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5 Walking the Sutra

A Semiotic Theory of Pilgrimage

Tatsuma Padoan

Introduction: The Method of Pilgrimage

Michael Taussig, in his thought-provoking book *The Magic of the State* (1997), concerning the construction and circulation of political power through death and its encounters in spirit possession, [1] concludes his analysis by explicitly invoking the idea of 'pilgrimage as method' in anthropology. He sees pilgrimage as analogous to translation: translation between home and shrine, profane and sacred, and official and unofficial voices. Pilgrimage provides a model of 'explanation-as-translation' which could be useful for anthropology: a mode of signification that does not erase images, events, or objects but maintains 'the ghost of the translated within the translation, allowing us to witness the presence of the other' (197). Taussig comes to the conclusion that anthropologists are also pilgrims since they engage in 'an act of transposition' between different domains – the world of their readers and the ethnographic other (198–199).

Although we could criticise Taussig's notion of pilgrimage as a journey across pre-existing profane and sacred domains, his idea of 'pilgrimage as method' based on a principle of translation that connects and transposes, rather than divides, is quite intriguing. His debt to Walter Benjamin's (1969) ideas concerning 'the task of the translator' is here rather evident. According to Taussig, *making sense* of an ethnographic experience does not just consist in transmitting information and data collected in the field. It requires ethnographers first and foremost to *translate* their data into another language that of anthropological discourse, by producing in such discourse 'the echo of the original' (Benjamin 1969: 76). This task involves evoking the presence of the ethnographic subjects encountered in the field and their own way of being in the world. As Benjamin puts it: 'A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully' (1969: 79).

As we will see, the notion of meaning is what might underlie this specific connection between ethnography, translation, and pilgrimage. On the one hand, the idea that meaning can only be grasped through some form of translation is quite old in anthropology and social sciences. Already in *Myth and Meaning*, Claude

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Lévi-Strauss ([1978] 2001) had extended the notion of translation to include that of signification itself, when he stated: '"to mean" means the ability of any kind of data to be translated in a different language' (2001: 4). Therefore, Taussig's idea, also shared by Asad (1986), Hanks (2014), and others (see also Viveiros de Castro 2004; Swift 2022), that anthropologists should think about their own task in terms of 'explanation-as-translation', is more encompassing than one would expect because, as semioticians say, meaning, or better *signification*, is itself an act of translation (Fabbri 2005: 104–105; Lotman 2009: 6). The only way we have to explain something is, in fact, to translate it or paraphrase it into other words, languages, and media (Jakobson 1959). Pilgrims can be also considered as translators insofar as they too make sense of their own life and experience through an *ongoing work of translation*, as will be clear from the ethnographic case I will present below. Yet, the relation between pilgrimage and the problem of meaning does not end with the notion of translation.

One of the definitions of meaning provided in semiotics – especially in the works of semioticians from the Paris School like Algirdas J. Greimas (1990), Paolo Fabbri (2005), Eric Landowski (2004), and Jacques Fontanille (2007) – is expressed through the term *sense*. In contrast to the English term 'meaning', etymologically related to the Old Saxon *mēnian* or 'to have in mind' (Klein 1971), the word 'sense' derives via the French *sens* from the Latin *sensus*, i.e. 'perceiving', 'going in a certain direction', and 'finding out' (cf. Italian *senso*). Although radically transformed during the Enlightenment through the English expression 'common sense', referring to some rational assumption or 'sturdy good judgement' about the world (Blackburn 1996: 70), 'sense' still evokes the link to both perception (cf. Lat *sensus communis*) and the idea of direction, movement, and orientation. In semiotic usage, 'sense' expresses the phenomenological quality of meaning through its link to perception, feeling, and direction as 'oriented intentionality' (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 240; cf. Deleuze 1990; Fontanille 2007: 2), before its articulation as signification and, thus, before we start to explain it, translate it, or interpret it.

Therefore, next to the idea of meaning as translation or *signification*, we also have the idea of meaning as oriented intentionality or *sense*, and these two conceptions are intertwined as two dimensions of the same phenomenon, in a constant interplay. This second definition of meaning as sense also seems to correspond to another important aspect of pilgrimage, not mentioned by Taussig, which is precisely its quality of 'perceiving', 'going in a certain direction', and 'finding out'. Over the last two decades, the topic of movement and mobility has indeed captured increasing attention in the anthropology of pilgrimage (Frey 1998; Michalowski and Dubisch 2001; Coleman and Eade 2004). This development has been accompanied by a reorientation of pilgrimage research towards large-scale issues such as globalisation (Han and Graburn 2010), travel and tourism (Swatos and Tomasi 2002; Badone and Roseman 2004), the politics of memory and heritage (Eade and Katić 2018), media (Seaton et al. 2017), migration (Yamba 1995), and the economic marketplace (Reader 2014; Padoan 2019).

However, given the centrality of mobility in pilgrimage, we also need a careful theorisation of this notion (Urry 2000, 2002), as indicated by Coleman and Eade (2004: 16–17) during their discussion of four different dimensions of movement – as performative, embodied, semantic, and metaphoric action. I would like here to suggest that besides these possible dimensions, pilgrimage is first of all an *oriented action* that is never isolated and independent, whatever the stress or emphasis might be. Even when the journey is valued more than the destination (as documented in the case of the Camino, e.g. by Frey 1998), pilgrimage follows a certain direction and course, where every movement is inserted in chains of actions and passions: every movement exists in view of an action to be performed elsewhere, or following an action occurred somewhere else, and such actions are *affectively* modulated and qualified by semiotic modalities, namely volitions, obligations, abilities, and knowledge (Greimas 1987a: 121–139). As Cheryl Mattingly (2010: 137) has pointed out, 'action, too, demands that we plot', and 'we act because we intend to get something done, to begin something, which we hope will lead us along a desirable route'. We tend to create sense out of situations by constantly reorganising our narratives according to new or pre-existing plans. In pilgrimage such plotting activity involves desirable targets, forms of subjectivity that pilgrims emotionally identify with, sources of legitimation they evoke, and, finally, both interpretations and evaluations of the actions performed. In order to understand the *quality* of movement, we need in other words a *theory of action*.

In this chapter, I will offer my contribution to an outline of this theory through a *semiotic analysis of pilgrimage*.[2] Movement will be explored by an analysis of different spheres of action played out by pilgrims, places, institutions, deities, and other entities involved, what semioticians call *actants* or dynamic positions carried out by human and nonhuman actors (Greimas 1987a: 106–120; Latour 2005).[3] We will see the emergence and mutual interaction in pilgrimage of at least four different actants or spheres of action: *targets*, *subjects*, *sources*, and *evaluators*, although these roles will be further multiplied according to the circumstances. I hope that, through a translation and semiotic mapping of pilgrims' experience, we will be in the position to better describe what I have called *the sense of pilgrimage* – namely the qualified movement and oriented intentionality of pilgrimage as a social practice – by tracing its articulation of values and flow of meanings.

As a specific case study, I will focus on my ethnographic research concerning a Shugen revivalist community of ascetic practice in Japan, the Tsukasakō lay group affiliated to the Shingon esoteric Buddhist temple Tenpōrinji on Mt Kongō, which I have been studying since 2008.[4] This group of ascetics is connected to the current revival of a premodern mountain pilgrimage route, the 28 *Lotus Sutra* mounds in Katsuragi (*Katsuragi no nijūhasshuku kyōzuka*). I could study their efforts to revitalise this pilgrimage route over the years, by conducting interviews and participant observation during ritual performances, pilgrimages, communal gatherings and celebratory events, business meetings, as well as cleaning activities at their main temple. This long-term ethnographic engagement with a revivalist group has provided an opportunity to reflect on Taussig's idea of pilgrimage as method.

Coincidentally, the semantic trail suggested by the term 'methodology' itself may pave the way to our reflections on the sense/orientation of pilgrimage. If we follow its etymology from *meta-hodos* ('method') – with the Greek term *hodos* signifying 'path', 'journey', or 'itinerary' – we can define *methodology* as a discourse (*logos*) over (*meta*) the itinerary itself (*hodos*).

The Targets of Action

It's about 1:30 pm on a very hot day at the end of August when, after having walked for more than four hours through woods and steep paths on the Katsuragi mountains, I line up with the group of 12 ascetics I have been following, in order to perform a ritual in front of a giant rock in the middle of a clearing. The rock is about three metres in diameter and marks the place where, until the Meiji period (1868–1912), stood a large temple called Ishidera or 'rock-temple', once part of a complex of Seven Diamond Temple Lodgings (*Kongō shichibō*), located at the foot of Mt Kongō within a range of two kilometres. At the centre of this complex was the Ōshukubō (Great Temple Lodgings) of the Tenpōrinji, the main temple on top of the mountain ruled by the Katsuragi family, and now a descendant of this very family, the Buddhist reverend Katsuragi Kōryū (b. 1972), is there with us, leading the group of ascetics.

Coming from an ancient aristocratic family, which has been running the Tenpōrinji at least since the fourteenth century, Kōryū decided in 2005 to emulate his grandfather, Katsuragi Mitsugu (1905–1997), in a renewed effort to resurrect the premodern pilgrimage tradition of the 'sutra mounds of the 28 lodges of Katsuragi' (*nijūhasshuku kyōzuka*). He did so by founding a group of lay ascetics called Tsukasakō, which is part of a larger Shugen mountain ascetic revivalist trend that started after the Second World War. Shugendō, literally meaning 'The way to master/acquire ascetic powers', may be described as a Japanese form of mountain asceticism which, according to current views, started being established around the late thirteenth century in major sacred mountain areas (Blair 2015: 272), combining Buddhist Esoteric, Daoist, and shamanic elements with the worship of kami, the local deities.[5] This Shugen pilgrimage route was abolished in 1868 and 1872 by the Meiji government precisely because of its syncretic Shinto-Buddhist character, strongly condemned by the modern nationalistic State Shinto – the official state ideology of the emperor system in the Meiji period. The pilgrimage follows an ancient route across a mountain range for more than a hundred kilometres, where the 28 Chapters of the prominent Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture *Lotus Sutra* were allegedly buried in 28 different stations or 'sutra mounds' by the founder of the movement, the semi-legendary ascetic, En no Gyōja (late seventh century).

So what the ascetics were actually worshipping during that very hot August afternoon was not the giant rock standing in the middle of the clearing but the Chapter 20 of the *Lotus Sutra*, called 'Jōfukyō bosatsu bon' (Chapter 'Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta'), supposedly buried deep under the rock. One of the narratives that

contemporary ascetics often mention, when discussing the origin of the pilgrimage route, is the *Shozan engi* (late twelfth century) which states:

> Ritual procedure of the mansions: under the steps walked by En no Gyōja there are 69.384 characters.
>
> (NST 20: 117, transl. is mine)

These narratives, first written down in medieval times to enhance the role of the Katsuragi mountains as places of asceticism and to attract funding (*kanjin*) from other religious institutions and aristocratic families (Kawasaki 2007), are continuously brought back to memory today, both orally and through a re-enactment of the mythical founder's ritual actions. Furthermore, this specific passage establishes a precise correspondence between the number of Chinese characters contained in the *Lotus Sutra* (69.384) and the number of steps that En no Gyōja undertook to complete the pilgrimage. In other words, in this case, the written text translates into the mountain and the mountain becomes a spatial text not to be 'read' but to be *walked* by the ascetics, following the steps of their legendary founder.

This may be considered an example of *intersemiotic translation* – defined by Roman Jakobson (1959) as a translation from one semiotic system to another – from the written language of the sutra to a *semiotics of the natural world* (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 374–375), namely the spatial landscape of the mountains. According to Jakobson, while *intralingual translation* would concern rewordings and metalinguistic operations within the same verbal language, and *interlingual translation* would characterise 'translation proper' from one verbal language to another, *intersemiotic translation* is 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems' (Jakobson 1959: 233), e.g. 'from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting' (238).[6] Space too could be considered as one of such semiotic systems, i.e. a 'spatial language' (Lotman 1990: 177, 189), but we could also conceive the natural world itself as a vast 'place for the elaboration and practice of multiple semiotic systems' (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 375) that produce significations of different kinds. Greimas and Courtés distinguish such significations in 'signifying points of view' (the way in which specific human and nonhuman collectives perceive the world and its spatial semiotics) and 'signifying practices' (conventional behaviour of human and nonhuman actors), to be analysed as 'discourses of the natural world' (1982: 374–375).

Pilgrims are thus here also intersemiotic translators. And by using the term *translation,* I wish to emphasise that the content of the verbal text of the sutra is not 'read' in the mountain. It is rather 'walked' and perceived through the landscape's phenomenological and 'sensible qualities' (1982: 375). In other words, the sutra is experienced through the *mediation* of the mountain's natural elements and the perceiving body of the practitioner who walks through it. In the same way, as we do not read but rather 'watch' the translation of a book into a movie, semiotic systems are perceived and interpreted in ways that are not necessarily the same

as written texts. Therefore, in order to interpret the landscape as a translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, ascetics need to learn how to walk it, through the performance of rituals, chanting of mantras, fasting, and other bodily techniques. By performing such ascetic practices, pilgrims gradually learn to master their thoughts, bodies, affective dispositions (*kimochi*), and courses of action. And they do it in interaction with the material environment, with local kami gods and Buddhist deities who inhabit the landscape, and with the sutra mounds where the 28 Chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* are worshipped as physical relics (*shari*) and living presence of the Buddha.

What we have been approaching so far is the problem of describing a certain sphere of action, one that both pilgrims and institutions are closely involved in pursuing, cherishing, and worshipping, but also constructing, promoting, and inventing. I will call this sphere the *targets* of action. In other words: what are the aims and purposes towards which pilgrims orientate themselves? The sutra mounds are an example of such focal points of action. As material spots on the mountain landscape towards which the ascetics walk and stop in order to pray, they become Objects of Value (Greimas 1989, 1987a: 84–105), i.e. objects actively constructed by pilgrims, on which they may invest their values, prayers, and emotional dispositions. As one of the practitioners once told me:

> It is by praying that the place becomes important (*taisetsu de*) [...] It does not matter that the place is exactly the authentic one, what matters is the disposition to pray (*ogamu kimochi*), it is the actual recitation of prayers that makes the place significant.

The term *kimochi* ('feeling/affective disposition') is often used by ascetics in Katsuragi, not only in relation to places of worship and the right attitude or ritual stance they should keep but also concerning the effect that the act of praying has on their own bodies and minds. Shinryū, before getting recently retired, used to work in a local coffee bean roasting factory, alternating ascetic activity on weekends with his work as a company employee during the week. When asked about the reasons that motivated him to participate in the pilgrimage, he affirmed that by performing ascetic practice at the pilgrimage sites he could change his feelings/state of mind (*kimochi wo kirikaeru*). He further explained to me that, because he had to face at work many hardships negatively affecting his own emotional disposition, it was through this ascetic practice that he could renovate his state of mind/emotional well-being. Such an emotional renewal can thus be understood as care of the self (Foucault 1997), where the self and *kimochi* become the target of an action reflexively reoriented towards the practitioner. However, the target of action can also become something other than the self, coinciding with different places along the pilgrimage route. For instance, even on that Sunday afternoon at the end of August 2017, before praying in front of the sutra mound, we cleaned up the place from weeds and twigs, which had completely covered the area around that giant rock thus making the access more difficult. In a similar way, pilgrims could also orientate their actions towards the forest, making sure that paths were

kept open, and signalling with ribbons the itineraries to choose in order not to get lost. Whatever the target of action might be (the self or the environment), it always needs constant care and attention.

The Subjects of Action

During the ritual performed nowadays at the 28 sutra mounds, Katsuragi ascetics chant a series of mantras and sutra, accompanied by the rhythmic shaking of *shakujō* (short Buddhist staff provided with six metal rings on top). The whole ceremony, lasting for about eight minutes, is temporally marked by the sound of *horagai* conch shells at the beginning and at the end. The main prayer 'offered' is the *Heart Wisdom Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō*). Rhythmic intensification, use of tools, and positions in space play a crucial role during the ritual when the practitioners *face the mound* where the *Lotus Sutra* chapter is located.

We must then interrogate a different sphere of action, arising in connection to the first one: how do participants become *subjects of action*? In other words, who is carrying out this particular type of movement we call pilgrimage? Who are the actors involved? And how do they emerge? Forms of ritual apprenticeship become very important here because ascetics are constant learners who construct themselves as ascetic subjects through practice. Besides the pilgrimage to the 28 sutra mounds, they organise once a month a smaller training session called 'monthly gathering' (*tsuki ichi kai*), in which, over half a day, they visit 15 spots located on different sides of Mt Kongō, performing rituals without the leader, and taking turns in heading the procession. During this session mistakes and oversights are not uncommon among less experienced practitioners; these mistakes are pointed out by elder ascetics who supervise the others. While trying to remember long mantras, performing ritual gestures *mudrā*, and leading the rest of the group through the woods, sometimes taking the wrong path, practitioners make continuous adjustments according to the situation.

Such situated ritual apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger 1991) within the group constitutes a means to gradually become part of a collective identity, the ascetic community, by 'learning through their bodies' (*mi ni tsukeru* in Japanese). And this learning process associated with the pilgrimage continues even in the daily life of the practitioners, at home or at their workplaces. When he is not climbing the mountains as a pilgrim, Kōyō usually works as a truck driver. He has been doing the same job for 27 years. As he explained to me, during his long drives across the highways all over Japan, he often recites sutras and mantras by heart. In the beginning, he found this was a good way to learn the prayers and magical formulas. But then he realised that through this practice he became more focused on his driving and also coped better (*norikireru*) with the hard work. He considered this practice outside the pilgrimage as the continuation of the mental and bodily training (*shinshin* or 'mind-body') experienced during the pilgrimage. For Kōyō and for many other participants, ascetic practice (*shugyō*) continues in their everyday life, again *translating* values – including ethical values like 'helping each other', as another practitioner pointed out – from pilgrimage to their family or work environment.

However, places and sutra mounds may also become *subjects* during the ritual interaction. Values invested on the sutra chapters, in fact, enable the semiotic construction of sutra mounds not as inert things but as *bodies*. The *Lotus Sutra* itself provides justification for this interpretation, by stating:

> Whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stupa of seven jewels [...] There is no need to even lodge a *śarīra* [corporal relic of the Buddha] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One [i.e. the Buddha himself].
> (*T* 9.262.31b; Hurvitz 1976: 178)

In this and other passages, the *Lotus Sutra* presents itself as the corporal relic of the Buddha. It is striking that in well-documented Buddhist practices across Asia, relics and religious icons have been envisaged for centuries, in a clear nonrepresentational and immanentist move, as the concrete, material presence of the Buddha's body on earth, rather than as symbols or representations of the sacred (Faure 1998; Sharf and Sharf 2001).[7] A similar devotional attitude is shared by ascetic practitioners in Katsuragi, who ritually engage with the sutra mounds, in the same *intersubjective way* in which they perform prayers, chants, and mantric powerful ritual formulas in front of other Buddhist icons.

Sources of Action

In the summer of 2014, I was sitting at the table of a busy restaurant in Kitanoda, in the Osaka prefecture. The abbot of the temple and his elder assistant were sitting next to me, and in front of me, a young man wearing glasses was taking notes on the ongoing conversation. Next to him, two elderly people were partaking in the dinner. The young man and these two older people were representatives of the Nankai private transport company, active in the southern Osaka prefecture. They had been invited to a meeting over dinner, as often happens in Japan when people need to discuss business, in order to negotiate a deal with the group of ascetics. As Mt Kongō *was one of the destinations connected by the Nankai bus service,* the religious group was asking the transport company to organise a special coach for pilgrims, with discounted fares and sutra chanting played on board. The agreement was eventually not stipulated, but my presence at the dinner was framed as a sort of 'academic authority', in order to show how a foreign researcher from Europe had been travelling all the way from London to southern Osaka to study their group of pilgrims. Yet my role in the negotiations was certainly a minor one, my position being evoked from time to time when the pilgrims asked me to confirm historical details about the Katsuragi pilgrimage. This episode reveals the importance of a third sphere, which we may call the *sources of action*.

What is the starting point of pilgrimage as an oriented movement? What are the motivations? And who are the actors triggering this process? What forms of authority are evoked, and who are the stakeholders? This sphere may include a wide range of different actors, from religious leaders and institutions to tutelary deities

and mythical ancestors, such as the legendary figure of the ascetic, En no Gyōja, who founded the practice and whose steps the *shugen* ascetics claim to follow during the pilgrimage. Even my presence, as explained in the example above, could be sometimes used as a means of legitimation for the pilgrimage. However, although I was invoked as a source of academic authority, this did not mean that I was able to exercise any power on the group. Quite the contrary; whenever I was called in front of other external people – during meetings with other secular or religious institutions, during public lectures at local libraries, and so on – it was me who was acted upon by the group members.

Such an inversion of the source of agency brings us to question the traditional role of the analyst as a neutral observer of social phenomena, thus blurring any supposed separation between emic and ethic dimensions. Most of the time my ethnographic subjects were, in fact, the ones observing me, the ones who made me do things, by giving me different hierarchical roles in the context of the pilgrimage practice. I was thus sometimes defined as an ascetic apprentice, sometimes as a pilgrim, sometimes as an academic legitimation, and sometimes as a cleaner at the temple. In other words, on several occasions the pilgrims themselves became the very source of my actions, they became the ones who motivated or triggered my actions precisely by giving me a certain role within the group. But in order to get deeper into questions of power and authority, we need to describe one last sphere of action.

The Evaluation of Action

While considering this last sphere of action which I call *evaluation*, we need to ask: what is the process through which pilgrimage is interpreted, judged, or reflected upon? This question emerged spontaneously when I discovered that, with the banishment of the Katsuragi pilgrimage in modern times, memory about the exact location of the sutra chapters had been partly lost. This generated a conflict of interpretations when different competing groups emerged after the Second World War, each claiming to have found the original pilgrimage trail. The fact is that these mountains had been the site for sutra burial since ancient times, and they are thus disseminated by mounds that might become potential candidates for pilgrimage stations. There are, therefore, three possible sutra mounds for the twenty-first station, and multiple alternatives for the lodge number two, three, four, six, and twenty-seven.

If the sutra has been translated into a spatial landscape, this has also produced a conflict over its correct interpretation between different revivalist groups and their leaders, who claim to have discovered the right sutra mounds. Sometimes this has also generated disagreements within the group itself, because some of the practitioners, who wished to include different or multiple spots into the pilgrimage, then left the community, while at the same time, the leader tried to re-establish his hierarchical position through his own interpretation of the spatial text.

All translations involve, to a certain extent, a negotiation of power and knowledge through an adaptation of cultural values. Translations may thus become

potential sites of conflict (Hanks 2014). Such conflicts may arise from different disagreements over, for example, the most acceptable interpretations, the right to authorise or impose certain interpretive practices, and over the act of translation itself, which may not be accepted by a certain community. The disputes concerning the correct location of the *Lotus Sutra* chapters in Katsuragi, which significantly focus on the correct translation of this spatial text, thus show that different evaluators can *sanction* and *interpret* the actions related to pilgrimage in different ways. Such a diversity of interpretations could eventually generate conflicting understandings of pilgrimage practice, some of which may try to impose themselves, therefore challenging other religious authorities. The evaluation of action thus becomes a process through which leaderships and hierarchies are confirmed or disputed, ritual behaviours are justified or challenged, and communities of pilgrims are constituted or broken apart.

Translating the Bodily Experience

There is another crucial dimension of pilgrimage that we have not discussed yet, and which once again brings into play the relation between researcher and ethnographic subjects: the role played by the body in the construction of subjectivities. The ascetic practice carried out by the group of pilgrims, whom I followed during my participant observation, seeks to radically *reconfigure 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; exhausting night vigils and extended hours spent while singing *mantras* and Buddhist chants; fearsome ordeals by fire, walking barefoot on burning coals (*hiwatari*), with flames reaching up to the knees, etc. All these activities constitute the ascetic core of this specific pilgrimage practice, and they are part of a path of *apprenticeship* towards the *construction of new selves* and *new worlds*. To what extent can ethnographers describe and translate these modes of experience, so deeply seated within their own body when participating in these kinds of practices (Fernandez and Herzfeld 2015: 74–75)?

André Leroi-Gourhan (1993) has pointed out that the suspension of everyday bodily values and rhythms, occurring in religious discourse – for example, the inversion of the day- and night-time, fasting, sexual abstinence, variations of temperature – may be used to enact processes of resignification and production of new symbolic discourses. The body and its sensory equipment then appear as 'a marvellous apparatus for transforming sensations into symbols' (281). It is through such networks of symbols that religious individuals *constitute themselves* as new subjects. Referring to religious traditions he defines as 'mystic', Leroi-Gourhan (1993: 281–297) interestingly suggests that physiological and perceptive modifications may also bring about a symbolic reconstruction of the time and space experienced by practitioners. 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*,[8] i.e. rooted in perception (Greimas 1987b). In order to clarify this point, I will draw on a specific 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 the Osaka and Nara prefectures, is characterised by low slopes, rounded tops, thick vegetation, 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 heads and shoulders to refresh ourselves, soaking the towel bands (*hachimaki*) tied around our foreheads, and 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 we 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 pilgrimage. 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 to 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 – disclosed 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. Recalling the words of Greimas from his book *De l'imperfection* (Greimas 1987b; Segre 1989):

> 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.
>
> (Greimas 1987b: 78)

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, they 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 that opened up further possibilities of signification. Water, for example, disclosed its refreshing property, its ability to generate pleasure and energising effects. It produced a 'collective aesthesis' (Landowski 2004) – an intersubjectively shared way of perceiving and feeling – thus presenting itself as much more than mere water. Everybody in the group could thus 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.[9]

During this process, defined by Greimas (1987b: 23) as aesthetic apprehension (*saisie esthétique*), when time seems to stop, the world overwhelms humans, merging with them. The influence of Merleau-Ponty, quoted by Greimas, is here rather evident, especially if we think about Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'intentional transgression' in *Signs* (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 94). 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'. This concept is further elaborated in Merleau-Ponty's posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968) in which, when describing the chiasm[10] 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' (1968: 155) can itself be conceived as *the language of a world that speaks to us*.

The *somatic and sensible dimension* of doing ethnography within a community of ascetic pilgrims, may thus potentially lead 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 highlights the role played by the body in the construction of subjectivities, and how bodily limits and potentialities may be constantly pushed forward in ascetic pilgrimages. In light of these considerations, we have 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 have seen in fact how the 'taste of water', intersubjectively shared by me and other practitioners during the ascetic practice through a *collective form of aesthesis*, produced an actantial 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 from the process of perception. This was by no means the only possible way of conceiving *the mountain* and its environment since 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. However, this form of experience, which occurred during an ascetic pilgrimage, reminded all participants of the need to translate (i.e. to make sense of) our differential relations with the mountain itself – a nonhuman actor whose sensory interaction with us, was so powerful on that and other occasions, as to renew both our bodily strengths and our perception of the world.

The bodily experience of pilgrimage, chanting, attending night vigils, fasting, and walking on fire, deeply reconfigures the practitioners' world, through the construction of new values and forms of subjectivity, based on an adjustment and reciprocal transformation between them and the environment. It was this process of adjustment to the ascetic dimension of this particular pilgrimage practice that forced me to reconsider the limits of my own bodily resilience and endurance. Without obviously arguing that such an ascetic dimension would be necessarily shared by other pilgrimage activities – and, in fact, this is not the case, as many forms of this practice do not actually involve much physical labour (Reader 2014: 125–128; Padoan 2019) – we should not underestimate the role played by the sensory and somatic experience while researching pilgrimage.

Because of the overwhelming somatic component in my own fieldwork, I started focusing on my own body as a living, experiential laboratory of semiotic analysis, for an understanding of pilgrimage, and ethnographic practice, in general. What I have tried to describe here in semiotic terms is, therefore, the process of *learning* triggered by my own encounter with human and nonhuman ethnographic subjects, including the active role played by the natural environment (Ingold 2000). 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*, related to the ascetic pilgrim. These adjustments had the effect of considerably reducing the significance given to a form of subjectivity conceived *a priori* as human. The ascetic pilgrim, in fact, renounces the *self* or, more precisely, he or she actually discovers that *the self is a multitude* (Simondon 1989); a network that connects rather than divides *humans, gods, places, and discourses of the natural world.*

Conclusion: Mapping the Flow

I have sought here to combine two methodological approaches, ethnography and semiotics, in order to describe certain dynamics of action emerging in pilgrimage. Rather than looking at pilgrimage as a single course of action, I preferred to approach it as a set of complex networks and hierarchies involving various spheres of action. Following the Paris School semiotic approach, I described four different spheres of action or *actants*, populated by a multiplicity of human and nonhuman actors. These spheres are respectively called *targets*, *subjects*, *sources,* and *evaluators* of action, and we have seen how at every level all the four actants have been connecting and interacting with each other, forming different networks and hierarchical positions (Figure 5.1).

I started my discussion by referring to Taussig's (1997) idea of 'pilgrimage as method' – a method based on the principle of translation as *signification,* according to which anthropologists too may be considered travelling pilgrims, translating and making sense of the ethnographic other. By examining the close connection between translation, the practice of pilgrimage and the notion of *sense* – as perceiving, going in a certain direction, and finding out (Fontanille 2007; Latour 2013: 237) – I explored the possibility of investigating pilgrimage from a semiotic point of view. By adopting such a perspective, I then examined this mode of practice we call 'pilgrimage' as a process of translation, involving body, space, materiality, sacred scriptures, and affective dispositions of pilgrims. Therefore, semiotics emerged here as a theory of action, connected to passions, body, and materiality: a theory based on actional spheres defining desirable *targets* of pilgrimage action, forms of *subjectivity*, *sources* of authority, and *evaluators* who interpret the actions performed.

I explored these actional spheres – targets, subjects, sources, and evaluators of pilgrimage – in terms of dynamic positions or actants. These positions are taken up by human and nonhuman actors, namely pilgrims, places, institutions, deities, and other entities, in order to translate and articulate (*signification*) the oriented and perceptual flow of meaning (*sense*) of pilgrimage. By exploring the actional spheres concerning targets, subjects, sources, and evaluators of pilgrimage, we

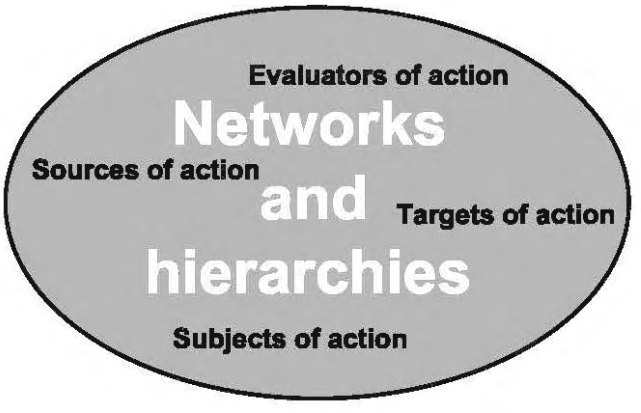


Figure 5.1 Tracing action in pilgrimage: actants, or dynamic roles played by human and nonhuman actors.

were able to see how pilgrims translate a sutra into a landscape through ascetic practice. But we also managed to analyse the role of ethnographers as translators, who *make sense* of the flow of pilgrimage through participant observation. They are immersed in different practices which involve a *bodily experience of the environment* while learning how to perceive the semiotics of the natural world.

To conclude, my aim was to use semiotics in order to map the articulation, but also the flows of meanings and values collected through my ethnography. Taussig's idea of pilgrimage as method thus became useful in order to cast light on the key role played by translation in both pilgrimage and ethnographic work. As ethnographers, we try to make sense of the pilgrimage, to catch its oriented flow of meanings, by translating it into an analytical discourse. We thus try, as Greimas (1987a: 67) argued, to put *sense* in the conditions of *signifying*, that is to articulate the movement of meaning by translating it – thus moving from *sense* to *signification*. But pilgrims too translate and articulate the sense of practice. They do it incessantly. In my ethnographic case, they constantly translate a Buddhist scripture into a landscape by means of their ascetic practice, but they also translate the ascetic values they learnt and acquired in the mountains, into their everyday lives, at home and at work, in the private and public sphere. I suppose that both of us, researchers and ascetics, will do our best to keep on translating, so far as the flows of sense and pilgrimage will keep on moving, posing new challenging questions to us.

Notes

1 The setting for Taussig's book is an imaginary state of Latin America, modelled after his own fieldwork in Venezuela (Taussig 1997: ix).

2 I would like to thank John Eade, Mario Katić, Dionigi Albera, Ian Reader, Simon Coleman, and the other participants in the EASA Pilgrimage Studies Network workshop in Zadar (4th–6th September 2019) for their comments and observations which helped me to shape this chapter. This work also benefitted from comments received at the JRC Seminar, organised by Fabio Gygi at SOAS University of London (26th May 2022), and from a thorough discussion of the chapter during the Anthropology Research Seminar, organised by Atsuro Morita at Osaka University (23rd August 2022). I wish to thank the organisers, as well as the participants in these two seminars – in particular Philip Swift, Barbara Pizziconi, William Kelly, Gergely Mohacsi, and Asli Kemiksiz – for their feedback and helpful suggestions.

3 Although Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory borrowed the notion of actant from Greimas (Latour 2005: 54), what I will try to do here is to see how this concept has been further explored in Paris School semiotics. By doing so, I will also include in my discussion important dimensions, like *hierarchical relations of power* and *phenomenological values*, which did not receive enough attention in Latour's understanding of actantial theory and semiotics.

4 The ethnographic material presented here in particular was collected in 2014, 2016, and more recently in 2017–2018, during a ten-month fieldwork project based at Osaka University, Anthropology Department, sponsored by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS grant PE16043).

5 For a detailed introduction to Shugen history, thought and practice, see Miyake (1999a, 1999b, 2001a), and Gorai (1980). In English, see Miyake (2001b, 2005), Faure, Moerman, and Sekimori (2009), Castiglioni, Rambelli, and Roth (2020), as well as Grapard (2016) for a site-specific study of Shugendō in north-eastern Kyushu.

6 Yuri Lotman (1990: 60) further expanded this idea, showing how a translation may occur from theatre and pictorial arts to actual behaviour or vice versa – for example when Napoleon established a court ceremonial based on eighteenth-century French theatrical representations of the court of Roman Emperors, by promoting a translation of ballet into the field of military parades.
7 Cf. Henare et al. (2007) for other nonrepresentational approaches to materiality.
8 Reverting to the classical etymological root 'aesthesis' of the term aesthetics (from Greek *aisthēsis*, or 'pertaining to sensual perception', cf. the English word 'synaesthesia'), Greimas (1987b) redefined the latter as the affective and sensible component of everyday experience. Further explaining this concept, Fontanille (2007: 179) writes: 'in order to better understand the organizing role of perception, we must come back to *aesthesis*. I define aesthesis as the mode of appearance of things, the singular matter in which they reveal themselves to us, independently of any prior codification'.
9 For other recent discussions of affect from a non-anthropocentric perspective, which consider the affective capacity of nonhuman bodies and the world, and are thus in line with the semiotic approach used in this paper, see Mattozzi and Parolin (2021), and Morita and Suzuki (2019).
10 When defining the 'chiasm' between subjects and world, Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes: 'we situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world' (1968: 160). Also, 'the chiasm is not only a me other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the "objective" body, between the perceiving and the perceived: what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a "state of consciousness" ends as a thing' (1968: 215).

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