Marie Lecomte-Tilouine. *Sacrifice et violence. Réflexions autour d’une ethnographie au Népal*

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India (in the historical sense of the whole of South Asia) has popularized in the 20th century, with Gandhi, the concept of non-violence, a-himsa; but in 1947 it reached the climax of violence, himsa, with the partition of the subcontinent between a Hindu majority in India and a Muslim majority in Pakistan, when 300 to 500,000 people were killed, and 10 to 15 million displaced... Between these two extremes (i.e. non-violence and “transgressive” violence) stands “legitimate” violence, which is regulated by religion and law. This is best illustrated by the ritual of sacrifice: hence the title of this book, which is precisely devoted to these legitimate uses of violence contrasted to the illegitimate ones. It is based on a rich and prolonged ethnographic experience in Nepal, a country which remained up to recent times a Hindu kingdom.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine is a social anthropologist specialized in Himalayan studies (see for instance Lecomte-Tilouine 1993, 2009a and 2010.). She undertakes in this book a bold theoretical reflection on her experience with a rejoinder to the classical studies of sacrifice by Sylvain Lévi (1898) and by Henri Hubert & Marcel Mauss (1899) at the end of the 19th century, which have been continued in our times by Charles Malamoud (1989 and 2005).

She first elaborates the theoretical questions raised by the study of violence in relation to sacrifice: this ritual in its complete form consists in putting to death a victim; sacrifice and violence are thus intimately linked. This analysis is announced in a lively introduction—in which the author recounts how she conducted her field enquiries and illustrates her exposé with interesting anecdotes—and in the first chapter. This is fully developed in chapter 2 on the “theory of sacrifice”; and in chapter 4 (“Pratiques et partitions sacrificielles”) with a detailed description of the rituals.

In between these two chapters, is inserted the third one entitled “Sacrificial violence in narration...”: it gives a detailed account of the classical mythology according to which the four “classes”—varna, subdivided into numerous castes—which make up human society were born from the dismemberment of the primordial man, called Puruṣa, during the original sacrifice. All kinds of violence, the author submits, are in one way or another related to this primordial violence. She lists all the kinds of sacrifice found in classical mythology and the epics: in the saga of the Goddess to whom the autumn sacrifices are offered; in the war narrated by the Māhabhārata; as well as in the folk epics sung by illiterate bards, in which the heroes must fight their adversaries until they kill them or are themselves killed.

Chapter 5, entitled “The sacrifice of the buffalo,” may be considered as the apex of the book. It illustrates this conception of sacrifice with a detailed description of the most spectacular one: the slaughtering ceremony celebrated during the state ritual of the
dasaɪ, in September-October, when thousands of goats and buffaloes are sacrificed in order to ensure the regeneration of the state and of the society, which had been endangered during the obscure and dangerous period of the summer monsoon; in South Asia, these autumnal festivities are considered as the start of a new year (see Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine 1996).

This festival lasts for ten days as its name (derived from number 10, das) indicates, in the beginning of the bright half (rising moon) of the lunar month: during these days all normal activities are suspended: offices and schools are closed. This festival is celebrated simultaneously at three levels: family, canton (thum) and kingdom. The first seven days are a period of seclusion, during which a first ritual is performed: seeds of barley are put in water to germinate in front of the altar of the Goddess to whom the festival is dedicated. From the seventh day there is a clear intensification of the festival, which reaches its acme on the night between the eighth and ninth days, the kāl rātri, the “black night” when the Goddess is to be pacified by the slaughtering of a great number of goats and buffaloes: the author provides an interesting description of the atmosphere of agitation and excitation which prevails during this spectacular bloody ritual. The Goddess is supposed to be pacified by it: all dangers are averted. The reconstruction of the state and of the society can then start: it is marked on the tenth day by the renewal of all allegiances in the whole of the kingdom from family house to royal palace. These rituals illustrate the fact that, from the Hindu point of view, authority is not hereditary, but contractual; it has to be renewed every year. And—my personal remark—this point was previously illustrated by the custom of pajanī (or panjanī) which prevailed from the unification of Nepal at the end of the 18th century to the end of the Rana regime in the 1950s, and according to which, at the time of Dasaɪ, the appointment of all the people in official positions in the kingdom had to be renewed (Lévi 1905, Vol. 1, p. 288).

The last type of violence examined in this book is the political kind (chap. 7): it is illustrated by the civil war (1996–2006) launched by the Maoist Party, which promoted an ideology of self-sacrifice. The author, who collected first-hand information on this topic in the village where she had conducted her first fieldwork, has already published several important contributions to this topic (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b and 2013). She provides here an original analysis of this new type of ideology which builds upon the foundations of traditional thought, and assimilates the self-sacrifice of the revolutionary to the ritual sacrifice. And she gives a graphic account of the way the people in “her” village were forcibly involved in these events.

While most of the book is about the various forms of violence and the people who promote them, a special chapter is devoted to those who oppose it and campaign against sacrifice. Although animal sacrifice is still allowed for Hindus in Nepal—while it is prohibited in India—objections to this ritual were also raised in Nepal: chap. 6 (which might be better placed at the end of the book) is devoted to this controversy. It tells of the campaigns of the opponents to this ritual since 1990, the year when the monarchy was liberalized; and particularly of their appeal to boycott the dasaɪ festival when thousands of animals are slaughtered. But these efforts were of no avail: the Supreme Court of Nepal refused to prohibit animal sacrifice in 1996.

The very well written conclusion sums up brilliantly the results of this long enquiry and serves as a good summary of the book, completing the too short one found on the last page of the cover.
This very dense book is undoubtedly of great interest. Non-specialists will learn a lot about Nepal and its recent evolution since the end of the monarchy. Specialists will also learn much, for most of them are not used to considering together all the aspects of violence which are detailed in it. This is a very well written work and pleasant to read; it is well illustrated by 9 black and white photographs in the text, and 39 unpaginated magnificent color ones.

But I have reservations about three points. The first pertains to the layout of the book: its beginning is rather abrupt; the reader would have liked to be more informed of the present South Asian context and the situation of Nepal before being plunged into sacrificial rituals. Second, a detailed index would have been useful to help the reader find his way into this technical and rather bushy text. The last point is about the coherence of the book: the author’s interest in violence confers a certain kind of unity to the book. But can all varieties of violence analyzed in it really be subsumed under the concept of sacrificial violence? The author attempts to do so through a very erudite argumentation based on a sophisticated analysis of classical Hindu literature on sacrifice, which is summed up in the second chapter. The present reviewer, however, remains rather skeptical.

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