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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Humors and Substances. Ideas of the Body in New Guinea by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

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l'intérêt, notamment du point de vue méthodologique. Les tâtonnements initiaux de l'ethnologue, mais aussi des autochtones dans leur volonté de donner du sens à la présence de l'observateur et de lui conférer un statut "honorable" dans leur communauté (finallement celui de "soeur aînée"), autant de préalables nécessaires à la conduite de la recherche, sont ici exprimés de manière remarquable dans le premier chapitre de l'ouvrage.

Si B. Steinmann s'autorise une grande liberté de ton, si elle a opté dans ce livre, comme elle le dit (34), pour un "entre-deux-temps", à mi-chemin du "vivre ensemble" et de la "vision à distance", c'est qu'elle a déjà produit une importante oeuvre scientifique relative aux Tamang du Népal oriental, plus académique mais de qualité, qui en fait l'une des meilleures spécialistes de cette population tibéto-birmane. On pense notamment à son ouvrage "Les Tamangs du Népal. Usages et religion, religion de l'usage", paru en 1987. Par rapport à ce livre, la présente étude constitue néanmoins une notable avancée. Elle y aborde en effet, par de multiples petites touches, les rapports très complexes qu'entretiennent ces "opérateurs" essentiels de la santé, de l'ordre social et du rapport avec les ancêtres comme avec les dieux que sont le *tamba*, le lama et le *ponpo*.

Au lieu de postuler le cloisonnement des champs d'action de ces spécialistes, ou leur simple superposition, B. Steinmann s'ingénie à montrer que leurs activités se réalisent, selon le principe d'une complémentarité tacite, au sein de ce qu'elle choisit d'appeler le "triangle bouddhique" (160). Certes ces officiants agissent rarement de concert, en coopération directe. Entre-eux l'évitement est plutôt de mise. Néanmoins leurs pratiques sont étroitement imbriquées. L'auteur fait ainsi remarquer que le *tamba* et le lama fondent tous deux leurs actions sur la connaissance des textes bouddhiques tibétains, que le lama et le chamane peuvent pratiquer les rites de rappel de l'âme, que le *tamba* se fait dans certaines circonstances le relais de la parole du moine ou du chamane; que le lama agit dans le sens de la dissolution du corps du défunt lors des rites funéraires dont il est l'officiant principal, alors qu'à l'inverse les chamanes passent leur temps à refaire l'intégrité spirituelle des corps, et ainsi de suite.

Toujours au registre de la religion bouddhique, dont l'implantation est ancienne parmi les Tamang, au point qu'ils font de l'adhésion à la doctrine de l'Illuminate le référent primordial de leur identité (ne se disent-ils pas dans leur mythe d'origine fils de la Démone des rochers et du Bouddha de la Compassion, Avalokiteśvara, apparu sous les traits d'un singe!), B. Steinmann réfléchit sur le statut et l'usage des textes, d'origine tibétaine ou indienne, qu'utilisent les trois spécialistes précités. Là aussi, par rapport à l'ethnologie classique qui privilégie les éléments de tradition orale, son étude fait preuve d'originalité. Sans négliger les chants du *tamba*, ou les litanies et formules chamaniques dont elle fournit au fil des pages un large corpus, l'auteur traduit de longs passages des textes d'exorcisme *nyingmapa* que possèdent les lama et qu'ils tiennent d'ordinaire secrets, ou encore du *kukpa khachjoi*, "enseignement

pour les esprits stupides", un recueil d'explications sur les coutumes destiné aux laïcs et aux célébrants de divers rites, que ces mêmes lama se transmettent d'une génération à l'autre.

Si l'on ajoute aux différents aspects qui viennent d'être évoqués, d'intéressants propos sur les stratégies matrimoniales, les registres de pollution (partie II, chap. 3) ou la manière dont les Tamang conçoivent la folie (partie III, chap. 2), ainsi qu'une description détaillée de l'initiation chamanique (partie III, chap. 1), on comprendra que ce livre soit vivement recommandé à toutes les personnes intéressées par les populations tibéto-birmanes du Népal et plus largement de l'aire himalayenne. Bien que l'auteur verse peu dans le genre, et c'est là le principal reproche que l'on puisse lui adresser, ce travail peut contribuer à de fécondes comparaisons au sein d'une telle aire. Enfin, la qualité littéraire de l'étude mérite d'être soulignée. Il y a quelque part de l'Alexandra David-Neel ou du Lanza del Vasto dans ce livre, deux aventuriers dont les écrits ont fasciné l'auteur au cours de sa jeunesse et dont elle ne renierait sans doute pas l'influence.

B. Formoso

**Stewart, Pamela J., and Andrew Strathern:** *Humors and Substances. Ideas of the Body in New Guinea*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 2001. 156 pp. ISBN 0-89789-762-5. Price: £ 41.95

Many recent anthropological writings about New Guinea cultural systems analyze the body as a primary metaphor used to express social realities. In that sense, "Humors and Substances" is no different from earlier works; what makes this book distinctive is the mode of analysis that the authors have chosen for dealing with these cultural ideas about the body. Rather than seeing the body as simply a "register of cultural values" (vii), P. Stewart and A. Strathern analyze bodily substances as "transmissible and transposable signs of persons in exchange with one another" (2). This line of analysis runs through the eight chapters that constitute the book, of which two have been written by scholars working in the Bird's Head region of what is now West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya).

P. Stewart and A. Strathern make a distinction between humors and substances. Humors designate "a core of notions on which concepts of personhood are built" (4), while substances form a wider universe of ideas into which these notions are embedded. Chapter 1, which serves as an introduction, details these two notions and shows in diverse New Guinea social contexts how bodies and the environment are interconnected. In many instances, bodily substances are equated with plants (like blood with red pandanus juice or semen with a particular tree sap), while in others the same humor is said to be present in humans, animals, plants, and the earth. So there is consubstantiality between persons and the world they live in, which is expressed primarily through the acts of growing, sharing, and consuming food. The authors also stress the multiple, and sometimes at first sight contradictory, realities of which bodies are a part:

they can “embody both individuality and relationality,” they are “both particular and general . . . distinct from and yet part of the environment” (8), and so on. Bodily substances are also used to express aspects of personality and knowledge. In short, in their introduction, P. Stewart and A. Strathern give an overview of the New Guinea cultural contexts in which the body plays a role.

The next two chapters are devoted to two groups living in the Bird’s Head region: Chapter 2, written by D. van Oosterhout, is a highly detailed account of the ideas about the body found in Inanwatan, provided mainly through a discussion of witchcraft. Particular emphasis is placed on scent, which can be considered as an “objectification of relations,” and to sweat, which is a “(fluid) visualization of scent.” A foul scent expresses disturbed relations or immoral conduct and is quite an accurate indicator of truth since scent “gives a person away” (37). The chapter also contains an interesting discussion of the skin as “a mirror of the inner body, a medium that makes a hidden dimension visible” (34). Skin and scent are thus in Inanwatan two bodily aspects that convey information about the moral state of the person.

It is through the analysis of a clanic healing ritual that Ien Courtens (chapter 3) gives access to the ideas about the body in West Ayfat society of the same area of West Papua. There, illness is a form of ancestral punishment, and good health implies good relations with ancestral spirits. What a healing ritual does, then, is to ask forgiveness of the spirits. Blood plays a central role in this process, together with food and sacred cloths.

The remaining chapters include comparative pieces on witchcraft and healing rituals in several societies of New Guinea, plus one located in Southeast Asia (chapter 4), and on ritual practices in the New Guinea Highlands (chapter 5), together with ethnographically focused analyses of the Hagen male Spirit Cult, called Kor Wöp (chapter 6) and of the Hagen notion of *noman* (chapter 7). Chapter 8 concludes with a discussion of common patterns found in New Guinea in the systems of ideas surrounding body humors.

The discussion of witchcraft and ritual curing practices in the two groups of the Bird’s Head region, studied here in the light of Duna, Pangia, and similar Hagen practices, reveal common cultural features, like odor as a marker of social behavior or the skin as the place where the inner emotional and moral state of the person is reflected (nothing really new here, cf., A. Strathern’s paper “Why is shame on the skin?”, in J. Blacking [ed.], “The Anthropology of the Body.” London 1977 or M. O’Hanlon’s book “Reading the Skin: Adornment, Display and Society among the Wahgi.” London 1989). After having analyzed humors and substances in the contexts of illness and death, the authors focus their attention on fertility rituals found in the Highlands (chapter 5). A great deal of the discussion centers around the cult stones used in the Hagen Amb Kor (Female Spirit cult), which are receptacles of fertility powers and are seen as living beings rather than as inert objects.

But before being able to enhance the fertility of the ground by being buried, they must be smeared with red ochre and pig grease, just like human beings are in some ritual occasions. The authors show that stones endowed with the same kind of fertility powers and receiving the same kind of treatment are found elsewhere in New Guinea. This reveals a widely shared cultural pattern in which strong correspondences appear between earthly substances and human bodily substances. In their concluding chapter, P. Stewart and A. Strathern analyze this pattern as a kind of “moral economy of the cosmos, in which the human body features as a central component” (140).

As a piece on the Hagen Kor Wöp (the Male Spirit cult), chapter 6 complements the preceding chapter. After having described this cult, the authors compare some of its features to the Female Spirit cult analyzed earlier, and consider the existing differences as “variations on a set of common themes” (106) all related to procreation, and particularly to female reproductive powers.

Chapter 7 is a very detailed discussion of the Hagen notion of *noman*, which P. Stewart and A. Strathern translate as “mind substance” and which designates conscious as well as unconscious aspects of mind. The analysis of *noman* is based on long interviews of two Hagen men, which are partially reproduced in the chapter and accompanied by a detailed commentary. It appears that the state of a person’s body is a product of interaction with the *noman* and that, over the life-span of the person, this interaction is constantly changing, mainly, it seems, because the “*noman* has to do with understanding the world, with reacting to events, learning from them” (116). How do the authors characterize the body-*noman* interaction? As an “internal communicative relationship . . . , making the body as a whole ‘mindful’” (133). The body is also the mediator of the states of the *noman*, and the bodily substances are not active without people’s intentions, which are of the realm of the *noman*. It is this intertwining of body, mind, and action (“a cosmos of correspondences and influences,” 136) that the authors render by the English expression “mind substance.” Put together with the other papers that A. Strathern has already devoted to the analysis of *noman*, this chapter offers a deep understanding of this complex and rich notion.

On the whole, this a welcome contribution to the existing anthropological works concerned with the body and the person in New Guinea in general; in addition, it provides new ethnographical information on the Hagen, Pangia, and Duna areas on which A. Strathern, first on his own and, more recently, in collaboration with P. Stewart, has already published. One thing I find regrettable, however, is the absence of reference to works published by several contemporary anthropologists, for example on the Duna; this lack is accompanied by a tendency on the part of the authors to refer almost exclusively to their own works. As a consequence, “Humors and Substances” fails to reflect the important role played by dialog with colleagues’ analyses in the construction of our own scientific models. Pascale Bonnemère