle. Although many versions exist, Michael Oppitz poignantly remarks the key-features of the origin story. Human beings emerge from a cave. The cave is a strict boundary between the world of the gods and the ordinary human world. Actually, the dividing line does not relate to humans alone. Inside the cave, according to the many versions of this story, we find animals of various colours, never seen in our world: "green dogs, yellow, green and turmeric-coloured cows" (Oppitz 1983, 196). This emergence myth describe the birth of the Magar in connection with the gods: it is the process of stepping out that transforms godly beings into worldly one. Despite the presence of this overarching theme connected with the cave theme, in some versions we find a supernatural wedding between a human girl and a god: in this specific case, a nocturnal lover visits a girl, and her parents, in order to discover the identity of her lover, ask her to tie a thread to him during their meetings. Following the thread, they reach a passage behind a waterfall, leading, again, to the cave of the gods. Thus discovered, the god is forced to take care of his human lover, and to gift her with yoke and oxen, and agricultural utensils (Oppitz 1983, 192-3).

The same complex pattern of interactions is found among the Thulung Rai of Nepal, whose mythological materials were analysed at length by Nicholas J. Allen (2012). In particular, for the purpose of the present paper, very relevant are the stories about the creation that revolve around the figure of Miyapma, a female being from which different species originate. The character of Miyapma emerges, according to various versions of the myth, from another being born out of a lotus blossoming among the moistened leaves accumulated by

the wind on the surface of a primordial lake.¹⁵ Seeking a husband, Miyapma sends two birds, named Jigengma (a *Prinia polychroa*) and Kekuwa (a hawk), to arrange a meeting with the planet Ruwasila (Venus). Ruwasila goes hiding, and in his place the messenger birds find the goitrous Khomda (Jupiter), who accepts to follow them down to earth. When Miyapma sees him, she hid herself, not wanting to marry someone with a goitre. Offended, Khomda leaves, bringing away the grandmothers of the waters, and leaving the earth in a state of drought. But before leaving, he left his urine/semen in a hollow tree trunk or a drinking vessel made of leaves. Thirsty, Miyapma is forced to drink and becomes pregnant. She then gave birth to different species, and the myth especially mentions the mountain thorny creeper, the valley thorny creeper, a tiger, a bear, a monkey and Mini Rai (a human being). Despite being brothers, Tiger and Mini Rai always quarrel: being both hunters, they constantly chase each other. One day, the tiger, hunting in the forest, kills her own mother Miyapma. Mini Rai sends the two other brothers to bury her body, but in fact they eat it. This episode of intra-familial cannibalism marks the end of the extended family and they disperse in diverse directions (Allen 2012, 23-42).

At the base of this familiar conflict, after which the brother species separate themselves, we find dietary customs: meat eaters, grain eaters and omnivorous. The place allocated to each and every of them, instead, seems to respond to ecological adaptation: the various versions of the myth indicate that the monkey goes southwards, the bear northwards, and the tiger can move across, while Mini Rai stays in the middle (Allen 2012, 42). It is not immediately clear why two varieties of thorny creepers are included in the family, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that this multispecific entanglement includes not only animals but plants too.

Incidentally, we find tigers and human beings entangled in a story collected by C. de Beauvoir Stock (1925). According to this story, two Lepcha brothers, Yong-rumbo and Yok-gnibu, were famous hunters, but they could not find wives, because everyone was afraid of their sister, Naremnom, who was married to a tiger, named Tung-bo, and she was a man-eater herself. The tiger had a brother too, named Renlok-bu, who was a snake. Despite their prowess and skills, the two hunters were not able to chase down Tung-bo, so they asked for help to the bamboo plant. They promised to give bamboo a relevant role

15 This sequence of events could possibly be a reframing of the Hindu myth of the god Vishnu sleeping on the primordial waters. It is in fact told that from his navel a lotus springs, and from the lotus the god Brahma is generated. Brahma then proceeds to create the world anew. At the end of the cosmic cycle, the world is to be destroyed by the god Shiva, with fire and water. After a period of quiescence, the whole process starts again.

during the rituals performed to honour the gods, and then the plant agreed to block the tiger on its tracks. Finding the bamboo blocking the trail, Tung-bo the tiger asked it to leave or be crushed, and upon its refusal jumped on it. A bamboo splinter pierced the tiger and killed it. The two brothers skinned Tung-bo and went back home. At the sight of the skin of her husband, Naremnom turned into a bird and flew to the jungle. As the story goes, people can still hear her crying at night, and her cry is a bad omen for those who hear it (365-6).

In a completely animated environment, conflicts seems to be inherent. But that could be also a reflection to explain the inescapable misfortunes and sorrows characterising human (and probably also non-human) life. A human behaviour surely triggering conflict is, in all relational epistemologies, greediness. While illness could be sparked by the occasional and unintentional acts of polluting a river, felling a tree, digging a trench thus offending or harming the related non-human entity, greediness invariably invites disaster. Hunting too much, collecting too much, cutting trees without reason, all these actions are seen as inherently ominous. In an economy of scarcity, surplus is greediness, and there is a price to pay. An example of this could also be found among the *bön* texts translated by Samten Karmay (2010). These texts were probably employed by *bön* ritual specialists during rituals of appeasement of the non-human entities called *nyen* (Tib. *gnyan*), a class of beings associated with natural spaces. In the text, each class of beings is given a place to live in, and skills to ensure its survival, but human beings out of greediness are tricked into believing they can exploit other beings and resources beyond measure. In a pivotal passage, the humans proclaim their greedy intentions with unequivocal words:

I will kill hundreds of thousands of the beasts of the white snow mountain.
I will kill hundreds of thousands of snow cocks and grouse of the blue slate mountain
I will kill hundreds of thousands of beavers and otters of the rivers.
I will cut the trees of the *Nyen*.
Dig up the stones of the *Nyen*.
I will plough the land of the *Nyen* as my field.
(Karmay 2010, 63)

The whole of the non-human, then, rise in battle against the humans: storms, plagues, illness, animals and spirits attack them without mercy, until the human beings are forced to beg for a truce, and, with the help of a *gshen*, i.e. a ritual specialist, which can be defined pos-

sibly as a *bön* shaman,¹⁶ make an agreement that enables a more or less smooth coexistence.

But conflict is just one among the possible cosmopolitic relations. In a Tamang creation myth, sung by the *bombo* during healing rituals, a different trope appears. Among the many beings of the creation, the golden chicken was created immortal, but he was feeling sad because he saw many people struck by illness and death, so he approached the god and asked the permission of dying on their behalf (Mastromattei 1988, 88-90). This is a mythical explanation for the ritual sacrifice of a chicken during shamanic rituals, performed in order to save a human life, according to the logic that an illness is in fact a spirit consuming the patient life-forces and internal organs, devouring flesh and bloods. It is a substitution ritual in which the life of the suffering person is spared through the offering of another life. We could see that this kind of rituals have a parallel in the so-called 'ransom ritual' of Tibetan Buddhism, which are based on the same logic, but take the substitution a step further through the use of a *torma* (Tib. *gtor ma*), an effigy made of dough.

During my first fieldwork, among the Lepcha people inhabiting the hills around the town of Kalimpong, I witnessed for the first time the sacrificial killing of an animal.¹⁷ The local ritualist, a *bongthing*, addressed the deities of the clan and the ancestors in front of a temporary altar. The ritual, I was told, was the *Chu Rum Faat*, (literally 'offering to mountain deities'). The altar was built behind the house, facing the mountains. It consisted of a bamboo pole, flanked by two arrows. The vertical pole represents the mountain peak, the two arrows its flanks. In front of it, on a tray, several effigies made of dough represented the mountain and lake associated with the clan, other mountains, the ancestors. On a side, the dead and other potentially noxious spirits. An assistant kept a red chicken close by. After an enumeration of deities and spirits, places and planets, winds and clouds, the *bongthing* sprinkled the chicken's head with water and rice, carefully looking for its reaction. At once, the chicken was taken away and sacrificed by the assistant. After a while, it was taken back to the altar: some of its flesh and bloods are given to the spirits of the dead

16 The notion of *bön shaman* was recently employed by Toni Huber (2020) in a work devoted to the study of fertility cults of Bhutan and the eastern Himalayas. In the recent past many Tibetologists and scholars of *Bön* have rejected the notion of shamanism as useful to explain what is defined, in fact, as the fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism, or an organised religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet. While the debate is still open, we cannot ignore the fact that many shamanic religious specialists of the Himalayas (e.g. the Hyolmo and Tamang *bombo* or *pombo*) define themselves as followers of a kind of *bön* unrelated to its organised, monastic form, i.e. the Yungdrung *Bön*.

17 The rite was observed in a village near Kalimpong, during the month of October 1997.

and the noxious agents. Its body, filled with rice, was consecrated to the mountain of the clan and the ancestor's deities. During the offering, it became clear that the body of the chicken was not only offered, but, symbolically, it became the mountain. In describing the body of the victim, he used expressions like "its wings are your arms, its legs are your legs, its crest is your ridges, the rice on its chest it's the mountain peak...". While the chicken was addressed as the mountain of the clan, the *bonghting* described also the connections between the mountain and the sun, the moon, the stars, the rivers, the slopes, the trees and flowers, up to the sacred places surrounding the village. The chicken, I was told later, was selected at the beginning of the year. Consecrated to the clan-deity of the mountain, it protected the village by bearing upon itself misfortunes and illness. Its consecration to the mountain-deity empower it, and through its sacrifice the pact between the people and the clanic god is renewed. The mountain, as the clan god, has the power to regulate relations between the beings inhabiting the region. It controls rains and grant bountiful harvests, or it can release drought and sickness. In a relational context, an animated environment reacts to human actions.

3 Conclusions

Despite the degree of intrinsic diversity characterizing the indigenous minorities of the Himalayan region, the studies presented in this paper demonstrate also a certain homogeneity in the way different ethnic groups of the region appreciate, understand and conceptualise the world and the way they live in it sharing space with other species. The Himalayan region is extremely rich in terms of biological and cultural diversity: not only it encompasses several nation-states and diverse ecological habitats, but it is also internally diversified. When it comes to indigenous communities, we must consider the highest level of a diversification that include ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. For the purpose of this paper, I have limited myself to the analysis of some ethnographic materials dealing with some groups inhabiting the Central and Eastern Himalayas. Among these, in particular, I chose to focus on Tibeto-Burman groups. Yet, it should be stated that some approaches, understanding and feelings towards the environment show continuities well beyond the central Himalayas. Studies on the Western Himalayan groups, and on the Hindu Kush region, show similarities in ritual techniques and ideas of a relational cosmos.¹⁸ The idea of a relational cosmos, and modified states of consciousness as a key access to it, represents a significant

¹⁸ For a complete overview of religions of the Hindu Kush region see Jettmar 1975.

trait of continuity across linguistic, cultural, religious and political barriers. Indigenous ontologies postulate, at least through practice and discourse of shamanic religious specialist, a web of connections among heterogeneous subjects (de la Cadena 2015, 283). Such heterogeneous ensemble is not human: the assemblage of life, the organic and the inorganic, the visible and the invisible, memories, energies, forms, ideas, each and every part contributes, has agency. I have chosen to focus on myth and related forms of narratives, such as shamanic songs and ritual texts, since they show a deep and intimate confidence with those ideas and approaches characterising concepts that only recently, and through the ontological turn, surfaced in a global discourse about life on the planet, the Anthropocene, and climate change.

To look at the entanglement of life as a reality, it is something new for a certain kind of approach privileging the crude exploitation of resources and beings (animals, both human and non-human). While reading or listening to shamanic songs dealing with the times of creation, something is really striking. The diversifications of diverse species, their conflicts for resources, the continuous state of metamorphosis and fluctuations, seemed certainly primitive to ethnographers of the 19th and 20th century. Reading it all again now, it looks extremely contemporary. And yet, if a truth really was contained in mythic narratives, it was there all the time. As Ludwig Wittgenstein rightly remarked:

there can have been no reason, that prompted certain races of man to venerate the oak tree, but only the fact that they and the oak were united in a community of life. (Wittgenstein 1993, 139)

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