Foreword to the translation of ‘The ranking place’ by Samten Karmay and Philippe Sagant

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In 1982, two great researchers, Philippe Sagant and Samten G Karmay, joined forces to pool their knowledge and make further progress in the study of themes dear to them.

Philippe Sagant, a specialist in the ethnology of Himalayan populations, began his career doing fieldwork in eastern Nepal among the Limbu community, and later in central Nepal in Nyishang/Manang. In between times he worked in Tibet among the Sharwas of Amdo, the community from which Samten Karmay originates. In all three regions, he pursued his interest on one particular theme: the survival of ancient beliefs and the way they are experienced in the life of these communities.

In 1981, after his long-term fieldwork among the Limbus, Sagant published his seminal article, 'With head held high: house, ritual and politics in east Nepal.' Through this study of a domestic ritual that allows the head of the household to walk with 'his head held high,' he reflects upon the possible links between this ritual and the political power the heads of households held before the Indianisation of the Limbus. He understands that what he calls the Limbu householder's 'life force', which is a religious concept, 'establish[es] primarily the power of the Limbu household-chief. There exists no political solidarity, for the Limbus, other than that for the household' (Sagant 1985: 198). Thanks to the cult of the war goddess Nahangma, the Limbu householder ensures that he 'raises his soul' and holds his 'head high'. Only then can he prosper, can his allies support him and everything succeeds him. But because one's own life force always finds expression to the detriment of the life force of another, conflicts are inevitable. In this unequal society where violence is commonplace, only the person who knows how to put an end to the conflict and allows a return to peace can become powerful. The first confrontation is followed by alliances that mark social success. Raising one's head is associated with notions of honour (holding one's head high) and shame (losing face), themes that will become recurrent in Philippe Sagant’s later work.
While working with Samten Karmay on the Sharwa society, a federation of four villages centred round the worship of the territorial god, he discovered that the leader is the one who has ‘the favour of the mountain god’. His reputation is such that when he speaks, everyone listens. Philippe Sagant then became interested in the ranked position and understood that the notions of life force and head held high are similar among the Limbus of Nepal and the Sharwas of Tibet. In both communities, men in power are not mandated by the members of the community: in the case of the former, they are those who ‘walk with their heads held high’, and for the latter, those who have received the favour of the mountain god and whose rank in the Sharwa house is the place of honour. For the Sharwas, the favour of the mountain god ‘founds the authority of every headman’.

Various authors had already pointed out that in communities of Tibetan culture a particular place is assigned in the house to certain people according not only to birth privileges but also to criteria such as wealth or fame. Christoph von Fürer Haimendorf (1964 [1980]) and Sherry Ortner (1978) had noted this characteristic among the Sherpas of Solu and Khumbu; Nancy Levine also observed it among the Nyinbas of Humla (1988), but without taking their analysis further. In Tibet proper, Philippe Sagant had found indications of the ranked position in the Gesar Epic and in some biographies such as that of Paul Sherab reported by G A Combe (1975). Nevertheless, only E H Walsh, in his article on the Chumbi Valley (1906), made a link between political power and the territorial god. Samten Karmay, on the other hand, was very interested in the cult of the territorial gods and had even witnessed its revival among the Sharwas in 1985. He would later write two important articles on the subject (Karmay 1994 and 1996). The discussions that took place over several years between them on these questions reinforced Philippe Sagant’s idea that a link existed between power, territorial god and ranked position. He then set about writing an article on ‘The ranking place in the Sharwa home (ancient Amdo)’, in which he highlights the symbolic organisation of the house in order to study ‘domestic hospitality as a political arena’ (Ortner 1978: 76).

But Philippe Sagant knew the importance of fieldwork and he did not want to finalise his article without having seen the Sharwa houses with his own eyes, without having met the inhabitants, having spoken with them, listened to them and without having immersed himself in the smells and sounds. Thus, in September 1986, although the region had not yet opened to foreigners, we were able to organise a short stay of about ten days in Sharwa country. Philippe Sagant’s knowledge of the people and places thanks to the numerous meetings he had with Samten Karmay meant that we did not arrived in uncharted territory. We slept in the guest house, ate in the room with the fireplace and sat around the huge hearth whose three stones ‘divide the kitchen into three distinct spaces’, as we observed where everyone else sat. We went up to the labtse cairn (Tib la btes/lab tse), accompanied the wife to the spring where the water deity lu (Tib kla) resides. Everything fell into place for Philippe Sagant, an attentive ethnographer: people came to life, places took shape.

The collaboration between Philippe Sagant and Samten Karmay over the years resulted in the publication of Les neuf forces de l’homme (The nine forces of man), a book in which the themes of the favour of the mountain god, the ranked position and the importance of the notion of life force are fully deployed.

Philippe Sagant’s reflection on the leader elected by the mountain god led him to take an interest in ritual hunting, gambling, luck and dice games, themes that went far
beyond the sphere of the Himalayas and that were subsequently taken up by researchers from various backgrounds. The tribute paid to him following his death (Buffetrille and Lecomte-Tilouine 2015) as well as the collection of articles gathered by Gisèle Krauskopff (2021) testify to this.

Philippe Sagant knew how to listen, how to observe and he was a wonderful storyteller. His passing, far too premature, did not give him time to pursue his reflection. This he left to us, and it has influenced the research of all those who followed his teachings at the University of Paris X-Nanterre in the 1980s and 1990s and who contribute to keeping it alive today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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