

THE PSYCHOPOMP HORSE & THE PHURBU OBSERVATIONS ON A RITUAL OBJECT

BY FRANÇOIS PANNIER

*"Whatever it is you can do, or that you dream of doing, do it. There is genius, power and magic in audacity."
Goethe¹*

Very early on, the horse became very important in rituals. It was a prestige animal, encountered in royal ceremonies that marked history.

In India, it was the sacrifice of Asvamedha, the horse, that was evoked. This was a long, complex and expensive ritual which King Dasaratha of the Kingdom of Kosola made use of to find an heir when all three of his wives proved to be sterile.

It would represent an opportunity for Vishnu to incarnate himself in Rama to neutralize Ravana,² the demon-king of Ceylon. It is the Ramayana epic.

A horse was sacrificed in the course of this ceremony and the queen had ritual intercourse with it.

Among Celtic peoples, when a monarch was elected, he was initiated and then consecrated with a very specific ritual.³

The chosen one placed himself naked beneath a mare,⁴ mimicking her foal. The animal's throat was slit, its carcass prepared, and it was cooked in a large pot. The new king was required to bathe in the broth and to eat the meat.

The author has also noted⁵ that the horse is a funerary animal in Celtic traditions, and a "passer" who moves souls to the world beyond on his back. Among the Celts, Epona is an equine psychopomp goddess.

He also mentions the Gundestrup⁶ vase, on which one sees foot soldiers in single file before a large cauldron, into which they are being thrown by a divinity. They emerge from it as cavalrymen.

This observation led him to write: "This change of state shows that they do not go back to their former life but gain access to another one, in which their condition is more elevated. The fact of being on horseback symbolizes both nobility and the fact of being deceased (since the horse is the psychopomp animal)."

Moreover, mention is made of the arrival of a horse carrying a cadaver in the *Peredur son of Efwarg* tale in the Mabinogion,⁷ an archetype of the quest for the Holy Grail.

Claude Sterckx⁸ also makes a connection between the Celtic myths and the Ramayana. He notes the evil omens, particularly those concerning Chuchulainn, that are associated with his two horses.

We will revisit this pair of horses later in other contexts.

As we have already noted in earlier articles,⁹ the magical functions associated with equine rituals that were considered sorcery by the Catholic church, caused the church to prohibit the consumption of horse meat. Salomon Reinach¹⁰ makes this observation in his article on Vercingetorix at Alesia. It was Gregory III who denounced the consumption of horse meat as an abomination in 732. The reason for that was not so much the fact of eating the animal's flesh as the superstition that was linked with it.

"The Pope requires that it be eaten cooked or smoke-dried: this is to abolish the very ancient superstition that is the basis for all of the omophagic rituals of Antiquity and involves the belief that communion is most effective when the meat of the animal that is ritually consumed remains raw and bloody." The association with the "body of Christ" and the "blood of Christ" was obviously worrying.

Mircea Eliade¹¹ noted:

"It is not the infernal character but the funerary character of the horse that dominates its mythology. It is a mythical image of Death, and it is consequently integrated into the ideologies and techniques of ecstasy. The horse carries the deceased to the great beyond. It is responsible for the "change of level", the passage from this world to the others..."

In the "Psychopomp" section of their work on the subject, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec and Bernard Sergent¹² tell us that psychopomp beings were often animals, and particularly the horse, in Ancient Greece, citing L. Malten (1914), and that they were among the *Vainah* as well, according to M. Tsaroiieva (2005).

Fernand Benoit¹³ also explores the subject: "It is thus not an unimportant detail that the horse plays a role in scenes having to do with life beyond the grave. The horse is the sacred animal of Mediterranean religions, whose primitive cult, in worship of the

earth-mother, is essentially chthonian. The horse as the carrier of the deceased in a popular religion in which the deceased is a hero, makes it part of the concept of death."

He later states: "The horse evokes death. An oracle of Apollonius of Tyana, told of by Philostratus, compares death to a fast horse. His judgment is all the more interesting because, he was a native of Lemnos living in the third century AD when the Thracian "hero cavalryman" steles were well-known and widely disseminated. Under the Empire, did not Artemidorus teach that a diseased individual would succumb if he saw an animal in his dreams?"

This notion of the dream as a premonition of death is a constant in a number of cultures as we shall see in the course of this article.

Angelo de Gubernatis¹⁴ points out that it is a sinister omen to dream of black horses, as evoked in two lines of verse of the *Suidas*,¹⁵ while it is augurs well to dream of white ones, that the Hungarians call Saint Michael's horse a coffin, that neo-Greek popular songs represent Charon, who guides the dead, on horseback, and lastly that in Switzerland, the horse that a dangerously ill person may see is viewed as the precursor of approaching death. This type of interpretation is corroborated by Henri Jemaire's text cited below.

Fernand Benoit¹⁶ also notes: "The representation of the equestrian figure is thus associated with the funerary banquet or with the bust of the deceased, which according to Ch. Picard, led Georgi Mihailov, the last exegete of the Thracian "hero horseman", to affirm the close relationship between it and the cult of the dead, and to admit that in some cases the Thracian equestrian figure could even be a representation of a deceased person."

This reference to the Thracians and to their place of origin is recurrent. Thrace was located on the Balkan Peninsula straddling what is now Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. It owes its name to the Thracians, a people of Indo-European descent, who occupied the region in Antiquity. According to Greek mythology, the god Dionysus and the hero Orpheus were from there. We will have occasion to come back to them here. The area also borders on Dacia, which was also rich in very important traditions of Antiquity that remain very poorly known. The Black Sea and surrounding areas were home to a great wealth of religious traditions.

Fernand Benoit¹⁷ continues: "The appearance of the horse in scenes relating death to the

process of becoming a hero in Ptolemaic Egypt, in Syria, in Greece, in Etruria, in Thrace, in Iberia, in Gaul and in Africa, in tandem with the function of the camel among the Shebans of the Southern Arabian Peninsula during the times of Antiquity, and the survival of the allegory in scenes of the "savage hunt" in Merovingian and Visigothic Gaul, in Ireland and from Scandinavia to the Christian East and to Tripolitania, show with certainty that this myth was not limited to a single people, religion or period. Its prevalence in places so different in time and space cannot be just the result of fortuitous encounters, and must be the product of general beliefs that were expressed by analogous symbols, and reveal relatively synchronic interferences in Mediterranean civilizations in both in Greco-Roman times and in the Paleo-Christian period.

The myth was also born of a rite - the burial of the deceased with the horse or the chariot, which was practiced beginning in prehistory from China to Scandinavia and the Celtic areas, and from the Near East to the Western Mediterranean. The horse carries the deceased on his voyage from the tomb, and is also his protector."

And a last quotation from Fernand Benoit's text:¹⁸ "The image of the hero- equestrian is thus a manifestation of beliefs or superstitions that are part of a common background for humanity, and reveal the unity and identity of a popular religion of death. This religion of death is closely associated with the sign of the horse, either with the "horseman- god" ensuring the deceased's protection, or with an identification of the deceased as the horseman himself." Ludolf Malten¹⁹, quoted by Henri Jeanmaire,²⁰ sought to establish that among the Greeks of Classical Antiquity, the horse had been a funerary symbol as an attribute of the infernal divinities, the messenger from beyond that carried the deceased on his final voyage, and even the incarnation of the spirits of the deceased.

After considerations of centaurs and satyrs, Henri Jeanmaire²¹ continues: "A variety of reasons can be given to explain the importance of this demonic and chthonian element in this mythical representation of the horse among the ancient Greeks. It has been rightfully emphasized that there are many unquestionable parallels with the analogous beliefs and superstitions that have to do with the horse in medieval texts and in European folklore, in which the horse is the carrier of the deceased or an omen of death. »

THE PSYCHOPOMP HORSE IN SIBERIA

Micea Eliade²² cites the legends of the Buryats that tell of horses that carry deceased shamans to their new dwelling place.

Umo Harva²³ provides details about the shamans' funerary rituals.

After his death, the shaman is placed on his saddle blanket, with his saddle as a pillow, and reins, arrows and a bow are placed in his hands. The horse on which the deceased's body is placed is equipped with a bridle and a saddle, a bell is hung around its neck and a cover is put on its back. An elder will ride behind the cadaver and another will lead the horse. When they arrive at the place where the body will be cremated and after a copious banquet, the men will make cuts in the horse on its head and its back prior to slaughtering and incinerating it. Sometimes it is let free instead, Then, after having lit the funeral pyre, each person leaves without turning around.

Among the Yakut, the normal funerary ritual was different.²⁴ Immediately after a death, the ritual of "skilled dismemberment" was performed, and a horse was killed and cut into pieces with a knife (but not an axe). No cow (draft animal) could be killed, for fear that the deceased might then be able to get back onto the sled that this animal was pulling and was carrying him to his tom, and take away his relatives.

The author also adds²⁵ that among the Yakut, as in many other cultures of the Altai, Central Asia and Mongolia, the horse was the most widely favored sacrificial animal.

In the Altai, J.P. Roux²⁶ describes three ways of slaughtering horses on the occasion of the performance funerary rites:

- The immolation of a riding horse immediately after the death, that would serve as a vehicle to take the deceased to the next world.
- The burial of horses at funerary rites that would enable the deceased to be with his animals in the next world.
- Slaughter for the funerary festivities.

In Siberia as in the Altai, immolated horse are very present at funerary sites, either on the *aranas* outdoor platforms, or in the tombs.

Among the Beltir²⁷ of the Altai, the deceased's horse is sacrificed so that its soul may guide that of its owner, and that is not surprising given what we have just observed.

However in this case, the animal's meat is divided up after slaughter and given to birds and dogs which are also deemed to be psychopomps.

Marcia Eliade²⁸ provides a lengthy description of the sacrifice in Altai of a horse that will accompany a deceased shaman on his ascent to the heavens.

And Ol'ga Petrovana Ignat'eva²⁹ writes: "There are several indications that the Altaians believe that man and the horse are two closely related beings. One of my informants stated that "the horse has a soul". In 2008, the Alati-Kiji of the Sebalin district told me that they believed that seeing a horse in a dream meant that the death of a man in the family was imminent, and that the animal represented the soul of the individual who would soon die. The omen is even more portentous when one dreams of a man on horseback. That is why people prefer not to discuss such dreams. On the other hand, if one wishes to speak ill of someone, they might say "I saw him on horseback", and everyone will understand what is meant. The same premonition exists among the Telengits of Ulangan. Moreover, for them, the arrival of the deceased's soul on the seventh day after his death, is announced by the sound of hooves."

The author states that in this context, one does not find horses near shamans' graves. A shaman's drum was the accessory that took him to other worlds in the rituals after his death. The drum was then "killed" - it was pierced with a knife to allow the soul to escape, and some of the metal pendants hanging from it were removed and placed next to the grave.

M. Brown³⁰ mentions a ritual in which a shaman uses two staffs which are called horses because their extremities are decorated with representations of a horse's head.

In 1719, John Bell³¹ also speaks of the use of two staffs in a ritual, but without mentioning horses' heads. In both cases the staffs were substitutes for the drum.

G. Tucci and W. Heissig³² speak of Mongolian shamans' staffs, and so do Professor Stein and Mircea Eliade.

"The second important emblem of the shamans is the percussion staff, or as one often calls it, the shaman's scepter... The function of this staff is to enable the shaman to travel to the imaginary place where the combat with the demons must take place."

THE PSYCHOPOMP HORSE IN INDIA

In the *Katha Upanishad*,³³ the young Brahman Naciketas questions Yama, the king of the Dead. He asks him to instruct him in the use of the fire "that leads to the heavens", and is seen as the a preliminary stage in the teaching on the *atman*. Yama does him this favor and also promises that this fire will carry the name of Naciketas.

After having given an account of the two *atman* (souls), the individual or migrating soul and the transcendental or absolute soul (which will be touched on again later), Yama answers:

"2 - May we realize the Naciketas (fire), which for the performers of sacrifice is the bridge to the Supreme Brahman, imperishable, for those who wish to pass to the other secure bank!

3 - Know that the *atman* is the master of the chariot, that the body is the chariot itself, that reason is the coachman and that thoughts are the reins.

4 - Senses are the horses, one says, and the objects of the senses are their vocations. The agents call the agents of pleasure that which is equipped with a soul, sensibility and the capacity for thought.

5 - He who lacks knowledge, and whose thinking is never harnessed, is not given to understand meanings. He is as a bad horse is to its driver.

6 - He who has knowledge, and whose thinking is always harnessed, is given to understand meanings. He is as a good horse is to its driver.

Plato's myth of the winged chariot that Mircea Elidae compares and relates to this Upanishad again associates the horse with the liberated soul on its way to the world beyond.

Quoting Verrier Elwin:³⁴ "We remind that several aboriginal Indian populations represent their dead on horseback: the Bhil for example, or the Korku who engrave equestrian figures on wooden tablets that they place in tombs. Among the Muria, funerary activities are accompanied by the singing of ritual chants which tell of the arrival of the deceased in the world beyond on horseback."

James Frazer³⁵ provides the following details about the Bhil: "These primitive people of

Central India believe that a horse, even just one of clay, is the best means of conveyance for the transportation of a human soul to the heavens. It is said that they erect likenesses of horses made of terracotta on the summits of hills and arrange them in rows on platforms. An English surgeon who asked what the reason for this custom was received the following explanation: "The heavens are believed to be not very distant from earth, but the souls of the dead must get there traveling along a very perilous and arduous path. The journey can at least to some extent be made easier by the placement of horses on hilltops, that will lessen the distance, remind the gods of the things that have already been accomplished, and they will serve as steeds for the souls in their travels towards eternal bliss." The surgeon added that the less affluent Bhil made hollow clay effigies with an opening in the back through which the spirit might enter. A clever Bhil individual could thus considerably shorten his posthumous voyage. Both men and women observed this custom."

This representation is less sophisticated than that described by Yama but is situated in a more popular context in which the miraculous has a certain place. Auguste Louis A. Loiseleur Deslongchamps³⁶ noted the interest the Indians had in the magical horse and in the idea of being able to move from one place to another with the help of this magic.

It remains to be ascertained what exactly the author meant by "magic". At the time it was a catch-all term, like sorcery, that evoked the supernatural. The word shamanism was not in the language at the time.

The influences of Central Asian traditions on the Indian context are difficult to identify, but they are very probably not negligible. While one can assume they exist, it is on the other hand impossible to know whether they were of Buryat, Mongol or other origins.

Louis Frédéric³⁷ states that when horses were used at the beginning of the first millennium of our era in the Indian cavalry, the grooms and hostlers were often of Central Asian origin and wore the traditional garments of their cultures.

He identifies this period as being Kushan (105-375AD). However, the first Ashvashastra treatises on horses³⁸ indicate a date of the third century BC.

Prior to that, the horse is very seldom seen in Indian iconography. S.P. Gupta³⁹ observes that only the abacus of Sarnath features a representation of one, and that its style suggests

a foreign influence.

This corresponds to the period during which the Ashvamedha, or "horse sacrifice", began to be practiced, since the first ruler to perform the ritual was Pushyamitra Shunga.⁴⁰

In his section of his work on "The Horse", Angelo de Gubernatis⁴¹ likens the Dioscuri to the Ashvins. The similarity is also noted by Louis Frédéric.⁴² The Ashvin are divine twins. They were born of horses and are horses themselves, responsible for pulling Indra's chariot. We will see further on that on certain *phurbu*, they are atop the vajra, the attribute of Indra, and that during the Indra Jatra festivities among the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, Indra collects the souls of the year's deceased along with his mother the Great Goddess to take them to their paradise.⁴³ The translation by Louis Renou⁴⁴ of the eighty-two hymns devoted to Indra repeatedly mentions his "two chestnut horses with manes".

The horse is also present in Indian Buddhism. Balāha,⁴⁵ an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara in the form of a horse, saves a group of shipwrecked castaways from certain death on an island inhabited by female demons. He is described as having flown through the air to accomplish this feat in the Jākata tales. In Tibet, his mantra is used as a greeting by his devotees.

THE PSYCHOPOMP HORSE IN THE ZHANG ZHUNG REGION (Pakistan, Kalash, Ladakh, and Western Nepal)

In Western Tibet, there was once a kingdom with vaguely defined borders that included Mount Kaliasa and Lake Manasarowara. Ladakh must have been a part of it as well, and it may also have included Mustang, now in Nepal, in its eastern extension. This kingdom submitted to the Tibetans in 645.⁴⁶

It is also in this area that the Bon-po religion originated, or at least where it left the most traces.

As Professor Rolf A. Stein has noted, the contacts the area had had with India, by way of Nepal, Kashmir or Ladakh, were obvious.

G. Tucci and W. Heissing⁴⁷ maintain that it extended as far as Western Tibet. The very

fragmented aspect of the kingdom lead them to assert that eight primary languages and twenty-four secondary languages were in use there. They also describe Shaivist and Iranian influences.

The study of the region, which is an incredible mosaic of multiple influences, is a very complex subject.

G. Tucci and W. Heissing⁴⁸ find very old influences there with populations being influenced by Iran in contacts that according to them occurred as a result of nomadic activity by shepherds and commercial trade relationships through Badakhshan, Gilgit, Ladakh or Western Nepal.

It is moreover probably through this kingdom that the horses from Central Asia that we observed in India got there. The impact on local populations has definitely left marks.

At the time of the conquest,⁴⁹ contact with the beyond was achieved by means of the *mu* rope. But in the course of the death of King Digum, who was killed by the chief of the guardians of the horses of Logam (in the Tsang area), it happened that during the magic struggle, the king cut the rope, and that disrupted the funerary rituals. It is undoubtedly not a trivial detail that the perpetrator of the murder was the guardian of the horses. In order to remedy the situation, the local Bon-po enlisted the help of foreign Bon-po. There was among them⁵⁰ a Kashmiri who was able to fly while straddling his drum. In Siberia and in Central Asia in particular, the drum is regularly equated with the horse.

Marcelle Lalou,⁵¹ basing herself on Tibetan manuscripts found at Dunhuang, describes royal funerary rites. She observes that the Bon-po liturgy is particularly bloody and replete with stories of "large quantities of precious animals like battle horses and riding horses, the famous Do-ma yaks and horses and sheep being sacrificed by specialized Bon-po priests."

Basing himself on the same manuscripts, R.A. Stein⁵² studies a number of the Bon-po religion's texts. He devotes a section of his work to "The Origin of the Ritual Function of the Horse".

He notes that all of these stories have to do with death and funerary rites. The horse is one of the animals that has a particularly important place in them.

In the translated texts, one reads:⁵³

"3 - [The specialist of the ritual intervenes]. The *gçenrabs* Myi-bo-dad and *dur-gçen* rMa-dad prepare various ritual objects for funerary rites. The horse rMan-dar [the friend of man] is used as the favorite horse, who shows his courage at the summits and his breadth in the fords."

"I - Happy age [with an inserted story (?) on the funerary horse in the heavens and its function in the rite]."

"IV - New opposition: man versus the horse surmounted by a sworn alliance which creates connections and reciprocal obligations.

In life, man helps the domesticated horse avenge its older brother the wild horse by killing the yak (hunt), but this act provokes its death. In death, the horse helps man through its function in funerary rites." In the following section⁵⁴ titled "Precedents to the Funerary Ritual" we read:

"3 - The father of the deceased entrusts (the horses or the deceased?) to the ritual sheep... The two horses will have to cross the summits and the fords *together* with the sheep that will guide them. The dead hero and the two horses, these three, will be together, united, in agreement, and will, guided by the sheep, go above the nine levels of the sky. The Bon-po chant and exhort them - they must remain united and stay together, master (the deceased) and servants (the horses) will see to it."

In other publications, Professor Rolf A. Stein⁵⁵ makes certain points: "In China as elsewhere in the Far East, the soul (*bla*) can leave the body and wander about (*bla khyams-pa*) as a result for instance, of a terrible scare..."

Then, with regards to the soul's return, he says: "This movement is in accord with the wish expressed by the "horse of the wind (breath)". Then returning to the text cited above,⁵⁶ he provides an interesting detail concerning the ancient Bon rites in the Dunhuang manuscripts: "These rites were partly opposed and partly assimilated by the Buddhists beginning in the Dunhuang period. They include chanted stories and offerings. They make reference to psychopomp animals, especially a sheep, a horse and a yak. These creatures were undoubtedly sacrificed. They assisted the deceased in his passage along the difficult paths the dead had to take to reach the "Land of joy".

This Zhang Zhung region, which straddles and crosses a number of borders, is even

more problematic and raises even more unanswered questions than the other Himalayan regions.

It has some very ancient archaeological sites that have been very little studied.

The most noteworthy of these are the megalithic alignments of Do Ring that Georges de Roerich⁵⁷ made rubbings of, but where he was not able to continue excavating the tombs surrounding them due to opposition he faced from local inhabitants. Apparently no new research has been undertaken on this site since then. The alignment terminates with an ensemble of erected stones with a design is identical to the drawing of the *phurbu*.⁵⁸ Since this region was the heartland of the Bon religion, one might suppose there could have been some pre-Buddhist function or use for this ritual object. A complete study of the site that would enable a more accurate dating of its creation could cause one to reconsider this sequence of events.

An enigma nonetheless remains: how can such an important site exist in such a sparsely populated area? Movements and displacements of populations undoubtedly took place caused by political or climatic problems and changes.

The funerary site in the Pir Panjal mountain range, with its numerous stone equestrian figures is only now beginning to be seriously studied by a Russo-Indian research team under the direction of Professor Vyacheslav Molodin.

The importance of this site, with its nipple-shaped basins and spillways, horses with elaborately decorated riders, both bedecked in sumptuous ornaments, is very obvious. Its location near areas that are politically sensitive and militarily protected is part of the reason that in-depth archaeological research has taken so long to get underway.

The Kalash and the Kafir of the Hindu Kush inhabit the area west of the Gilgit, which G. Tucci and W. Heissing consider a zone of influence for Zhang Zhung.

Their location near the Khyber Pass, over which numerous invasions took place, and their practice of traditions that are atypical for the environment, seem to confirm that they have a different origin.

It was believed that their morphology suggested Greek origins, and that they might be descendants of Alexander's troops. However, an Iranian origin now appears more likely.

Jean-Yves Loude⁵⁹ writes: "Just like the Aryan gods, the Kailash and Kafir divinities rode horses, and local sculptors rendered their equestrian activities in their representations of

them. This association of the god with the horse, and the correspondences that exist between the religious terms of the Kalish and Kafir and Sanskrit, led Professor Morgenstierne to consider "the decadent paganism of the Kafir tribes as the only vestige of an ancient Aryan religion not affected by a literary tradition", that thus did not include a Brahman theological component." It is indeed curious to observe what great importance the horse had in their traditions given the fact that it was not very present in their daily lives.

The altar of Mahendeo is represented decorated with four horse heads.

Jean-Yves Loude⁶⁰ states: "One of their gods is moreover Mahendeo, which means "Great God", and is derived from the Sanskrit root Mahadeva. The title Mahadeva is used to designate Shiva. He is considered a prophet, an intermediary with access to the highest divinity." The great primordial shaman in Nepal is also called Mahendeo or Mahedeo in Nepal.

A statue at the Peshawar Museum, commissioned by the family of Mahamarut eleven months after his death, renders him seated on a mount with two heads and six legs⁶¹ (drawing page 11).

In another publication,⁶² the authors tell of two events during which the horse intercedes and functions as a psychopomp animal.

"Banguta, *dehar*, fell ill. It was a long illness. One night, his condition worsened and the fairies of Parlar took him away (his soul) on a white horse to the summit of the white mountain. There Banguta beheld the spectacle of all of the souls of the dead that lived in golden houses - similar to Kalash houses, but of gold. There the fairies admitted to Banguta that there had been a mistake. It was not his time to die after all, but rather it was Tamin's. They went back to get (the soul of) Tamin, who was not suffering from any illness. They brought back Tamin's soul on a horse, and Tamin died six days later. Banguta's soul was able to get back to its body, which healed. It was he who revealed the existence of the golden houses, the abodes of the souls, to the Kalash."

Kasi Khoshnawas told them of another event: "My father was ill. His

older brother on the other hand was in perfect health. I wanted to perform a sacrifice for my father's health on the roof of our house, and I went to the valley of Sanduriga to get a goat from our stable. I left accompanied by a member of my lineage. On our way home, when we had almost arrived in Balanguru, we saw my father's older brother on horseback, wearing a white turban and a ceremonial robe, and he laughed as he passed us. Yet when we got home, we found him there, and he claimed not to have moved. His ceremonial robe had stayed at the same place. We sacrificed the goat and ate its meat when suddenly my father's brother began to complain of stomach pains which intensified rapidly. Less than an hour after the meal, he died. It was his departing soul that we had met up with."

The mention of this time gap between the vision of a person on horseback and his death is recurrent in the texts.

THE PSYCHOPOMP HORSE IN NEPAL

In the Himalayan zone, poles flying prayer flags are everywhere. They are printed with the *lungta*, the "horse of the wind", and they are used to address prayers to the gods with the aim of helping the souls of the deceased find their way to the next world beyond. They actually cause serious ecological problems in Bhutan, since a great deal of deforestation is involved in putting them up.

A case among many of the presence of horses in rituals that seems of particular interest to us is that of the Kuswar, a caste of boatmen that live along the river banks at moderate altitudes in the Himalayan valleys.

In his study on this group, Corneille Jest⁶³ mentions their divinity Mahadev, the "Great Divinity", whose name is of course also noted among the Kalash.

On the third day of the ritual, the divinity *bote* comes into play. *Bote* is the servant of the souls of the dead and he is on horseback. A pole must be erected.

"Let us get the pole, it is bent in one direction, or in the other, but the pole must be really straight; wood must be cut to make the horse (of the divinity *bote*), but *amala* wood will make the horse crazy."

The nature of this wood is important because: "It is said in Chaitali that on a ceremonial

day at the end of a mourning period a man mounted a horse made of *amala* wood left the village going in the direction of the river and never returned." *Bote's* horse is moreover sculpted with a piece of wood at its extremity that has the shape of a horse's head, which the incarnation of *bote* mounts.

This wooden horse will later be thrown in the river along with other offerings.

In Nepal, there are a variety of psychopomp animals. In our 2007 exhibition on shamanism,⁶⁴ we presented birds used by the Gurung in their funerary rites. At the time, we had information that we were not able to verify until later as a result of the discovery of films and photographs.

Among the Thakali, the *drom*, master of ceremonies for the ritual devoted to the ancestors of the clan, holds a bird, the *drom's* protective divinity,⁶⁵ in his hand.

Corneille Jest believes that the *drom* practices as a whole represent pre-Buddhist Bon-po concepts.

In two different contexts, the bird and the horse, sometimes associated with the sun, have the same function.

Louis Frédéric⁶⁶ writes: "Tarrkshya, the "son of movement", an ancient divinity that personified the sun in the form of a horse or a bird. This name was later given to Garuda."

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec and Bernard Sergent⁶⁷ complete the information about the sun with: "[...] the following is also a psychopomp (in the first sense of the word) among several peoples: the sun, which sets in the west every day, the direction in which the land of the dead is most often said to be [...]."

All of the preceding elements make us think that this *phurbu* surmounted by one or more equestrian figures is a psychopomp object used in funerary rituals. The term *phurbu* is probably not appropriate as a designation for this object within this ritual context. Indeed, whether for the Sanskrit *kila* or the Tibetan *phurbu*, the notion connected with it is that of fixation: stabilizing or nailing down maleficent forces. The psychopomp dagger that is the subject of this article is on the contrary associated with liberation, and the departure to the world beyond. Since a more precise and better adapted term is lacking, we will retain and use this one, but with the reservations just mentioned.

At our 2007 exhibition on shamanism,⁶⁸ another hypothesis was advanced, based on information provided by a Nepalese dealer named Dawa Gyeltsen. According to this hypothesis, this type of piece would have been of Sherpa origin and carried in baggage as a talisman. Information obtained from this kind of source has since proved to be either of limited value, or wholly inaccurate.

Other Nepalese sources confirm the interpretation of psychopomp objects, without however supplying concrete elements for the moment: it is photographs and films that attest irrefutably to this interpretation. We hope that, like for the Gurung birds, this gap in our knowledge will be filled in the near future.

A certain number of elements connected with *phurbu* iconography are worthy of analysis. The lower structure of this psychopomp *phurbu* is in the majority of case identical to the traditional one used by the shamans. The *makara* surmounting a triangular blade decorated with various ritual objects, and snakes, connects them with the Tamang, even though we now know that the Gurung, some Chepang, and the Sunuwar⁶⁹ also use them. One must mention the Nepalese migrations to Sikkim and Bhutan where the shamans, who elude these classifications, still use objects of this kind, like those in the collections of the Saint Maurice monastery in Switzerland.

THE MULTI-LEGGED HORSE

As we can observe on the drawing above of the Kalash funerary sculpture at the Peshawar Museum, the two horses together have only six legs.

This anomaly in the number of legs is very often associated with the horses of the infernal world. It is also seen in many cultures, and often very early in their development, suggesting that these representations are part of a very archaic tradition.

In Nordic mythology, Sleipnir⁷⁰ is a legendary horse with eight legs. It has often been related to shamanic practices and its psychopomp role is known and recognized.

In the folklore of Denmark and Schleswig, it is a three-legged horse called Helhest⁷¹ that is associated with the kingdom of the dead. It is the "horse of hell" or the "horse of the

goddess of hell."

This ghost horse is ridden by Death, announcing illness, accident, and especially death. Seeing it or hearing the sound of its hooves is not fatal, but it also has a psychopomp function.

In the Kyrgyz epic of Et-Töshtük,⁷² his horse Tchal-Kouyrouk helps him find his soul in the subterranean world. The horse's psychopomp role is obvious, and its powers are superior to those of man.

Among the Yakut, Niourgoun, the celestial warrior, confronts the same challenges.

THE HORSE WITH MULTIPLE RIDERS

The number of riders can vary. It can be one, two, or up to four. The single rider does not present any particular problem of interpretation.

The two horsemen remind us that in the Katha Upanishad referenced above, mention is made of two *atman* (souls), the individual or migrating soul, and the transcendental or absolute soul. It may be that these two horsemen represent these two souls of the deceased.

In that case, one would consider the horses to be the Ashvins, Indra's horses that carry the two souls of the deceased.

The four horsemen on the *phurbu* being examined here are rendered in back to back pairs.

Here we are no longer in the above context of the Katha Upanishad with two souls.

We have had occasion in this article to make a certain number of references to Greek culture. Should we thus further refer to what Aristotle wrote in *On the Soul*, in which he describes it as being constituted of a varying number of principles? The dissemination of this interpretation, which is moreover not necessarily of Greek origin, could justify this representation.

And that could connect with what Brigitte Steinmann⁷³ wrote about the funerary ceremonies of the Eastern Tamang: "This theory is very influenced by that of

the bompo (the Tamang equivalent of the Nepalese jhankri), who believe that there are between seven and nine vital principles in various locations: the head, the hands, the feet, the lock of hair at the top of the head, the chest, the lower back, the mat the bompo is sitting on when he enters into a trance, and the kilkhor (the wheel of the universe drawn by the lamas during the gewa). The lamas, as we have already noted, repudiate the idea that there could be more than one soul in the body, but in the case of illness, their behavior manifestly reveals that they hold beliefs that have nothing to do with Buddhism. Indeed, like the bompa, the lamas manufacture the same effigies of demons which are supposed to seize on of the sick individual's "souls".

In an article by Clément Jacquemoud⁷⁴ on the "Lady of Ice" of the Altai, he mentions several entities ("souls") that reside in the body of a being.

The horsemen of the Pir Panjal site may also number as many as four. The site dates to about 3000 years ago. That takes us back to approximately the era of Aristotle. That is obviously not a proof - but an interesting observation nonetheless.

THE POSITION OF THE RIDER'S LEGS

Some horsemen have their legs very far back along the horse, and hugging its rump. The position they are in is not actually practicable.

It is undoubtedly correct to consider these riders representations of the dead. The other world being seen as the opposite of the present in life, the dishes and weapons are often broken in the tombs so that they will be intact in the next world, and useful to the deceased.

THE BASES OF HORSES WITH SEVERAL MASKS

Horsemen on the summits of these objects are on a rectangular base that is generally sculpted with faces or masks. This brings to mind something Corneille

Jest⁷⁵ wrote in his article on the Pa-la festival at Chim, in the Kali Gandaki River valley.

"One day, two black yaks got lost on the slopes of the Nilgiri. After having wandered for twelve years, they were found by shepherds and began to talk. We will return to the village of Chim they said, on the condition that the people there celebrate with a festival, presenting the protective birds of the divinities to all and dancing in front of the masks of the ancestors. The villagers paid no heed to their words and the yaks died. They were then recognized as the protectors of the village and venerated every year in the middle of summer." The masks of the ancestors were taken out during this ceremony and their descendants came to prostrate themselves before them.

It is very probable that the sculptures seen on this base are of the same nature, and represent the deceased for whom the ritual is being performed.

THE PROBLEM OF LOCALIZATION

Stylistically, the broad-necked horses, some of the figures with turbans, certain decorative elements like the rosettes seen on the statues of Pir Panjal, all tend to point to an extreme Western Nepalese origin, very probably in the area where the Zhang Zhung Empire was located.

The Khyber Pass on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan represents a place of passage through which important invasions passed, and we find evidence of extremely original traditions in a geographical arc from west to east.

The Kafir and the Kalash first of all, a bit north of the pass, the Pir Panjal funerary site with its hundreds of stone equestrian figures, the Dard tribes of Ladakh whose traditions are very similar to those of the Kafir and the Kalash, with whom they apparently share their Aryan origins, the megalithic alignment of Do Ring, the wooden sculptures of Byash in the extreme northwest of Nepal, are all elements which make us think that they greatly influenced this type of psychopomp *phurbu* and that the source of the use of the object can be identified as being this area.

Historical and stylistic comparisons and considerations lead us to this conclusion.

Henri Stierlin⁷⁶ makes the same observation but with a different approach: "It is indeed over land, by way of the Khyber summit connecting Kabul with Begram and Taxila that the influence of Greek statuary came through."

He also writes: "It was around 30AD when a tribal chief founded the kingdom of Kushan in the area that is now Kabul. A century later, the Kushan formed an empire that included Oxus and the Hindu Kush and extended as far as Taxila, and Mathura in India. The Kushan sites investigated by Daniel Schlumberger reveal an art that glorified the princes in the dynastic sanctuaries (Surkh-Kotal) and blended influences from Buddhism, some features of the arts of the steppes, and Hellenistic traditions of Antiquity."

Kathmandu became the hub for the trade in antiquities throughout the Himalayan region very early on. Objects from Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunchal Pradesh, Ladakh, Bihar and Bengal all converged on the Kathmandu Valley.

And these objects all eventually lost their origins and became Nepalese objects. Few in situ studies having been done on their uses, the tasks of trying to reconstruct how they were used and their precise functions or localizations are real detective work.

Moreover, the ethnic groups in the mountainous areas do not care about political borders, and pay very little attention to them.

Marc Gaborieau⁷⁷ noted that the Tamang and the Gurung are closely related to the Tibetans, that they are in direct contact with them, and that when they are in need of prestigious models they turn to the lamas of Tibet. This would imply that the psychopomp *phurbu* was widespread in the entire region.

NOTES

¹ Quotation that accompanies texts by Marcel Otte, and that complements the quotations that open the Toit du Monde newsletter #25 of March 2018.

² *Le Ramayana de Valmiki*, translation by Madeleine Biardeau and Marie-Claude Porcher, La Pléiade, 1999. *The Ramayana as told by the Rajbanchi masks*, text by François Pannier, ARCH, 2017.

³ *La Mythologie celtique*, Yann Brekilien, éditions du Rocher, 2007, page 342.

⁴ Quoted by Giraldus Cambrensis.

⁵ *La Mythologie celtique*, Yann Brekilien, éd. du Rocher, 2007, p. 63.

⁶ Ibidem, page 234.

⁷ Ibidem, page 233.

⁸ *La Mythologie du monde celte*, Claude Sterckx, Poche Mara- bout, 2009, pages 98-101.

⁹ Lettre du Toit du Monde, numéro 25, mars 2018, « Les masques champignons du Népal ». Lettre du Toit du Monde, numéro 26, septembre 2018, « Les phurbu occidentaux ».

¹⁰ *Cultes, mythes et religions*, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1996, p.298.

¹¹ *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Mircea Eliade, Bibliothèque historique Payot, 1968, page 364.

¹² Le Dictionnaire critique de la mythologie, CNRS éditions, 2017, page 1088.

¹³ *L'Héroïsation équestre*, Fernand Benoit, publication des Annales de la Faculté des lettres, Aix-en-Provence, éditions Ophrys, 1954, p.19.

¹⁴ *Mythologie zoologique ou Les légendes animales*, Angelo de Gubernatis, Arche, 1987, réédition de A. Durand et Pedone Lauriel éditeurs, 1874, page 314.

¹⁵ Encyclopédie grecque de la fin du Xe siècle.

¹⁶ Ibidem, page 62.

¹⁷ Ibidem, page 135.

¹⁸ Ibidem, page 136.

¹⁹ *Der Stier in Kult und mythischen*, Ludolf Malten, 1928.

²⁰ *Dionysos, histoire du culte de Bacchus*, Henri Jeanmaire, Payot, 1951, page 282.

²¹ Ibidem, page 284.

²² *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Mircea Eliade, Bibliothèque historique Payot, 1968, page, page 366.

- ²³ Les Représentations religieuses des peuples altaïques, Umo Harva, NRF Gallimard, 1959, pages 211-212.
- ²⁴ *Chamane : Kyss, jeune fille des glaces*, sous la direction d'Éric Crubézy, éditions Errance, 2007, page 38.
- ²⁵ Ibidem, page 87.
- ²⁶ La Mort chez les peuples althaïques anciens et médiévaux d'après les documents écrits, éditions Maisonneuve, Paris, 1963, p. 215.
- ²⁷ *Dictionnaire des symboles*, J. Chevalier et A. Gheerbrant, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1969, page 224.
- ²⁸ *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Mircea Eliade, Bibliothèque historique Payot, 1968, page 160.
- ²⁹ *Le Cheval dans le rituel funéraire des Altaïens du Sud*, Études mongoles et sibériennes, centre asiatiques et tibétaines, n°41, 2010, traduction de Carole Ferret.
- ³⁰ *Les Missionnaires anglais (1818-1840) dans le voyage en Asie centrale et au Tibet*, Michel Jan, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1992, rubrique « La Mongolie », page 1081.
- ³¹ Ibidem, page 1079.
- ³² Les Religions du Tibet et de la Mongolie, Payot 1973, page 371.
- ³³ *Les Upanishad*, traduction de Louis Renou, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien-Maisonneuve, 2006.
- ³⁴ *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Mircea Eliade, Bibliothèque historique Payot 1968, page 364.
- ³⁵ *La Crainte des morts*, Émile Nourry éditeur, Paris 1934, page 239.
- ³⁶ Essai sur les fables indiennes (Of Bidpaï and Sindibâd) et sur leur introduction en Europe, Techener Libraire, 1838, pages 35-36.
- ³⁷ *Dictionnaire de la civilisation indienne*, Louis Frédéric, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1987, page 284.
- ³⁸ Ibidem, page 129
- ³⁹ *Les Racines de l'art indien*, art et architecture de l'Inde maurya et post-maurya (IIIe et IIe siècles av. J.C.), CNRS éd., 1990, p.80.
- ⁴⁰ Ibidem, page 129.
- ⁴¹ *Mythologie zoologique ou les légendes animales*, Angelo de Gubernatis, Arche, 1987, réédition de A. Durand et Pedone Lauer Editeurs, 1874, page 306.
- ⁴² *Dictionnaire de la civilisation indienne*, Louis Frédéric, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1987, page 130.
- ⁴³ Lettre du Toit du Monde, numéro 6, « Sur le Dieu-masques dans les grandes Dionysies grecques et Indra Jatra », F.Pannier.

- ⁴⁴ *Études védiques et pâninéennes*, publications de l'Institut de civilisation indienne, série in-8° fascicule 30, 1969.
- ⁴⁵ Ibidem, page 160.
- ⁴⁶ *La Civilisation tibétaine*, Rolf A. Stein, Le Sycomore, L'Asiathèque, 1981, page 37.
- ⁴⁷ *Les Religions du Tibet et de la Mongolie*, Payot, 1973, p.272.
- ⁴⁸ Ibidem, page 313.
- ⁴⁹ *La Civilisation tibétaine*, Rolf A. Stein, Le Sycomore, L'Asiathèque, 1981, page 201.
- ⁵⁰ Ibidem, page 202.
- ⁵¹ *Les Religions du Tibet*, PUF, 1957.
- ⁵² *Études tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, Adrien Maisonneuve, 1971, page 485 et suivantes.
- ⁵³ Ibidem, page 490.
- ⁵⁴ Ibidem, page 491.
- ⁵⁵ *La Civilisation tibétaine*, Rolf A. Stein, Le Sycomore, L'Asiathèque, 1981, page 198.
- ⁵⁶ Ibidem, page 206.
- ⁵⁷ *Sur les pistes de l'Asie centrale*, Georges de Roerich, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1933.
- ⁵⁸ « *Phurbu : une hypothèse sur ses origines* », François Pan- nier, page 159, in *Art chamanique népalais*, éd. Galerie Le Toit du Monde, 2007.
- ⁵⁹ « *Kalash : les derniers "infidèles" de l'Hindu-Kush* », Jean- Yves Loude, in *Espace des hommes*, Berger-Levrault, 1980.
- ⁶⁰ Ibidem, page 46.
- ⁶¹ Ibidem, page 28.
- ⁶² *Le Chamanisme des Kalash du Pakistan, des montagnards polythéistes face à l'Islam*, par Viviane Lièvre et Jean-Yves Loude, avec la collaboration d'Hervé Nègre, Musée des Confluences, 2018, page 259.
- ⁶³ « *Le Tambour à deux voix* » ou le monde à l'envers : cérémonie de fin de deuil chez les Kuswar du Népal, coll. Eurasie, L'Harmattan.
- ⁶⁴ *Art chamanique népalais*, éd. Galerie Le Toit du Monde, p. 101.
- ⁶⁵ *Objets et mondes, tome IX, fascicule 1*, Corneille Jest, printemps 1969, page 64.
- ⁶⁶ *Dictionnaire de la civilisation indienne*, Bouquins Robert Laffont, 1987, page 1058.
- ⁶⁷ *Dictionnaire critique de la mythologie*, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec et Bernard Sergent, CNRS éditions, 2017, page 1088.

⁶⁸ « *Dagues rituelles des lamas et chamans* », Jean-Christophe Kovacs, in *Art chamanique népalais*, édition Galerie Le Toit du monde, page 30.

⁶⁹ « *Note préliminaire sur les Poembo de Suri (Népal)* », page 239, in *L'Ethnographie, voyage chamanique*, CXVIII année, tome LXXIII, Société d'ethnographie.

⁷⁰ The saga of Hervor and King Heidrekr.

⁷¹ Mentioned by Jacob Grimm in his *Mythologie Teutonne*, 1883, page 844.

⁷² *Aventures merveilleuses sous terre et ailleurs de Er-Töshtük, le géant des steppes*, Coll. Causase, NRF Gallimard.

⁷³ « La cérémonie funéraire chez les Tamang de l'Est » in *BEFEO*, tome 76, 1987, page 265.

⁷⁴ « *Le retour de la "Dame des glaces"* » in *Arts & Culture du Musée Barbier Mueller*, 2019, page 96.

⁷⁵ *La Revue du musée de l'Homme*, tome XIV, fascicule 4, hiver 1974, page 303.

⁷⁶ *L'Orient grec : l'art hellénistique et romain d'Alexandre à Dioclétien*, Imprimerie nationale édition, 2008, page 293.

⁷⁷ *Le Népal, une introduction à la connaissance du monde népalais*, éditions Kailash, 1995, page 133.