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Recalcitrant Interactions : Semiotic Reflections on Fieldwork among Mountain Ascetics

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> Much like the fieldwork done by an ethnologist, for the semiotician this work on the text is supposed to be a return, free of preconceived notions, to sources. This comparison can be developed further : much in the same way as a stranger who, settling in a community that is recognizably different, would bring with him an entire store of duly organized knowledge accompanied by a somewhat hypocritical sympathy founded on difference, so the relation of analyst to the text is never innocent, and the naivety of the questions asked is often feigned.
>
> Algirdas J. Greimas[1]

> This was the beginning of the dialectic process of fieldwork. I say dialectic because neither the subject nor the object remain static.
>
> Paul Rabinow[2]

1 A.J. Greimas, *Maupassant. La sémiotique du texte : exercices pratiques,* Paris, Seuil, 1976 ; Eng. trans. *Maupassant : The Semiotics of Texts,* Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1988, p. xxiii.

2 P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 39.

Introduction

In the first excerpt above, quoted from the "Foreword" of his book-length semiotic analysis of Maupassant's *Two Friends,* Algirdas J. Greimas strikingly compares semioticians' work on texts to the ethnographic work done by anthropologists. Similar to anthropologists and their fieldwork, semioticians may be led to experience their work on texts as a simple and sincere return to original sources. According to Greimas though, this comparison between semiotic analysis and ethnographic work may be further developed, and it can be even inverted respect to its premises. Like the anthropologists who, having moved to a community of "others", would carry — with a sympathetic but also hypocritical attitude (based on the idea of cultural difference) — a whole "body of accumulated and sifted knowledge"[3], semioticians' relation to their text is never innocent, and the ingenuousness of their questions is rather fictitious. However, the "Foreword" also continues saying that, from time to time, we may be fortunate enough to be rewarded for our efforts, out of proportion to the poor discoveries usually made, when certain facts unexpectedly emerge, which are able to shake our certainties, forcing us to question our ready-made explanations. "This path, strewn with obstacles", says Greimas, "is perhaps that of all scientific practice"[4].

In the reflections which I will here present, I wish to continue the comparison suggested by Greimas, between semiotic work on texts and anthropological fieldwork, by pursuing some of its postulates to their ultimate consequences[5]. It is in fact interesting to notice how the Lithuanian semiotician ends up mentioning some of the typical problems concerning fieldwork, namely (1) diversity or otherness of its object of inquiry, (2) positioning of the researcher in the field (characterised by empathy or hypocrisy, naivety or fiction ?), (3) difference between anthropological and native knowledge, and finally (4) discovery of ethnographic data which may deeply shake our certainties and our models. I will try to explore these problems, hoping that they might help us rethinking, or better, refining the semiotic method. My idea is in fact that semiotics may already have a few instruments able to tackle this kind of questions, and that such instruments may be further sharpened and improved through our analytical work, notwithstanding the form of textuality (ethnographic, literary, or other) we are dealing with[6].

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3 See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, [1937] 1976, p. 241. It is quite striking that in the same year of publication of Greimas's *Maupassant* (1976), Evans-Pritchard added, as an appendix to the reedition of his work on Azande, a careful reflection on ethnographic practice (first published three years earlier on the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*), in which he expressed the same problematic ambivalence of the anthropologist in the field, defined for this reason as a *double marginal man* (*ibid.*, p. 243).

4 A.J. Greimas, *Maupassant, op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

5 Acknowledgements : I wish to thank Marilena Frisone for reading and commenting on this work, and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for providing a grant for this study in 2017-18, during a ten-month fieldwork project based at Osaka University, Anthropology Department (JSPS grant PE16043).

6 In light of frequent misunderstandings about the concept of cultural text in social sciences (see e.g. P.

During my discussion, I will refer to the problem of "textual resistance", namely the idea that the more semiotic texts are stimulating, the more they force us to reconfigure our own analytical tools. I will rethink this problem in slightly provocatory terms — but certainly fit to describe ethnographic work — using the concept of "recalcitrant subjects". I will borrow this concept from Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour[7], according to whom we should turn our attention to objects which are less "domesticated" and more "recalcitrant". Objects that are able to raise new questions, forcing us to reorganise our instruments and theoretical perspectives.

In order to explore these issues, I will draw on my ethnographic fieldwork — conducted over a period of about twenty-four months, and distributed across twelve years (starting from 2008) — within the *shugen* mountain ascetic group Tsukasakō in Katsuragi, central Japan, which is part of the syncretic Shinto-Buddhist tradition called Shugendō, or "The way to master/acquire (Jp. *osameru*) ascetic powers (Jp. *gen*)"[8]. This group, affiliated to the Shingon Buddhist temple Tenpōrinji on top of Mt Kongō or "Diamond Peak" (1125 m), has been active since 2005. The main purpose of the group is the revival of *shugen* ascetic practices connected to a particular pilgrimage route — the twenty-eight *Lotus Sutra* mounds in Katsuragi (*Katsuragi nijūhasshuku kyōzuka*) — which unfolds through almost 120 km across the ancient Katsuragi mountain range[9].

Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), we need to recall here that the semiotic notion of text in Paris School is an analytical construct, referring to any configuration of meaning understood as a mechanism of signification and a process of communication, whose plane of expression may be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, verbal, syncretic/multimodal etc. The notion of semiotic text is thus not modelled after the idea of written linguistic texts, and is not based on the concept of cognitive representation (P. Fabbri, *La svolta semiotica,* Rome and Bari, Laterza, 2005 ; G. Marrone, *The Invention of the Text,* Milan, Mimesis, 2014). On the contrary, the notion of semiotic text might be more correctly defined as *antirepresentational, multimodal and dynamic,* insofar as it cuts across any (modern Protestant) *representational divide* between a *supposed interior language* and the *external world.* Semiotic textuality might thus recall more closely the Latin concept of *textus* "texture, woven fabric, cloth, framework, web", rather than the idea of written work (T. Padoan, "On the Semiotics of Space in the Study of Religions : Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Challenges", in T.-A. Poder and J. Van Boom (eds.), *Sign, Method, and the Sacred : New Directions in Semiotic Methodologies for the Study of Religion,* Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 193-94). It is nonetheless interesting to notice how current critiques of the concepts of text and discourse, anchored as they are to the idea of "written text" and "mental representation", often need to cast off or downplay the *semiotic* dimension of affect, body, action, materiality, etc. (cf. B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* Durham, Duke UP, 2002). Such critiques thus end up reinforcing the modern divides they wish to overcome, by entirely removing the domain of discourse, language and communication from their own field of inquiry (the "external social world"), and by thrusting it into the "interiority of human mind".

7 I. Stengers, "Le dix-huit brumaire du progrès scientifique", *Ethnopsy / Les mondes contemporains de la guérison,* 5, 2002, <http://www.ethnopsychiatrie.net/actu/brumaire.htm> (last accessed August 29, 2021) ; B. Latour, "Des sujets récalcitrants", in his *Chroniques d'un amateur de sciences,* Paris, École des mines, 2006, pp. 187-189 ; B. Latour, "When Things Strike Back", *British Journal of Sociology,* 51, 1, 2002, pp. 107-123.

8 On Shugendō, see the works by Miyake Hitoshi (*Shugendō : Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion,* Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan, 2001), Allan Grapard (*Mountain Mandalas,* London, Bloomsbury, 2016), and the edited volumes B. Faure, M. Moerman and G. Sekimori (eds.), *Shugendō : The History and Culture of a Japanese Religion,* special issue of *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie,* vol. 18, 2009, and A. Castiglioni, F. Rambelli and C. Roth (eds.), *Defining Shugendō : Critical Studies on Japanese Mountain Religion,* London, Bloomsbury, 2020. In Japanese, see the two volumes by Miyake Hitoshi, *Shugendō girei no kenkyū,* Tokyo, Shunjūsha, 1999, and *Shugendō shisō no kenkyū,* Tokyo, Shunjūsha, 1999.

9 On mountain asceticism in Katsuragi, see T. Padoan, "On the Semiotics of Space in the Study of Religions", *op. cit.*, pp. 197-209.

I will analyse the relational and phenomenological aspects of my ethnographic experience with these Japanese mountain ascetics through the lens of semiotics, using the regimes of interaction formulated by Eric Landowski. Finally, I will try to show how, far from being based on forms of communality and reciprocity without differentiation, ethnography and sociality always involve heterogeneous human and nonhuman actors, and may only emerge from interactions and transactions that are inherently recalcitrant.

1. Two contrastive positions ?

I would like to start my discussion from a critical examination of different ways in which the conditions of possibility of doing ethnography in anthropology and social sciences may be conceptualised through semiotics. As defined by Greimas, every scientific discourse constitutes itself as a *veridictory doing* — an action aspiring to the production of some form of truth — whose object is the construction of a *certain referent*, and whose aim is to taxonomically organise what it intends to explore[10]. In anthropology the "referent", namely a certain culture or society — the object to be re-constructed — is produced through a reorganisation of the semantic microuniverse acquired in the field. A reorganisation made through the perceptive and cognitive categories of the ethnographer. However, there are at least two different ways in which semiotics can look at the conditions, possibility, and limits of ethnographic practice.

The first way, closer to *phenomenology,* may be exemplified by the approach of Jean-Claude Coquet[11]. In his work on the enunciating instances, Coquet, following Benveniste, draws on the famous essay written by Malinowski for the volume edited by Odgen e Richards *The Meaning of Meaning*[12]. This essay, entitled "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Language", explored a series of issues, from the definition of language as "mode of action" to the notion of meaning as "active force", against a philosophical idea of language as mirror-like reflection of thought. It was in this work that Malinowski described for the first time the concept of phatic communion, which was later included by Jakobson in his six communicative functions[13]. In defining language, and more specifically the

10 Cf. A.J. Greimas, *Sémiotique et sciences sociales,* Paris, Seuil, 1976 ; Eng. trans. *The Social Sciences : A Semiotic View,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990, pp. 15-28. See also A.J. Greimas and E. Landowski, "Les parcours du savoir", in *id.* (eds.), *Introduction à l'analyse du discours en sciences sociales,* Paris, Hachette, 1979 ; Eng. trans. "The Pathways of Knowledge", in A.J. Greimas, *The Social Sciences, op. cit.,* pp. 37-58.

11 See J.-Cl. Coquet, "Les instances énonçantes", in *Phusis et logos. Une phénoménologie du langage,* Vincennes, PUV, 2007 ; It. trans. "Le istanze enuncianti", in *Le istanze enuncianti,* Milano, Mondadori, 2008.

12 Cfr. B. Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Language", in C.K. Odgen, I.A. Richards (eds.), *The Meaning of Meaning,* London, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1923 ; now in B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays,* Glencoe, The Free Press, 1948.

13 These are, we recall here, the emotive, referential, poetic, phatic, metalingual and conative functions, respectively associated with addresser, context, message, contact, code and addressee (R. Jakobson, "Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem" [1956], in *id.*, *The Framework of Language,* Ann Arbor, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1980, p. 81). This formulation, presented by Jakobson in 1956 during his inaugural

practice of gossip among Trobrianders, not as vehicle of information, but as the place where social bonds are constituted, Malinowski wrote : "There is in all human beings the well-known tendency to congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other's company"[14]. Coquet interprets this passage in terms of a communion and affective proximity which also invests participant observers in relation to the social group they are studying. Ethnographers would then have the task to convey this experience of *physis* to the readers of their ethnographies, through the *logos* of anthropological discourse[15]. Such reflections place us in front of one of the most difficult anthropological tasks, namely the process of *translation*, from the field experience to the written ethnography[16].

The problem of translation, which does not only concern anthropology but every scientific project including the semiotic one, is seen from a quite different perspective by Juri Lotman, whose approach I consider representative of the second way in which semiotics can look at the possibility of ethnographic practice. In an enlightening essay on historical methods, translated in the volume *Universe of the Mind,* Lotman points out that nowadays in human and natural sciences, from nuclear physics to linguistics, it would be unthinkable to look at scientists as external observers of the objects under study, merely extracting from them some form of absolute objective knowledge[17]. Every scientific discourse sees the researchers as part of the world they describe. Nevertheless, this does not imply that observing subjects and observed objects play identical roles. Quite the opposite.

Lotman thus warns us against the philosophical position proposed by Collingwood, who describes the role of the historian in terms of a subject that should identify himself with the historical figures he is studying. According to Collingwood the historian should re-actualise through his own imagination, the experience of a Roman emperor like Theodosius, and then try to understand the motivations behind his actions[18]. Such an identification, according to Lotman, starts from Collingwood's misleading assumption — extreme example of post-Cartesian common sense in which truth shines at the centre "bright as the sun" — that the world of the twentieth-century Englishman was the same as that of Theodosius, and that a bit of imagination and intuition sufficed to fill the historical and cultural gap. To this idea, Lotman opposes a semiotic approach

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address as president of the Linguistic Society of America, preceded his more famous essay "Closing Statements : Linguistics and Poetics" (published in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language,* Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1960 ; Fr. trans. "Linguistique et poétique", in R. Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale,* Paris, Minuit, 1963) to which scholars generally refer.

14 See B. Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Language", *op. cit.*, p. 248.

15 J.-Cl. Coquet, "Les instances énonçantes", *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

16 Cf. T. Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Anthropology", in J. Clifford and G. Marcus, (eds.), *Writing Culture : The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 141-164 ; W. Hanks, "The Space of Translation", *HAU : Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* 4, 2, 2014, pp. 17-39.

17 J.M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind,* London, I.B. Tauris, 1990.

18 See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* Oxford, Oxford UP, 1986.

which aims at exposing, rather than concealing, the differences between the two worlds, by describing them in terms of *translation* from one cultural language to another[19]. This does not mean totally abstracting researchers from their work, something truly impossible, but on the contrary it implies a recognition of their own presence, involvement, and differential relation to their field of inquiry, being fully aware of how such presence might affect their description[20].

Together, these two positions — Lotman's emphasis on the gap between researcher and field, and Coquet's remarks on the phatic and affective communion between the two levels — could both be considered as accurate descriptions of the role of the ethnographer in the field, although relying on seemingly contrasting ideas. As with the two ways of seeing ethnographic and semiotic work, described by Greimas in our opening quote — either as empathy or hypocrisy, as naivety or simulation — Coquet and Lotman postulate, respectively, the *possibility* and *impossibility* of establishing a *common experiential ground* between researchers and their objects of inquiry. While for Coquet such possibility would be the natural outcome of participant observation — and the translation of this experience to the reader (*ad quem*) after fieldwork would be the challenge — for Lotman the problem of translation is immediately posed (*ab quo*) already in the field, since it highlights a gap between researchers and informants. But perhaps the problem of translation could be tackled in another way, allowing us to reconsider these two different positions as perspectives that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

2. Perspectival reversals and equivocations

When I first started my ethnographic research, I had assumed that the object of my inquiry would be the ritual activities of Japanese ascetics (*gyōja* or *shugenja*, also called *yamabushi*, literally "those who prostrate / take refuge in the mountains") in the Katsuragi mountains, and that the leading and sanctioning authorities, or Sender actants (*Destinateurs*) of this inquiry, could only be of strictly academic nature. Such expectation was short-lived, since I understood very soon that the ascetics themselves were carving a specific role for me within their group. One of the problems immediately experienced during fieldwork is that the situation in the field considerably differs from the one usually described in ethnographic manuals[21]. Notably, the idea of an ethnographic *observer*, very much present in written ethnographies, ends up being systematically questioned in the field.

19 On the topic of translation from a Lotmanian perspective, see F. Sedda, *Tradurre la tradizione. Sardegna,* su ballu, *i corpi, la cultura,* Milan, Mimesis, 2019.

20 J.M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind, op. cit.*, p. 271. The necessity (and heuristic advantages) of such a recognition is also underlined in post-Greimassian semiotics : see E. Landowski, "Politiques de la sémiotique", *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio,* 13, 2, 2019, p. 11.

21 For a classical linear and "top-down" conception of ethnography presented in popular sociological works, cf. M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography : Principles in Practice,* London, Routledge, 2007 ; R.M. Emerson, R.I. Fretz and L.L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011. For an anthropological critique of this kind of ethnographic approach, see instead J. Spradley, *Participant Observation,* New York, Harcourt, 1980, pp. 27-29.

For example, I was once invited by the ascetic practitioners to participate in a business meeting with representatives of local transport companies. On that occasion they were trying to strike a deal, in order to establish a special bus service for pilgrims who wanted to reach the temple on Mt Kongō from one of the nearby stations. The bus service should have included special Buddhist sutra chanting, and detailed information on their ascetic tradition, besides a reduced ticket fee. My role at the meeting was then framed by the practitioners as that of a foreign scholar who had travelled from Europe to study their specific ascetic tradition, and whose very presence confirmed and enhanced the remarkable value and prestige of their religious practice.

If *translation* can be understood, according to Viveiros de Castro, as a form of "controlled equivocation", this legitimising role, which I was often invited to play, in some way exposed a first equivocation, namely my initial assumption that I was the one analysing their form of life, and that the ascetics were the object of my investigation[22]. It was frequently the opposite : the ethnographic work showed how *source and direction of agency* were *constantly reversed.* Often, I was the one who was *factitively manipulated,* the one tested by the group through a series of roles which members of the ascetic community had placed me in[23]. Such actantial roles ranged from positions of authority — for which I was invoked as Sender (*Destinateur*), in order to legitimise their specific agenda and instrumental programmes of action[24] — to humbler positions within the temple — for which I was reassigned as Helper actant (*Adjuvant*) in weekly cleaning and in the ongoing maintenance of the place. The latter position of "monastic aid", in which I frequently found myself, could be actantially assimilated, on the plane of *seeming* (i.e. from the point of view of what *seems* to be) to the role of *modal helper*[25]. But on the plane of *being*, this was the role of a *performing subject* who continued, as the practitioners often told me, a process of apprenticeship that went beyond what was considered, strictly speaking, ascetic ritual activity.

Although since the beginning of my fieldwork I felt accepted by the community, on a few occasions, especially in the first period, I also had the impression of being strategically invoked for my status of foreign researcher. This seemed

22 Cf. E. Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation", *Tipití : Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America,* 2, 1, 2004, pp. 3-22.

23 For a similar amusing case, in which an anthropologist in a Moroccan village is constantly acted upon by his informants, who systematically place him in the role of a driver, using his car to reach the next city almost on a daily basis, cf. P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, op. cit.,* pp. 112-115. I wish to thank Eric Landowski for drawing my attention to some interesting common *isotopies* between mine and Rabinow's experience.

24 Cf. A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage,* Paris, Hachette, 1979 ; Eng. trans. *Semiotics and Language : An Analytical Dictionary,* Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1982, pp. 245-246.

25 On the modal helper actant, see *ibid.*, p. 141. Concerning the interplay between "seeming" and "being", we recall what Greimas and Courtés say about veridictory modalities : "The category of veridiction is constituted [...] by the correlation of two schemas : the *seeming / non-seeming* schema is called manifestation, the *being / non-being* schema is called immanence. The 'truth game' is played out between these two dimensions of existence. To infer from manifestation the existence of immanence is to make a pronouncement concerning the being of being" (*ibid.*, p. 369).

to be confirmed by the numerous circumstances in which I was warmly encouraged to publish, present and translate their world into the academic world, in order to circulate and magnify the image of their group, against other competing ascetic communities. But I soon realised that our relation was going to change according to an ongoing *intersubjective process of fiduciary construction*[26] .

In fact, my position within the group, and the *form of subjectivity offered to me,* did considerably change over time, in the same way as my *thematic role* of "researcher" was also subject to modifications. My historical knowledge of the pilgrimage was often appreciated by members, and it was associated with a form of academic authority. "Can you see it ? Padoan-san knows about it", "He will meet important scholars, he will talk to them about us". Somehow, the practitioners started to consider me as their academic *alter-ego.* Since this was a relatively recent group, they considered themselves as *ascetic apprentices.* At the same time, members of the group considered me as a young scholar, who proceeded in his life and career in the same way as they were proceeding along the path of ascetic apprenticeship. From their own point of view, the more my anthropological research appeared in the academic community, the more the activities of the Tsukasakō would gain visibility both within and without the academic environment. Vice versa, practitioners also thought that the more they became skilled in their practices establishing themselves more firmly within the context of mountain asceticism in Japan, the more my research would become significant. We proceeded across *parallel paths,* which mirrored each other in a *mimetic and somatic way.* As Paul Rabinow pointed out in his reflexive analysis of fieldwork in Morocco, ethnographer and informant are often mutually brought to reflect on their own lifeworlds, to objectify and externalise their cultural and social experiences[27]. From a semiotic point of view, they are doing so by *shifting out* and observing themselves, thus occupying the two actantial positions of subject and object at the same time[28]. But in this way, they are also trying to create an in-between space between the two cultural worlds, and a special form of communication. Using the words of Rabinow, fieldwork thus becomes "a process of intersubjective construction of liminal modes of communication"[29].

Or maybe this was just one more ethnographic equivocation ? The last turning point occurred more recently, when I visited again the same field for a period of about ten months, from March 2017 to January 2018. As soon as I arrived, I could attend the long-awaited official ceremony of initiation (*yamabushi tokudo girei*), for which the apprentices had been preparing themselves for many years.

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26 On the notion of trust, cf. E. Landowski, *La société réfléchie,* Paris, Seuil, 1989 ; It. trans. *La società riflessa,* Rome, Meltemi, 2003, pp. 199-214 ; H. Garfinkel, "A Conception of, and Experiments with, 'Trust' as a Condition of Stable Concerted Actions", in O.J. Harvey (ed.), *Motivation and Social Interaction,* New York, Ronald Press, 1963 ; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande, op. cit.*, p. 247.

27 P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, op. cit.*, p. 152.

28 A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire..., op. cit.*, p. 351.

29 P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, op. cit.*, p. 155.

Immediately, even if I had been participating in the group's activities for an extended period, I was this time offered a more restricted role within the group, in a *position of exclusion,* which prevented me from accessing the sacred space of the ritual (which I could only observe from outside), or from performing some *mudrā* ritual gestures and mantric formulas that only initiates could recite. On top of this, a new highly skilled practitioner had arrived in the group, namely a Buddhist monk who, as an ordained member of the monastic community, second only to the leader, enjoyed a much higher status than mine.

The form of academic authority which I had been previously assigned became at this point, in the eyes of the expert monk recently arrived in the community, a *possible threat* to the religious authority embodied by him and the leader. In a quite systematic way, the new member started to *weaken the position* of academic Sender which the other believers had placed me in, by ignoring, objecting or dismissing what I was saying, by casting doubts on the legitimacy of my presence within the group, or setting limits to my acquisition of competence in terms of what I "was able" to do, or "knew how" to do. I had wrongly assumed that, after a long period of time spent in the same field, trust would no longer be an issue, but all of a sudden I felt as if I were back to square one : negotiation of trust had to start over again.

3. Recalcitrant subjects

It is thus rather evident that the process of fiduciary construction, namely the *enunciative contract* at the roots of every communicative strategy[30], is profoundly shaped by the informants, and constantly negotiated by the researcher. This aspect affects the whole research : in place of a semiotic and ethnographic object, constructed by the analyst, what emerges here is, using Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour's words, a "recalcitrant object" which offers resistance[31]. Or, to be more precise, a full-fledged *recalcitrant subject,* who does not fulfil our expectations of being observed and analysed, but who instead observes and evaluates us. We thus face a *reversal of perspectives.* We could in fact describe the two perspectives of the researcher and of the ethnographic subjects as two opposing programmes of action, as an opposition between gazes crossing each other, mutually constructing their own object[32]. We meet *recalcitrant subjects* who pursue their own objectives, by framing the researcher within their own *programmes of action* as Helper actant, or as an authority with the function of Sender actant. Other times, ethnographic subjects may become themselves Senders, and assign to the ethnographer a series of thematic roles and figurative paths. In my own ethnography, these shifted from the role of "academic promot-

30 On the role of fiduciary contracts in establishing intersubjective structures, cf. A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire..., op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

31 Cf. I. Stengers, "Le dix-huit brumaire...", *art. cit.* ; B. Latour, "Des sujets recalcitrants", *op. cit.*

32 For a detailed analysis of such "optical games", see E. Landowski, *La société réfléchie, op. cit.*, pp. 113-136.

er" to the "foreign ascetic" accepted within the community, and to that of the non-initiated "intruder", i.e. an anti-subject delegated by an outside academic power, potentially undermining the religious authority inside the group.

It is for all these reasons that the emic/etic dichotomy, once used in anthropological theory, always dissolves itself during the ethnographic activity, revealing all its inadequacy as soon as what we called "recalcitrant subjects" start to observe, scrutinise, analyse and evaluate our actions, excluding or including us as they like. All this reinforces the notion that the *boundaries of the ethnographic text* are each time reshaped by dynamics of "contract" and "conflict", and that the best way to study our ethnographic subjects is through a process of apprenticeship, under the guidance of the actors and cultural texts themselves, learning to see, as the Malinowskian saying goes, from the native's point of view[33]. But if we want to *take seriously* the actors we are working with[34], in order to describe the sense of their actions, we might need to take a step further.

In his programme of redefinition of social sciences, Latour invites to take into consideration objections and resistances presented by social "subjects", in the same way as physicists, biologists and geologists are already forced to do it for their natural "objects" — hence his suggestion to treat the former ones as "recalcitrant objects"[35]. However, from the short ethnographic account provided above, it is evident how actors in field, in their interaction with researchers, may play roles better described as "subjects". The latter statement holds true also in the case of nonhuman actors, particularly when considered from a syntactic and actantial point of view. On this point, we could say that semioticians, art theorists, anthropologists and sociologists have already been studying for some time a series of nonhuman actors — from art works to religious idols, from products of consumption to technologies — as something more than inert "objects" without active roles[36]. Within this frame of analysis, such entities, as soon as they start playing the role of *competent interactants,* may be considered as full-fledged syntactic subjects who can intervene and act on other objects or, even, other subjects[37]. If we thus want to further investigate the problem of

33 B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* London, Routledge, [1922] 2002, p. 19 ; cf. C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge,* New York, Basic Books, 1983.

34 Cf. B. Latour, *Pandora's Hope,* Cambridge MA, Harvard UP, 1999, p. 306.

35 Cf. B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005, p. 125 ; *id.*, "When Things Strike Back", *op. cit.*

36 Cf. J.-M. Floch, *Identités visuelles,* Paris, PUF, 1995 ; Eng. trans. *Visual Identities,* London and New York, Continuum, 2000 ; E. Landowski, "Avoir prise, donner prise", *Actes Sémiotiques,* 112, 2009 ; It. trans. "Avere presa, dare presa", *Lexia,* 3-4, 2009, pp. 139-202 ; E. Landowski and G. Marrone (eds.), *La società degli oggetti,* Rome, Meltemi, 2002 ; A. Mattozzi (ed.), *Il senso degli oggetti tecnici,* Rome, Meltemi, 2006 ; D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989 ; A. Gell, *Art and Agency : An Anthropological Theory,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998 ; M. Augé, *Le dieu objet,* Paris, Flammarion, 1988 ; It. trans. *Il dio oggetto,* Milan, Mimesis, 2016 ; A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things : Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1986 ; A. Henare, M. Holbraad and S. Wastell (eds.), *Thinking through Things,* London, Routledge, 2007 ; B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social, op. cit.*

37 Cf. M. Hammad, *Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture,* Limoges, PULIM, 2006 ; It. trans. *Leggere lo spazio, comprendere l'architettura,* Rome, Meltemi, 2003, p. 115. E. Landowski, "Avoir prise, donner prise", *op. cit.*

recalcitrance, we will also need to ask what happens when those experiencing resistance from other beings, bodies, and entities — ranging from deities and forces who exceed human power, to elements of the everyday material scene — are the informants themselves. In other words, *how is the recalcitrance of human and nonhuman actors lived by the ethnographic subjects themselves, in the flow of their everyday interactions ?*

To explore this issue, it will be useful to refer again to my ethnographic field. During my fieldwork with the ascetics from Katsuragi mountain area, I often noticed how most of the space crossed and lived by them, and particularly the temple area, was invested with *prescriptions* and *interdictions* of various sorts. Certain actions, for example, had to be performed in front of a statue representing the esoteric Buddhist deity Fudō Myōō (Skt. Acalanātha vidyārāja) during a fire ritual (Jp. *goma*, Skt. *homa*), performed either in the temple hall, or outside. Such actions included the chanting of a series of ritual formulas or *mantras* from Shingon esoteric tradition, together with other Buddhist prayers — more specifically the *Heart Wisdom Sutra* (Jp. *Hannya shingyō,* Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya sūtra*), a scripture commonly recited in different Buddhist schools in Japan. Those ascetics who had already received initiation were also required to perform specific ritual gestures (*mudrā*) and whisper powerful mantras in a ritual called *goshinbō* ("rite of bodily protection"), *before* and *after* the ceremony itself. Other participants, including me, "were not able to perform" such prescribed actions, due to *lack of ritual competence.* In a similar way, during the ritual, the space around the sacred fire was interdicted to non-initiates. This place, located in the inner temple hall, faces the main icon of Hōki *bosatsu* (Skt. Dharmodgata *bodhisattva*), considered to be the living material presence of this tutelary numen inside the temple.

In other words, the ritual scene was strongly *modalised* from a *deontic* point of view, as participants, spaces and times of the ritual were overdetermined by a series of "having to do" (*prescription*) and "having not to do" (*interdiction*) (fig. 1). These prescriptive and interdicting programmes of action were in turn linked to *various degrees of limitation of competence,* and thus to what members of the group "were not able to do" (*powerlessness* of the non-initiated subjects) or "were not able not to do" (*obedience* of the initiated subjects). This occurred even if both initiated and non-initiated members of the Tsukasakō shared a better "knowing how to do", concerning the ritual tradition, compared to external believers who only visited the temple during major festivals.

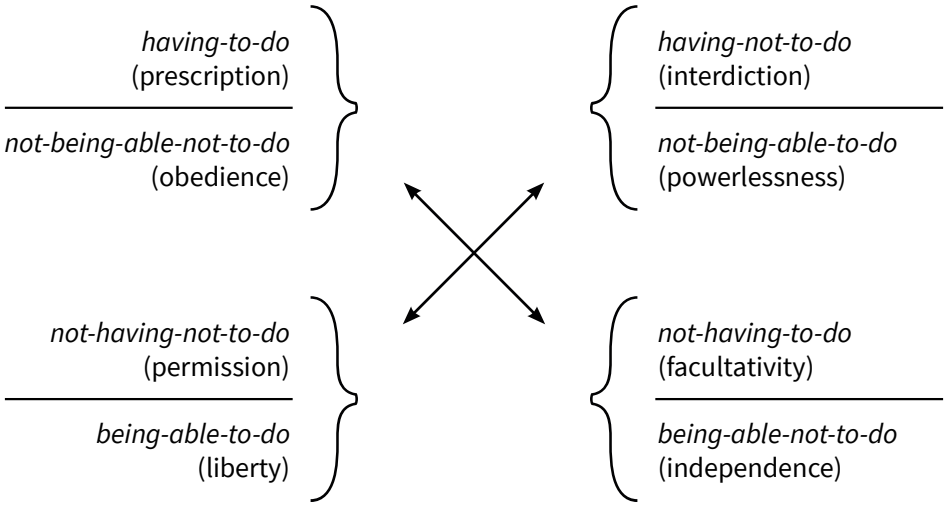

Figure 1. Modal structures of obligation ("having to do") and power ("being able to do")[38].

Deontic prescriptions and interdictions were however occasionally accompanied by possible *modal negotiations* when, under special circumstances, practitioners were allowed to ignore some of them. For example, in the *tsukiichikai* ("monthly assembly") — a pilgrimage to sacred places of Mt Kongō, where the temple is located — less experienced practitioners were permitted to guide the group during ritual performances, under the supervision of elder ascetics, while the leader was not attending. In this case, the ritual discourse itself, by opening spaces for the "legitimate peripheral participation" of less expert members, produces an interactive frame of apprenticeship, in which such members can acquire competence, while gradually being included into the group identity[39].

Over numerous sessions of the *tsukiichikai*, I could see that some elder members "were able not to follow" all the spots of the pilgrimage (assuming the modality of *independence*), cutting the trail through the forest to skip the hardest parts of the climb. Some other times, the apprentices who made mistakes in choosing the pilgrimage path to follow, or in chanting the ritual sequence of *mantras*, "did not have to repeat" the pilgrimage or the procedure (on the modal plane of *facultativity*). In other circumstances we could even "turn a blind eye" to particular prohibitions (and thus a modal *permission* based on a "not having not to do" something). This happened when an exception was made for me to film the inner hall of the temple during the fire ritual — over the New Year celebrations a few years ago (fig. 2) — or when we "were allowed to see" (*liberty*) some secret Buddhist icons (*hibutsu*) usually exposed only during special festivals (called *kaichō*, or "opening of the curtain"), as a reward for having cleaned and repaired an old ritual building where those were installed[40]. On several other occasions a rigorous network of injunctions was instead in force.

38 A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire..., op. cit.*, p. 247.

39 Cf. J. Lave and E. Wenger, *Situated Learning,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991.

40 Cf. F. Rambelli, "Secret Buddhas : The Limits of Buddhist Representation", *Monumenta Nipponica,* 57, 3, 2002, pp. 271-307

Figure 2. Filming the fire ritual : the inner temple hall, from interdiction to permission. Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

A significant aspect of the practice is that, notwithstanding whether rules could be negotiated or not, their source, that is their Sender actant, *was the deity itself,* or the leader and elder members as its delegates. Actions like crossing an interdicted space, taking pictures without permission, looking at secret buddhas, or even cleaning sacred effigies with impure cloths and water, were considered as highly disrespectful (*shitsurei*) against the deity Hōki bosatsu and other "living icons". Like in the rest of Buddhist traditions in Asia — as documented by ample literature on the topic — such icons are in fact considered as active and concrete sacred presences inside the space of the temple[41].

4. Aesthesis e ascesis

There is another crucial dimension of the relation between researcher and ethnographic subjects which we have not discussed yet : the role played by the body in the construction of subjectivities. The ascetic practice carried out by the group, which I followed during my participant observation, determines a radical *reconfiguration of everyday life,* thanks to the intervention of the *body*. Long walks through difficult and scarcely frequented mountain trails, often fasting or with minimum supplies, while donning the white clothes and equipment of *yamabushi* ascetics characterised by complex symbolic correspondences ; exhausting night vigils and extended hours spent while singing *mantras* and Buddhist chants ;

41 Cf. G. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks,* Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1997 ; R. Gombrich, "The Consecration of a Buddhist Image", *The Journal of Asian Studies,* 26, 1, 1966, pp. 23-36 ; R. Sharf and E.H. Sharf (eds.), *Living Images : Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context,* Stanford, Stanford UP, 2001 ; B. Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze", *Critical Inquiry,* 24, 3, 1998, pp. 768-813.

fearsome ordeals by fire, walking barefoot on burning coals (*hiwatari*), with flames reaching up to the knees, etc. All these practices constitute the core of ascetic activity, and they are part of a path of *apprenticeship* towards the *construction of new selves* and *new worlds.* Recalling Coquet's remarks above, on the phenomenological problem of translating somatic and affective proximity from the ethnographic field to the anthropological discourse, we may wonder : to what extent can ethnographers describe and communicate these modes of experience, so deeply seated within their own body ?

André Leroi-Gourhan has pointed out that the suspension of everyday bodily values and rhythms, occurring in religious discourse — e.g. the inversion of day and night-time, fasting, sexual abstinence, variations of temperature — may be used to enact processes of resemantisation and production of new symbolic discourses[42]. The body and its sensory equipment appear as "a marvellous apparatus for transforming sensations into symbols"[43]. The networks of symbols thus produced would then introduce a *reflexivity* in rhythms and values. It is through such networks that religious individuals emerge, reflexively mirroring themselves in symbols and thus *constituting themselves* as new subjects. Referring to religious traditions he defines as "mystic", Leroi-Gourhan interestingly suggests that physiological and perceptive modifications may also bring about a symbolic reconstruction of the time and space experienced by practitioners[44]. A new subject would emerge from such a discourse, a subject characterised by a new role in society and in the universe of values through processes we might define as somatic, or more precisely *aesthesic,* rooted in perception[45]. In order to clarify this point, let me recall an ethnographic episode.

During our long pilgrimage walks, inside the forests across the Katsuragi mountain range, it often happened that, after a few hours of journeying through close-pressing trees, we would find ourselves in an open space. Here we would usually have a short rest. Sometimes we would find a small shrine or statue, in front of which practitioners would pray together. Some other times, however, a wonderful view of a valley, the abundant vegetation of the nearby peaks, or mountain cherry blossoms, could also unexpectedly open below us. On such occasions, we used to stop and contemplate the landscape together, certainly exhausted, and short of breath, but not short of admiration for the spectacular nature surrounding us from every side. The long mountain chain running almost seamlessly from the Wakayama coast in the south-west, up north to Osaka and Nara prefectures, is characterised by low slopes, rounded tops, thick vegetation,

42 Cf. A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole. La mémoire et les rythmes,* Paris, Albin Michel, 1964 ; Eng. trans. *Gesture and Speech,* Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1993.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 281-297.

45 I refer here to the notion of *aesthesis* introduced by Greimas into the semiotic metalanguage (cf. A.J. Greimas, *De l'Imperfection,* Périgueux, Fanlac, 1987 ; It. trans. *Dell'imperfezione,* Palermo, Sellerio, 2004) and then further developed by E. Landowski (cf. "A partir de *De l'Imperfection*", *Passions sans nom,* Paris, PUF, 2005, ch. 2 ; more recently, *id.*, "*De l'Imperfection* : un livre, deux lectures", *Actes Sémiotiques,* 121, 2018).

frequent watercourses, small waterfalls, and considerable fauna (birds, wild boars, badgers, weasels, rabbits, snakes, foxes, squirrels etc.).

On one of these occasions, during the summer of 2017, after a difficult climb, when our energies were about to fade out, we finally reached a natural spring. Following the leader's instructions, we used our *tokin* — small black caps worn on the forehead, embodying the five wisdoms of the cosmic buddha Dainichi nyorai — soaked with sweat dripping from our foreheads, to quench our thirst with the freshwater which was generously gushing out from the side of the mountain. After drinking, we all agreed that it really seemed the most delicious water we had ever tasted ! Rarely had I drunk such fresh and clean water, capable of swiftly providing strength and relief. We fully gathered the water with our bare hands, pouring it on our head and shoulders to refresh ourselves, soaking the towel bands (*hachimaki*) tied around our foreheads, filling our bottles, while a strange sense of excitement started to affect all participants.

One of the ascetics noticed that the energising effect of the spring could be related to the mineral salts of our sweat that, drinking from the *tokin*, we had indeed mixed with the water ! However, this remark did not diminish the *euphoric* mood of that moment, which, once returned to the city, we did not hesitate to recall and comment upon, while sipping a pint of beer to celebrate the completion of the ascesis. At that point, the religious leader of the group explained that the sensation we felt could only arise after the long climb, a mode of ascetic practice that naturally led us to *perceive differently,* and fully appreciate, the beauty of the mountain.

Such an aesthesic experience of communality — produced by the sensible pleasure we felt, the taste of water and the landscape view — discloses an entire *semiotics of perception,* in which affective qualities, perceived as immanent in the world, act on the subjects through the mediation of the body. But this could only happen *after* a somatic and social process of learning had occurred, consisting of intense apprenticeship and ascetic practice[46]. Recalling the words of Greimas from his book *De l'Imperfection* :

> The smell of carnation and the smell of rose are certainly, at once, recognisable as metonymies of the carnation and the rose : with regard to their mode of formation, they are not different from the visual *Gestalten* "read" by someone who knows a bit about flowers. Yet, hidden under these original designations, perfumed harmonies must unveil their coalescences and correspondences and, through dreadful, exalting fascinations, guide the subject toward new significations produced by intimate and absorbing conjunction with the sacred, carnal, and spiritual. [...] Therefore, figuration is not a simple ornament of things : it is that screen of appearance whose virtue consists in disclosing itself, letting others glimpse at itself as a possibility of further sense, thanks to, or because of, its imperfection. The subject's temperament hence regains the immanence of the sensible.[47]

46 Cf. E. Landowski, "L'esthésie comme processus et comme apprentissage", *Passions sans nom, op. cit.*, pp. 153-158.

47 *De l'Imperfection, op. cit.*, p. 58. Cf. C. Segre, "The Style of Greimas and Its Transformations", *New Literary History,* 20, 3, 1989, pp. 679-692.

The water, its taste, and the landscape perceived by the ascetics, then, while appearing as recognisable Gestalten of the world (i.e. as identifiable figures), simultaneously presented themselves as "imperfect" figures, i.e. open figures that are filled with further aesthesic and affective meanings arising precisely during the process of perception. It is for this reason that the water, its taste, and the landscape, could manifest themselves to the trained ascetics as elements which opened up further possibilities of signification. Water, for example, disclosed its refreshing property, its ability to generate pleasure and energising effects[48]. It produced a "collective aesthesis" — an intersubjectively shared way of perceiving and feeling — thus presenting itself as much more than mere water. So everybody in the group could notice the shift that occurred when these figures "disclosed" themselves, that is when they presented themselves as more than mere objects, revealing their nuanced properties and affecting the perceivers in various ways, to the point of *inverting the initial relationship between subject and object* altogether. During this process, defined by Greimas as aesthetic apprehension (*saisie esthétique*), when time seems to stop, the world overwhelms humans, merging with them[49]. The affinity with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted by Greimas, is here rather evident, especially if we think about Merleau-Ponty's notion of "intentional transgression" in *Signs*. This notion precisely refers to the process through which the ordinary relation we have with objects is reversed, and the latter ones are given the status of "subjects"[50]. This concept is further elaborated in Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible* in which, when describing the chiasm and intertwining relation between body and world (a relation that he calls "flesh of the world"), the philosopher even states that "the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests"[51] can itself be conceived as *the language of a world that speaks to us*.

In Alessandro Duranti's recent book *The Anthropology of Intentions,* an in-depth re-examination of Husserl's philosophy, we also find out that the German phenomenologist's position — described in the unpublished works recently made available in his *Nachlass,* and consisting of a vast number of lecture notes and manuscripts saved from the Nazis after his death in 1939 — very closely resembled some of the ideas presented many years later by Merleau-Ponty[52]. In these scripts Edmund Husserl describes for example how the objects "out there" exert

48 For another ethnographic case in China, in which tasting the water is considered as a far more dangerous activity for the fieldworker, related to trance and spirit possession, see J. DeBernardi, "Tasting the Water", in D. Tedlock and B. Mannheim (eds.), *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture,* Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, pp. 179-197.

49 *De l'Imperfection, op. cit.*, pp. 30, 45. On the notion of "aesthetic apprehension" (*saisie*), cf. also J. Geninasca, "Le regard esthétique", *La parole littéraire,* Paris, PUF, 1997 ; E. Landowski, "La rencontre esthétique", *Passions sans nom, op. cit.*, chap. 5.

50 Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes,* Paris, Gallimard, 1960 ; Eng. trans. *Signs,* Evanston, Ill., Northwestern UP, 1964, p. 94.

51 Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible,* Paris, Gallimard, 1964 ; Eng. trans. *The Visible and the Invisible,* Evanston, Ill., Northwestern UP, 1968, p. 155.

52 Cf. A. Duranti, *The Anthropology of Intentions,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2015.

a specific affective pull on subjects, and how, during the mutual constitution of self and world, the fundamental role in the construction of Ego is in fact played by the Other[53].

5. Regimes of interaction

The forms of ethnographic encounter I described in the previous chapters are by no means peculiar to the case I investigated. These modes of experience are instead commonly found in the field and in anthropological literature. A good example is provided by Rabinow's work quoted above, in which the anthropologist tries to analyse the ethnographic process itself, through a detailed account of the interactions he had with his informants in Morocco while collecting data for his PhD dissertation[54]. Besides providing a narrative characterisation of his main informants, he reflexively describes how his own relationship with them changed over time, together with the evolving circumstances of his fieldwork. In doing so, he presents an account of his encounter with the ethnographic other, and of the production of anthropological knowledge through a mutually constructed ground of experience, involving both the informants and the researcher.

Some of the scenarios Rabinow describes are strikingly similar to the ones I analysed above. The villagers from Sidi Lahcen, strategically using his presence there to enhance their lineages and factions or persuading him to drive them daily to the main city Sefrou for their personal business, are described as acute observers. They continuously test the ethnographer and negotiate their relationship with him, either including or excluding him from their activities, cooperating with him or trying to exert a relation of power. The way informants situate his position in the field, and react to his own reactions, not only determines the ethnographer's access to knowledge, but also reveals something about the nature of social interaction itself. Interestingly, Eric Landowski has attempted to analyse the scenarios described by Rabinow in his book, according to a model of semiotic *regimes of interaction* he proposed in other publications[55]. Landowski describes four regimes, each corresponding to a different logic of interaction (fig. 3).

53 Cf. E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis : Lectures on Transcendental Logic,* trans. A.J. Steinbock, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2001, pp. 196-197 ; quoted in A. Duranti, *The Anthropology of Intentions, op. cit.*, p. 29.

54 P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, op. cit.*

55 E. Landowski, "L'épreuve de l'autre", *Sign Systems Studies,* 34, 2, 2006, pp. 317-338.

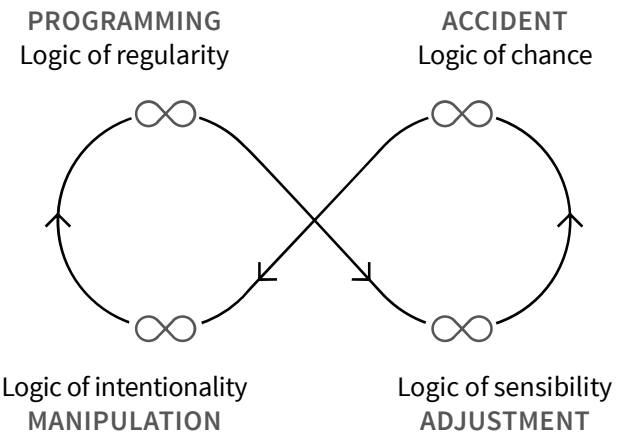

Figure 3. Regimes of interaction[56].

These semiotic regimes are : programming, based on a logic of regularity ; manipulation, based on the logic of intentionality ; accident, based on a logic of chance ; and finally adjustment, based on sensibility. In the regime of *programming,* interactions between actors are stipulated according to certain patterns and courses of action expected or actualised, trying to reduce as much as possible the risk of uncertainty, but also producing a desemantisation of everyday life through routine. People and things are interpreted, controlled and approached according to plans, operations and expected outcomes, and such regularity of events is achieved through repetition, by following a certain script or playing fixed roles[57].

A second regime, *manipulation*, characterises modes of interaction in which actants try to impose their own system of values on the others, through adulation, intimidation, deception, provocation, seduction, persuasion, promise, etc., in order to affect their courses of action. By acting as, or evoking, a certain Sender, an actor may use his or her authority, or offer a certain object, to convince their interlocutor to do something for them, or to accept a certain state of affairs. In the same way, a sorcerer can bend a deity to his own will, or trick a demon to chase him away, by performing magical ritual actions or powerful formulas, thus manipulating forms of nonhuman agency. Manipulation acts on the modal competence of the others, along the lines of intentionality, and using strategic forms of rationality which work in intersubjective and often mutual ways[58].

The third regime, *accident,* focuses on chance as main rationale. Here interaction with the human or nonhuman other escapes from the predictability of the programming regime, and from the control of the manipulation regime. Relations and events are completely unexpected and beyond regulation, and the only thing we can do is to accept what happened, even if absurd, chaotic or

56 Adapted from E. Landowski, *Les interactions risquées,* Limoges, Pulim, 2005 ; It. trans. *Rischiare nelle interazioni,* Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2010, p. 92.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-22.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-27.

above our comprehension. Contrary to the lessening of meaning provided by void repetition and obsessive planning, here meaning might be way too much to handle. Whether it is blind fortune or a terrible destiny which knocked on our door, we can however take the chance and entrust ourselves to the open possibility of the unknown. This regime might thus represent pure risk, but also a meaningful break from an empty routine[59].

The final and fourth regime, *adjustment,* directly involves the body and sensibility of actors in mutual interaction. Like in a dance, in war, in love, when riding a horse, using a tool or engaging in some artistic activity, we often need to dynamically attune to the moves, the rhythm, pace, force, intensity, and material and bodily presence of an entity we do recognise as an interactant, even when its nature seems to be purely mechanic[60]. To draw from a classic anthropological work, such is the case of the car described by Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée sauvage* :

> The American Indian who deciphers a trail by means of imperceptible clues, or the Australian who unhesitatingly identifies footprints left by a random member of his group (Meggitt) does not proceed any differently than ourselves do when we are driving a car and judge from a single glance, a slight shift in the direction of the wheels, a fluctuation of engine speed, or even from the supposed intention of a look, the moment to pass or avoid another vehicle. However incongruous it may seem, this comparison is rich in instruction ; for what sharpens our faculties, stimulates our perception, and gives assurance to our judgments is, on the one hand, that the means at our disposal and the risks that we run are incomparably augmented by the mechanical power of the engine, and, on the other hand, that the tension that results from feeling this embodied power is exercised in a series of dialogues with other drivers whose intentions, the same as our own, are translated into signs that we constantly strive to decipher because, precisely, these are signs, and call for intellectual effort. [...] And it is in fact beyond them in that it entails a confrontation, not exactly between either men or natural laws, but between systems of natural forces humanized by the intentions of drivers, and men transformed into natural forces by the physical energy of which they are the mediators. [...] The beings involved confront each other simultaneously as subjects and as objects, and, in the code they employ, a simple variation in the distance separating them has the force of a silent adjuration.[61]

The car described here is not perceived as an inert or passive object, but as an active force that confronts the driver and interacts with him or her, in a process of mutual adjustment. This process is based on perceptive qualities, sensibility, and the bodily feeling of forces and tensions which affect both the parties involved. Humans and the world do not only mirror each other through a reciprocity of perspectives, but they actually transform each other — the man into natural forces and the car into human extension — creating a tension that arises from "feeling this embodied power". Such somatic tension has the effect of sharpening the sensory faculties, adjusting the interactants' position to imperceptible clues, slight turns, fluctuations in movements, glances and looks, in

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-85.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-62.

61 C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage,* Paris, Plon, 1962 ; Eng. trans. *Wild Thought : A New Translation of La Pensée sauvage,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 250-251.

other words to signs (or better *moves*[62]) embodied and interpreted by human and nonhuman actors.

If we now reconsider the ethnographic descriptions presented in the previous chapters, we can recognise different scenarios of interaction, possibly related to these semiotic regimes. To my eagerness to apply field research methods to the study of a community of ascetic practice, and to my initial 'objective' stance in approaching them — an attitude we could connect to the *programming* regime — the ascetics immediately responded with modes of interaction we could analyse in terms of *manipulation*. Making me play different actantial positions and thematic roles ; strategically using my status of foreign academic ; deflecting my intentionality towards the enhancement of their prestige : these were only some of the manipulations of my modal competence, which I had to renegotiate in the field. At the same time, the regimes of interaction above could be observed not only in the relation between ethnographer and practitioners, but also among the practitioners themselves, and in the relation between ascetics, ritual space, and deities. While ritual activity was often presented and learnt by practitioners in terms of repetition of actions, and regularity in following certain patterns and procedures (Jp. *sahō*) — according to programmes of ceremonial action — the application of such programmes often involved an interaction with deities who acted upon the modal competence of the ascetics. The latter mode of interaction with nonhuman actors presented all the characteristics of a manipulation, which affected the courses of action of the practitioners through a *modalisation of space*. Access and ritual use of space were thus regulated by Hōki bosatsu and other deities through deontic interdictions, prescriptions, permissions, etc., according to the degree of power and knowledge shared by the ascetics.

Moreover, the ritual training of the practitioners during the *tsukiichikai* sessions, as described above, included frequent oversights and unpredictable mistakes in the ritual procedure, thus often falling into a logic of chance[63]. This regime of *accident* was normally accepted by elder ascetics as part of the training itself. However, it was also counterbalanced by a bodily readjustment of the practitioners to the new situation. When events went off the script, the ascetic apprentices always tried to follow the ritual procedure, even in an imperfect way through progressive attuning, in order to get the ritual done. The latter regime of interaction, which we called *adjustment*, was governed by a logic of sensibility of the apprentice towards the other participants and the material environment. But

62 According to Landowski, whereas a "sign" *has a meaning* that stems from some predefined code, permitting its "reading", an embodied "move" *makes sense*, a sense which is to be immediately "grasped" among sensitive interactants, regardless of any precodified system. Cf. E. Landowski, "Structural, yet existential" (IV.2. Regimes of meaning in the interaction), in E. Tarasti (ed.), *Transcending Signs,* Berlin, Mouton-de Gruyter (forthcoming). Cf. a similar interpretation provided by Tim Ingold about the notion of *clue*, in T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment,* London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 20-22. However, see also Paolo Fabbri's reinterpretation of signs as affective forces — "a thymic variation, a variation of tension and relaxation within the text" — or in a more Spinozian way, as "*effects* of actions on bodies, bodies acting on other bodies" (P. Fabbri, *La svolta semiotica, op. cit.*, p. 97).

63 For a different interpretation of mistakes, slips of the tongue, and inexperience, based on the enunciation of an actant-body, see also J. Fontanille, *Séma & soma. Les figures du corps,* Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2004 ; It. trans. *Figure del corpo,* Rome, Meltemi, 2004, pp. 45-124.

it was also closely connected to the notion of *mi ni tsukeru* ("learning through the body"), which was often discussed by the practitioners as the best way to learn and master (Jp. *osameru*) ascetic powers (Jp. *gen*). Also the experience of tasting the water and perceiving the landscape described in the previous chapter, offers a good example of adjustment regime. The somatic training of the ascetic form of life produces a particular mode of experience based on perceptive qualities and bodily mediation of meaning. These affective and aesthesic dynamics are often presented by the ascetics as transcending both the individual and the human, insofar as they are intersubjectively shared between the group of ascetics, the landscape, as well as the deities and ancestors who inhabit it. In the case of the collective and affective experience I described, as with the relation between the car and the driver analysed by Lévi-Strauss, natural world and ascetics seem to inform each other, to mutually adjust according to a logic of sensibility. This mode of interaction is based on a particular way of perceiving the environment and the relation between humans, of "grasping" their "sense" (as opposed to hypothetically reading their meaning). The work on the bodies through fasting and walking in the forest, has in fact the effect of *re-motivating bonds within the group* and its connection to a *semiotics of the natural world.*

An interesting aspect of these semiotic regimes is that, besides describing a passage from one mode of interaction to another, each of the regimes may contain all the other logics. This mechanism of recursivity is shown in figure 3 by the presence of the infinity symbol inside each of the four sections. Although a certain regime, like for example the one of accident, defines an overall trend emerging in that mode of interaction (based on chance), the other logics (sensibility, regularity, and intentionality) may be virtually present in the situation where such interaction occurs, and may be actualised by the actors involved, modulating the regime in different ways. The arrival of the highly skilled monk in the group may well have thwarted my expectations — when he limited my access to the field and downplayed my presence in the group as a researcher. However, such unpredictable event that we could associate with the regime of accident, was also characterised by a logic of intentionality, insofar as the monk was acting as a Sender for me and the members of the community. And although I had to negotiate again my presence in field, I was ultimately sympathetic to him, adopting a logic of sensibility towards his reasons, as this event opened the chance for me to reflexively analyse my own position in relation to the dynamics of authority within the group.

However, perhaps one of the most striking elements of all these interactions, as they emerge from ethnographic experience, is their inner *recalcitrance.* We understood recalcitrance as a particular quality of the human and nonhuman actors we are working with, which brings us to question our own theoretical and methodological assumptions, and brings the ethnographic subjects themselves to rearrange their own systems of values and conventional sense of reality. This is certainly present in the regime of accident, whose logic of chance and unpredictability unsettles our expectations. The example of the monk, who suddenly

forced me to renegotiate trust with the group, well illustrates this point. Moreover, recalcitrance may also be found in the manipulation and programming regimes, in which subjects try to alter each other's values, intentionality and courses of action, or try to apply regularities to their behaviour, often finding resistance to this. My participation in business meetings, requested by the community of ascetics, or the difficulty in following the ritual format experienced by apprentices, respectively show the recalcitrant ability of the informants to divert the somehow manipulative intentionalities of the researcher, and the recalcitrance of ritual apprenticeship as programmed repetition, which aims at transforming the participant. But perhaps one of the modes of interaction which most epitomised recalcitrance was, in my fieldwork, the regime of adjustment. The bodily experience of pilgrimage, chanting, attending night vigils, fasting and walking on fire, intends in fact to deeply reconfigure the practitioners' world, through the construction of new values and forms of subjectivity, based on harmonisation and reciprocal transformation between them and the sacred environment of local gods (kami) and buddhas. It was the recalcitrant character of my process of adjustment to ascetic practice, that forced me to reconsider the limits of my bodily resilience and endurance. Because of this, I started focusing on my own body as a living, experiential laboratory of semiotic analysis, for an understanding of the phenomenon called asceticism, and of ethnographic practice more in general.

What needed to be described in semiotic terms was thus the process of *learning* triggered by my own encounter with the field and the cultural texts. This process of apprenticeship unfolded through a series of *translations* situated at the microphysical level of experience, in the small adjustments through which I explored a particular *form of life,* the ascetic one[64]. These adjustments had the effect of considerably reducing the significance given to a form of subjectivity conceived *a priori* as human. The ascetic, in fact, renounces the *self* or, more precisely, he or she actually discovers that *the self is a multitude*[65] , a network that connects rather than divides *humans, gods, places and discourses of the natural world*.

6. Learning from recalcitrance

6.1. Translation as apprenticeship

At the beginning of this article we discussed two contrasting positions, respectively presented by Coquet and Lotman, concerning the relation between researchers and their field of inquiry. These two points of view were connected to different semiotic understandings of how ethnographic work may be conducted

64 On the semiotic notion of "form of life", see C. Zilberberg, "Le jardin comme forme de vie", *Tropelias. Revista de Teoria de la Literatura Y Literatura Comparada,* 7-8, 1996 ; It. trans. "Il giardino come forma di vita", in *Giardini e altri terreni sensibili,* Rome, Aracne, 2019, pp. 39-64.

65 Cf. G. Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective,* Paris, Aubier, 1989 ; It. trans. *L'individuazione psichica e collettiva,* Roma, DeriveApprodi, 2001.

in anthropology and social sciences. According to Coquet, one of the main tasks of the ethnographers would be to translate and convey the affective and bodily experience (*physis*) they shared with their ethnographic subjects on fieldwork, into the reflexive language (*logos*) of ethnographic writing[66]. But such a translation of *physis* into *logos*, or somatic experience into language, presupposes that, before this process of inscription occurs, a common experiential field should already be established between ethnographers and informants — an intersomatic phenomenological ground in which the same perceptions and emotions may be felt and shared among all the parties involved.

Such a common experiential ground is instead questioned by Lotman. His perspective, as we already noted, intends to show how ethnographers and informants inevitably start from different planes of social and cultural reality, urging us to consider how the presence of the researcher in the field affects the investigation. Rather than obliterating *differences* between fieldworker and informants, Lotman invites us to expose them, analysing the gap between the parties involved in terms of a process of translation between cultural languages. Therefore, while, according to Coquet, the process of translation mainly occurs *ad quem*, i.e. afterwards between author and readers, according to Lotman it would already start *ab quo*, from the beginning of the fieldwork, between the scholar and the informants. The latter idea also characterised Rabinow's account of his fieldwork in Morocco, in which the growing and shifting relations established between himself and his informants became the core of his investigation. As we have seen in my ethnographic account of Japanese mountain ascetics, such relations emerging in the field often involve power, authority, hierarchy and asymmetrical distribution of agency.

We should however recall what Gilles Deleuze wrote in his book on Foucault : "Power-relations are the differential relations which determine particular features (affects)"[67]. In other words, *differential relations* involving power, authority

66 However, we need to be careful before creating misleading hierarchies between fieldwork and deskwork (cf. B. Mannheim and D. Tedlock, "Introduction", in D. Tedlock and B. Mannheim (eds.), *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture,* Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, pp. 2, 18). We might argue in fact that somatic *physis* and discursive *logos* are both present in fieldwork, intertwined together with different degrees of entanglement.

67 G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, Paris, Minuit, 1986 ; Eng. trans. *Foucault*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 75. My reading of Deleuze considerably differs from Brian Massumi's interpretation (in *Parables for the Virtual, op. cit.*, pp. 23-45) and from other contemporary anthropological reflections which tend to divide "affect" from discourse (C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape,* New York, Columbia UP, 2006 ; K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* Durham, Duke UP, 2007 ; Y. Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space,* Durham, Duke UP, 2012). Such views reinforce a modern Protestant ideology of separation between an interior language, now located in the cognitive paths of the mind, and an external world, associated with bodily perception, materiality and affect (cf. W. Keane, *Protestant Moderns,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007 ; R. Bauman and C. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003). However, we might argue that Massumi's notion of the autonomy of affect from discourse, does not come from Deleuze but from the projection of this semiotic ideology (or *episteme*) which has become particularly influential in Anglo-American scholarship. Rather than being pre-semiotic, for Deleuze and Guattari corporeality and affect are in fact part of a "presignifying semiotic" (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux,* Paris, Minuit, 1980 ; Eng. trans. *A Thousand Plateaus,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 117), and "a semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive [...]. Language is, in Weinreich's words, 'an essentially heterogeneous reality'" (*ibid.*, p. 7).

and asymmetry do not necessarily prevent the construction of a *common affective field*. As we have seen in our analysis of *aesthesis* (modes of perception) and affect in ascetic experience, differential relations become the ground upon which such a field may be actualised. Differences with *recalcitrant subjects* of various kind and appearance, from demanding ascetics and belligerent monks, to deities sometimes uncompromising, sometimes permissive — without forgetting the relation with another form of otherness, the mountain itself and its particular sensory semiotics — all such differences are to be translated by ethnographers, through a process of learning.

We might argue in fact that in ethnographic fieldwork, all differences are necessarily translated through our *bodily experience,* and that *such a process of translation consists in a form of apprenticeship.* It is no wonder that one of the great masters of ethnographic work, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, had already recognised the fundamental role played by the process of learning in fieldwork ("you are their pupil, an infant to be taught and guided"[68]), and the huge impact this process has on the ethnographer's subjectivity ("[anthropologists are] transformed by the people they are making a study of"[69]). The act of translating differential relations in the field may thus be conceptualised as a process of apprenticeship under the guidance of the ethnographic actors, learning to see from their point of view. The fact of being continuously acted upon by other ascetics, deities, and by the mountain environment, not only moved me from the position of an observer (and sanctioning Sender) to the one of the observed (and sanctioned Subject), but also produced another curious perspectival inversion. As argued by Marc Augé in his book on *Oblivion,* we could talk about a sort of *methodological reversal,* in which questions are no longer posed by the analyst, but *by the ethnographic actors themselves*[70].

How to analyse such a change of perspectives and agencies, which characterises the way we translate differences in the field by learning from our *human and nonhuman informants,* always trying to *control equivocations* which inevitably arise ? We tried to do so by looking at the shift of actantial positions played in the field, in different *regimes of interaction* with practitioners and deities — accidents, manipulations, programming, and adjustments — which triggered dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from the field itself. We thus conceived the field as a *semiotic text* whose boundaries are constantly negotiated by fieldworker and informants through these regimes, and through a process of fiduciary construction, i.e. the intersubjective construction of *trust*. But we also saw that an important role in this analysis was played by the recognition of *spatial modalisations* investing ritual actions, and generated by sacred deities. Deities were considered as the main source of *interdictions* and *prescriptions* for both ethnographer and practitioners, although *facultativity* and *permission* could also be negotiated and

68 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande, op. cit.*, pp. 253-254.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

70 Cf. M. Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli,* Paris, Payot, 1998 ; Eng. trans. *Oblivion,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 24.

granted during a process of ritual apprenticeship which inevitably involved approximations, errors, and adjustments.

We then explored the *somatic and sensible dimension* of doing ethnography within a community of ascetic practice, leading to a radical reversal of bodily values and rhythms of the ethnographers, who gradually learn to experience different ways of conceiving both the world and themselves. Such an analysis highlighted the role played by the body in the construction of subjectivities, and how bodily limits and potentialities are constantly pushed forward in ascetic practice. We examined a particular example of semiotic reconfiguration of times, spaces, and actors through ascetic practice on the Katsuragi mountains, triggered by somatic perception and affectivity. We saw in fact how the "taste of water", intersubjectively shared during ascetic practice through a *collective form of aesthesis,* produced an inversion of the relation between subjects and objects, ascetics and the natural world. Figures started to disclose themselves, opening up to further possibilities of signification arising in the process of perception. This was by no means the only possible way of conceiving *the mountain* and its environment, as this entity rather appears as a *multi-layered semiotics of the natural world,* produced by multiple enunciations, including ritual, mythological, historical, hikers' and tourist enunciations[71]. However, this form of experience reminded all participants of the need to translate our differential relations with the mountain itself, perhaps the most recalcitrant of all subjects, whose sensory interaction was so powerful on that and other occasions, as to renew both our bodily strengths and our perception of the world.

Current interpretations of asceticism (from Grk. *áskēsis* or "training, exercise"), tend to focus either on the embodiment of a certain textual tradition which allows ascetics to get rid of their own individual self[72], or on Foucauldian notions of self-cultivation, through which ascetics lose their older subjectivities in the process of becoming new ethical subjects[73]. Although the dimension of learning has been rightly stressed in anthropological studies on asceticism[74], emphasis on the process of self-transformation of individual practitioners, and on the social relations enacted within their groups, reinforced the idea of human individual ascetics working on themselves. Even if ascetics are portrayed as affected by environmental conditions[75], the process of learning and bodily training in which they are involved, and which forms the core of the practice, is never seen

71 T. Padoan, "On the Semiotics of Space in the Study of Religions", *op. cit.* ; F. Sedda and T. Padoan, "Sémiotique et anthropologie", in A. Biglari, N. Roelens (eds.), *Sémiotique en interface,* Paris, Kimé, 2018, pp. 55-57.

72 G. Flood, *The Ascetic Self,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2004 ; T. Lobetti, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion,* London, Routledge, 2014.

73 J. Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation : Religion, Economy, and Society among the Jains,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995 ; J. Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism,* Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010 ; M. Foucault, "A propos de la généalogie de l'éthique", *Dits et écrits (1954-1988),* tome IV : 1980-1988, Paris, Gallimard, 1994 ; Eng. trans. "On the Genealogy of Ethics", in P. Rabinow (ed.), *Essential Works of Michel Foucault,* vol. 1 : *Ethics : Subjectivity and Truth,* New York, The New Press, 1997, pp. 253-80.

74 J. Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism, op. cit.*, p. 20.

75 T. Lobetti, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion, op. cit.*, pp. 48-65.

as constituted *by progressive adjustments* that are also produced by an *interaction with nonhuman actors,* including deities and places. With a semiotic analysis of the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted among Japanese ascetics, I have instead tried to demonstrate how both kinds of nonhuman actors, i.e. deities and the mountain, do play an active role in the process of ascetic apprenticeship. This process also consisted in a bodily, affective and sensory adjustment between subjects, leading to the construction of an expanded form of ascetic self *beyond the individual and beyond the human,* characterising ascetic practice as a new form of life adopted by practitioners.

6.2. Differential relations

In other words, between Lotman and Coquet's positions, i.e. between the two translations *ab quo* and *ad quem,* a long process of learning takes place, which involves the body of the ethnographer in a myriad of small accidents, manipulations, programmings, and adjustments. These are what we have finally defined, with Landowski, *regimes of interactions,* as a way to describe the innumerable micro-interactions through which ethnographers translate differential relations in the field.

But such interactions not always involve subjects who easily comply to our expectations, about how we would like to observe and study them. Quite the contrary, following Latour and Stenger, human and nonhuman actors we meet in the field are more often *recalcitrant,* as they constantly reverse not only our expectations about who observes whom, and who is acted upon, but also the way in which we think and perceive, that is our own sense of reality. *All interactions on fieldwork are potentially recalcitrant,* insofar as they are able to challenge or defy our theories and hypotheses, forcing us to continuously reshape them. As argued by Marilyn Strathern, "what one thus encounters in making interpretations are always counter-interpretations"[76]. This "reconception"[77] of the semiotic regimes of interaction as recalcitrant may better encapsulate how we learn to translate differential relations with human and nonhuman others in the field. Although as stated by Tim Ingold, "otherness is ever-emergent from within the matrix of relations within which all are immersed *ab initio*"[78], the notion of recalcitrance leads us to consider an important idea : *otherness too is a particular form of relation* — very complex, multi-layered, and entangled — which characterises our own hybrid (human-nonhuman) lifeworlds, our being in a pluriverse[79].

The idea that otherness may be a form of relation which binds and separates at the same time has been well expressed by Rupert Stasch in his ethnography of

76 M. Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect,* London, Athlone Press, 1999, p. 239.

77 N. Goodman and C. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences,* Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1988.

78 T. Ingold, "Art and Anthropology for a Sustainable World", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.),* 25, 2019, p. 663.

79 M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser (eds.), *A World of Many Worlds,* Durham, Duke UP, 2018.

Korowai[80]. In West Papua, Indonesia, Korowai people continuously experience otherness as part of what relates them to their tribe, to their environment, to their spirits, and even to their next of kin. Korowai live on treehouses fifteen feet above ground, a mile from the house of their next neighbours within the same tribe, thus setting their domestic space apart from the rest of the villagers and claiming individual landownership over such a vast territory. But they highly value their practices of interaction as "guests" and "owners", in which they visit their neighbours through elaborate rituals, crossing such a territorial separation. Korowai thus live their relationship with other villagers as an ambiguous form of otherness, as both proximity and distance. Sociality for them is embedded with recalcitrance. Even when mutual distance is crossed, recalcitrance is never removed. It is instead inscribed in the form of such relationships. This ambiguity applies to the way they deal with other people, both kins and strangers. They use kinship terms to address others inside and outside their community, but they also say such people are "not a relative", they are instead *yani* ("other, strange"). In fact, they also say of themselves, "I have no relatives". Social relations are inherently recalcitrant for them, because these are all deeply ambiguous, characterised by both intimacy and strangeness at the same time. Also, ambiguity is present in the way they interact with nonhuman others. Korowai people see their world as populated by demons (*laleo*) and witches (*xaxua*), from whom they constantly try to stay separate. While witches cause humans to die, demons are considered an "intimate counterpart to humanity", since demons are what humans actually become after death, thus turning into dead relatives of the living. Therefore, recalcitrance for Korowai people reaches its highest form in kinship, in the way they intertwine two extreme polarities, otherness with sameness, demonic presences with their next of kin. Newborn children themselves are considered as repulsively demonic and not human by their mothers, and yet they experience intense positive attachment with parents despite their difference. Bonds between maternal uncles and sister's children are strong and emotionally charged, and yet they belong to different clans, different households and different lands. As Stasch aptly puts it, "the relatives' separateness is part of their intimacy"[81].

The whole ethnographic work done by Stasch on Korowai people shows an extreme example of how *sociality* between humans, and between humans and nonhumans, may be inherently recalcitrant. Sociality may not necessarily correspond to the Western modern idea of society as based on human relations of pure mutual identifications, produced by sharing the same space, kin, and social experience. Such an idea, which we might relate to Thomas Hobbes' theory of social contract, and later to Émile Durkheim's social solidarity, obscures the fact that all relations are complex and nuanced, animated by both intimacy and strangeness, proximity and distance at once, and that *recalcitrance* might instead

80 R. Stasch, *Society of Others,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009.

81 R. Stasch, *Society of Others, op. cit.*, p. 6.

be an intrinsic part of them. In line with our discussion of ritual and ascetic apprenticeship in Katsuragi, could we thus consider otherness as a legitimate form of social relation, which has recalcitrance as one of its qualities ?

This does not sound very strange, especially if we take into account the work of another anthropologist of Melanesia as Marilyn Strathern, who in her *The Gender of the Gift* explicitly wrote about sexual and *kula* shells transactions as "relations which separate". As Strathern well puts it, "we shall not get very far in the analysis of gift exchange without realising that gifts quite crucially sever and detach people from people"[82]. Gifts are in fact virtual *dispositifs* of recalcitrance. Peter Geschiere too has pointed out that recent English translations of Marcel Mauss' notion of *rendre le don* as "to reciprocate the gift" are quite problematic, because they have produced inaccurate understandings of gift-giving practices as based on a logic of generalised reciprocity and positive solidarity. A more correct translation of *rendre le don* should instead be "to return the gift", keeping in mind that such a form of transaction involves much more obligation, ambiguity and danger than reciprocity[83]. Every gift triggers a process of both connection and separation, or better, a form of interaction which is inherently recalcitrant. As Mauss magisterially showed in his classic work, gift-giving involves the obligation to return — codified in many ancient juridical systems — lest "serious harm might befall me, even death"[84]. The main purpose of gift exchange is to legally regulate and stipulate social relations, reshaping the subjects involved through a logic of *prestations* and *contre-prestations,* in unstable situations of competition, rivalry, magical acts, passage of property, war, commerce, alliance, circulation of people and things. The inner ambiguity of such relations, and the potential recalcitrance of the other, are never lost in gift-giving. They are even inscribed in etymologies, if we consider the two meanings of the word *Gift* in ancient Germanic languages : "gift" but also "poison"[85].

Such an ambiguity and risk, intrinsic to all interactions, is better expressed through the principle of recalcitrance. The recalcitrance of otherness, which we encounter in fieldwork and in social life, when interacting with human or non-human actors, is not the opposite of sociality. Instead, it is likely to be the very fabric, the inner stuff of sociality. We might consider recalcitrance as a form of *transduction,* which Gilbert Simondon describes as the intermediate gradient between two affective polarities, the medium term which stretches between one side or the other of a differential relation[86]. Instead of considering social life in strict categorical terms, as either communality or its mere absence, recalcitrance invites us *to rethink the passage from conflict to contract in scalar terms,* as a

82 M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 191.

83 P. Geschiere, "Sociality and Its Dangers : Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust", in N. Long and H. Moore (eds.), *Sociality : New Directions,* New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2013, pp. 61-82.

84 M. Mauss, "Essai sur le don" [1923-4], in *Sociologie et anthropologie,* Paris, PUF, 1950 ; Eng. trans. *The Gift,* London, Routledge, 2002, p. 14.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

86 G. Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective, op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

graduality which still retains a difference. In other words, the recalcitrance of social interactions might not be the negation of affective and sensory communality, but what actually triggers it, as its intimate counterpart.

Conclusion

Contrary to the *extension* of anthropological comparison — which is an open platform for theoretical experimentation and for broad translations between molar and objectified (*disengaged*) ethno-taxonomies — ethnography offers an *intensity* that is deep and entangled[87], enmeshed with people, places, rituals, gods, their molecular and subjectified (*engaged*) life-histories and their genealogies in the *longue durée*. But it is from the intensity of relations produced during ethnographic fieldwork, that recalcitrance emerges as a quality of social interaction, as *disjunctive synthesis* of the other[88]. I would like to exemplify this concept by means of a last ethnographic example.

Kōun was an old but vigorous Japanese man in his mid-seventies, with a stern look and leathery face, who seemed to epitomise the tradition of mountain asceticism and its harsh conditions of practice. He had been the first to join the Tsukasakō group in 2005, and had already been practising there since the early Nineties, when he met the father of the current abbot, who convinced him to become an ascetic. Besides being an expert practitioner, Kōun was also extremely popular and much beloved among other members, as he seemed to display at once two radically different forms of life : he could be extremely strict and uncompromising in his ascetic practice, but he could also indulge in eccentric behaviour, engaging in heavy drinking and loud shouting, while singing *enka* (post-war sentimental songs) in crowded karaoke venues. Yet this ambiguity was an intrinsic part of his character, insofar as even in his most easy-going moments he would suddenly reprimand younger members, harshly instructing them on the right attitudes and values to be followed by ascetic practitioners.

Recalcitrance was an inner quality of the relations he would establish with the others, including the leader of the group. During one of the interviews in 2014, he told me that since the former abbot (father of the current leader Kōryū), had asked him to take care of his son while they were on the mountains, a few weeks before he died, he felt the responsibility of assiduously participating in, and financially supporting, the group activities. He jokingly defined this relation with the leader as *kusareen* (lit. “sour karmic relationship”), an undesirable but inseparable relationship, namely a recalcitrant relation born from a moral debt incurred with the former abbot, who had helped him during a very difficult financial period, in the post-bubble economic crisis. This way of conceptualising the obligation to “return the gift” and the relationships ensuing from that, often

87 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille plateaux, op. cit.*, p. 479 ; E. Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales,* Paris, PUF, 2009 ; Eng. trans. *Cannibal Metaphysics,* Minneapolis, Univocal, 2014, p. 118.

88 F. Zourabichvili, *Le vocabulaire de Deleuze,* Paris, Ellipses, 2003 ; Eng. trans. *Deleuze : A Philosophy of the Event, together with The Vocabulary of Deleuze,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2012, pp. 167-171.

reframed through the Buddhist theory of karma, is not uncommon in Japan, and it was frequently evoked by the social actors I was working with, to the point of becoming part of the same relations which shaped my own experience as an ethnographer.

When I visited Katsuragi area again between end-November 2019 and mid-January 2020, Kōun was having some financial difficulties at work — although already in retirement age, he was doing two jobs, one of which was manual and physically demanding — so we decided to organise a small party to cheer him up, on the pretext of welcoming my arrival to Japan. An elder member of the group offered to pay for Kōun and my share, and he left some money before leaving the party. After he left, I insisted to pay, as a token of my appreciation for the many interviews Kōun had granted me in the past. I then suggested to Kōun that he could keep the money provided by the member who had left, as a small support during a difficult period. Although Kōun accepted my suggestion, this small gift and the moral *manque* created by it, triggered a series of *contre-prestations* through which he tried to renegotiate his position towards the other member and a much younger foreign researcher (myself), whose action risked at the time to undermine his own status as the eldest ascetic of the group. Besides returning the favour in other ways to his peer, Kōun turned out with a much more valuable gift for me, his personal *shakujō* — short Buddhist staff with metal rings on top, used to beat the rhythm in ritual chanting. Such a precious object, invested with both religious and affective, thymic values — marked by the name of the previous owner inscribed on the ritual tool — created an almost incommensurable unbalance and asymmetry between me and my informant, when Kōun passed away after my return to Europe. To the religious values of purification and enlightenment, and the phenomenological affective values invested on this object by its recalcitrant owner, new existential values were added by this sad turn of events. These were "life" and "death", namely the ultimate asymmetry between me and Kōun, which left me with the impossibility to return a much more valuable gift than the one he had wished to rebalance for, when he donated me the *shakujō*.

I believe in fact that the last lesson Kōun gave me was about the sense of ethnographic work itself, about the impossibility to fully return the most precious gift we receive from our informants, their own lifeworlds and personal narrative trajectories. This imbalance leaves us with the duty to share and translate what we have learnt. But this is a task that can never adequately compensate for what we actually received, a *contre-prestation* which remains quite imperfect and insufficient, keeping the imbalance open, and keeping with it the *obligation to translate.* An obligation produced by the inherently recalcitrant quality of our ethnographic interactions.

In memory of Ogiso Kōun (1945-2020).

Figure 4. Kōun during the *osegaki* ceremony (Tenpōrinji, 16th August 2017) : *gasshō*. Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

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Résumé : This article explores issues related to ethnographic research, such as "otherness" as a form of relation, the researcher's position, and the difference between anthropological and native knowledge, leading to the production of ethnographic data that can undermine previously established models. In order to approach these issues, I will refer to the notion of "recalcitrant subjects", coined by I. Stengers, and based on the idea that we should turn our attention to objects of analysis that are capable of raising new questions, forcing the researchers to reorganise their instruments and theoretical perspectives. Using the *interaction regimes* formulated by E. Landowski, I will analyse from a semiotic perspective my own field research, conducted within the mountain ascetic group Tsukasakō in Katsuragi, central Japan. The article shows how, far from being based on forms of communality and undifferentiated reciprocity, *ethnography* and *sociality* always involve *heterogeneous actors* and can only emerge from interactions that are *inherently recalcitrant*.

Mots clés : acteurs non humains, anthropologie, apprentissage, bouddhisme contemporain, corps et ascèse, don, esthésie, ethnographie, Japon, matérialité, pratique rituelle, récalcitrance, régimes d'interaction, traduction
Auteurs cités : Jean-Claude Coquet, Gilles Deleuze, Paolo Fabbri, Algirdas J. Greimas, Tim Ingold, Eric Landowski, Bruno Latour, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jurij M. Lotman, Marcel Mauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Rabinow, Gilbert Simondon, Rupert Stasch, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

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