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Pilgrimage and Spirit Possession: Reconnecting Senses, Discourse and Subjectivity on Mt Kiso Ontake

Tatsuma Padoan

Abstract

While the anthropology of pilgrimage shifted its major paradigm from a focus on *sacred sites* to one on *movement*, investigation of sensory bodies, as *moving sites* for an encounter with spirits and deities, has rarely been undertaken. On the other side the anthropology of senses, although providing a contribution to an understanding of the role of perception in social life, has frequently privileged embodied experience over language and discourse. It might be argued that such an exclusion of discourse from senses has involuntarily reiterated a Modern Divide between language and body, traceable back to a Protestant ideology of separation between interiority and exteriority, belief and ritual. In this paper I will explore the role of language, body and senses in pilgrimage, trying to look beyond such a Western epistemological divide. In so doing, I will focus on a contemporary pilgrimage in Japan, on Mt Kiso Ontake (3067m), where pilgrims visit spirits' abodes (*reijinhi*) in order to hear ancestors' voices coming from the possessed body of a medium (*nakaza*). Through an ethnographic and semiotic analysis of somatic and oracular interactions between ancestors and pilgrims, I will show how, by opening the *individual body* of the medium, an intersensory, *collective body* of human and nonhuman members of the group is constructed. We will thus follow the body-voice of the medium by considering it as a "moving shrine" where, through language, sounds, screams and gestures occurring during the séances (*oza*), an *aesthesic contagion* is actualised among pilgrims, and new subjectivities are produced, shattering supposed divisions between sense and senses, discourse and affect.

Keywords: pilgrimage, spirit possession, ethnosemiotics, Japanese religions, enunciation, aesthesis, subjectivity.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, anthropological studies on pilgrimage have emphasised the role of movement and mobility in this form of social practice.[1] Early theorisations of pilgrimage primarily focused on the analysis of *sacred sites*—discussing whether they were characterised by the liminoid presence of anti-structural *communitas*,[2] or, on the contrary, they were the contested ground for competing discourses,[3] and whether those sites were pervaded by spiritual magnetism.[4] But as anthropology itself was constantly moving away from classical fieldwork on stable and circumscribed local communities, pilgrimage studies too began to look at the social dimension of mobility and travelling.

By looking beyond the territory-bound communities of the village, the city or even the nation, vast research on transnational migration, global travel, and commodity flows in the Nineties[5] reoriented anthropologists' attention towards the dynamic character of pilgrimage. And together with a renewed interest in the practice of travelling, which brought scholars of pilgrimage much closer to the topic of tourism[6], a renewed interest in the *experience* of journeying to sacred places started to affect the field of pilgrimage studies in anthropology. In this context, also a stronger focus on the fieldworker's reflexivity—their own physical and affective experience of the journey, the implications of their involvement in the field—and more in general the role of body and senses in pilgrimage became part of the ethnographic description.[7]

A striking example is Nancy Frey's ethnography along the Camino of Santiago de Compostela, in which pilgrims' bodies and their sensory happenings, pain and strain suffered during the journey on foot, up to the impact the pilgrimage had on her own marriage when she returned home, are all described in detail.[8] After having addressed the jokes pilgrims sometimes make concerning the smell produced during the journey, from days of accumulated sweat, dust and inadequate washing of clothes, Frey mentions one American professor saying: "Now my body seemed to walk itself, the road walking my body". She explains that for those who normally do not mainly rely on physical strength for their jobs in daily life, the Camino opens up "a new unexplored territory" on body and sensations, as pilgrims realise that they completely depend on their own body during the journey, and on its sometimes unexpected

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[1] Nancy Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Raymond Michalowski and Jill Dubisch, *Run for the Wall* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001); Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds.), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[2] Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978).
[3] John Eade and Michael Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[4] James Preston, "Spiritual Magnetism: An Organizing Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage", in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, edited by Alan Morinis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 31-46.
[5] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Richard Fardon (ed.), *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[6] Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman (eds.), *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004); William Swatos and Luigi Tomasi (eds.) *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).
[7] S. Coleman and J. Eade, "Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage", in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, edited by S. Coleman and J. Eade (London: Routledge, 2004), 16; Hildi Mitchell, "'Being There': British Mormons and the History Trail", in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, edited by S. Coleman and J. Eade (London: Routledge, 2004), 27-46.
[8] Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, op. cit.

strength. Frey interestingly adds that "the body also serves as an important conduit for knowledge as pilgrims learn to listen to or read their bodies through new sensations and pains and the development of muscles and endurance".[9] On the other side, quite significantly, the pilgrimage destination and description of sacred space in Santiago play a minor role in her ethnography. At the end of their long travel, pilgrims seem in fact to realise that the religious site did not actually meet their high expectations, and that perhaps the meaning of the pilgrimage lied in the journey itself, rather than in its somehow anticlimactic conclusion.[10]

Therefore, although over the last two decades anthropology has indeed devoted much attention to the role of senses and travelling experience in pilgrimage, the conceptualisation of sacred space has been left more on the background. One possible way to combine the two topics together—the sacralisation of space and the phenomenological experience of travelling—could lie on the investigation of those cases where such a process of sacralisation does not only invest physical places, but also pilgrims' bodies, which may become moving sites for an encounter with the divine.

Such a practice of considering pilgrims' bodies as "portable shrines" has rarely been investigated. However, a recent study on New Age pilgrimages dedicated to Saint James in Brazil, written by Carlos Steil—for Coleman and Eade's edited volume *Pilgrimage and Political Economy*—tries to make a similar point.[11] According to Steil, "the body in movement thus presents itself as the central locus for the pilgrim's experience of the world, while simultaneously constituting an imagined community of walkers who share a common habitus". [12] Drawing on both Bourdieu's theory of habitus, and Thomas Csordas's interpretation of phenomenology,[13] Steil underlines the importance of an "existential pilgrim space", where the concept of sacred is reformulated as "an intimate other", during walks taken on spiritual trails first created in different parts of Brazil in 2000, and motivated by an ideal of "inner transformation and personal improvement".[14] Steil is however adamant in asserting "the need to move beyond a strictly semiotic approach" in order to study the "configuration of an intercorporeality which brings the pilgrims together through relations that", according to the author, "very often dispense with the need for language and meanings".[15]

It is interesting to note that a very similar attitude towards meaning, language and semiotics, is also presented by some of the most representative scholars working in the field of the anthropology of senses, like David Howes and Paul Stoller.[16] But whereas senses and bodily experience are given a privileged position over language and discourse in social analysis, we may wonder, along with a sociologist like Bruno Latour, and an anthropologist like Webb

[9] Ibid., 112-113.
[10] Ibid., 146.
[11] Carlos Steil, "The Path of Saint James in Brazil: Body, Spirituality and Market", in *Pilgrimage and Political Economy: Translating the Sacred*, edited by S. Coleman and J. Eade (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 155-172.
[12] Ibid., 165.
[13] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977); Thomas Csordas, *The Sacred Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
[14] Steil, "The Path of Saint James in Brazil", 157-165.
[15] Ibid., 163-164.
[16] Cf. the removal of language and discourse from the investigation of senses in anthropology, advocated in David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Cultural and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 29-58. Also, see the sharp separation between textuality and body, in the study of spirit possession, discussed in Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 53-61.

Keane, whether such a divide might not be better understood as a prevalently modern Western affair, a bias stemming from a Protestant, or more precisely Calvinist ideology of separation between exteriority and interiority, ritual and belief.[17]

In this article, I will suggest a way to consider body and language, senses and sense from a more integrated perspective, by looking at a case of oracular possession performed during a pilgrimage on Mount Kiso Ontake (*Kiso Ontakesan* 木曽御嶽山), in central Japan. This case study will allow us to consider the idea of body as "moving shrine", without necessarily creating a divide between signification and sensory perception. For the analysis of this ethnographic case, I will draw on the work of French linguist Émile Benveniste, as well as on ideas developed by Paris School semioticians—like Jean-Claude Coquet, Eric Landowski, and Paolo Fabbri—who proposed an antirepresentational theory of semiotics closely related to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, in contrast to the common cliché which sees these two approaches, semiotic and phenomenological, as mutually exclusive.[18] By analysing the relationship between pilgrimage and spirit possession, I will thus try to explore what kind of connections may be traced between semantic and somatic spheres, and whether these could be more conveniently considered as part of the same domain.

Making the Ontake Pilgrimage (*Ontake junrei* 御嶽巡礼)

Mount Kiso Ontake is a 3067m high volcano located between Gifu 岐阜県 and Nagano 長野県 prefectures, central Japan, which has been for a long time the focus of a pilgrimage made by lay practitioners organised in groups called *kō* 講 (pilgrim confraternities).[19] This practice started in the eighteenth century, thanks to two ascetics, called Kakumei 覚明 (1718-1786) and Fukan 普寛 (1731-1801), who opened two trails to the top of the mountain, respectively the Kurosawa path (*Kurosawaguchi* 黒沢口) and the Ōtaki path (*Ōtakiguchi* 王滝口), making the rituals on the mountain less harsh to perform, and popularising the pilgrimage outside the sphere of religious specialists.[20] Kakumei and Fukan were both deified and worshipped after their death, as revered founders of Ontake worship (*Ontake shinkō* 御嶽信仰), and pilgrim groups divided themselves in two large traditions, according to whether they considered the first or the second ascetic as their divine ancestor.[21] Up to the 2000s, there were possibly about one thousand pilgrim groups scattered across Japan,[22] led by religious guides called *sendatsu*

[17] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993); Webb Keane, *Protestant Moderns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[18] Herman Parret, "Introduction". In *Paris School Semiotics, Vol. I: Theory*, edited by Paul Perron and Frank Collins (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), vii-xxvi; Jacques Fontanille, *Semiotics of Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1964). M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[19] The Kiso Ontake volcano, considered inactive for millennia, after a few micro-eruption which started in 1979 has tragically resumed its activity in 2014, when after a sudden eruption 58 people died and 5 more went missing. Kobayashi Naoko, "Mountain Worship and Women", in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions*, edited by Erica Baffelli, Andrea Castiglioni and Fabio Rambelli (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 267-269.

[20] Sugawara Toshikiyo, Tokieda Tsutomu and Nakayama Kaoru, *Kiso no Ontakesan. Sono rekishi to shinkō* (Tokyo: Iwata shoin, 2009), 25-49. Cf. Ikoma Kanshichi, *Ontake no shinkō to tozan no rekishi* (Tokyo: Daiichihōki, 1988), 9.

[21] Sugawara, Tokieda and Nakayama, *Kiso no Ontakesan*, 172-173. For a deep historical and ethnological analysis of Ontake worship, see Sugawara T., *Kiso Ontake shinkō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoin, 2002). For a now classical overview in English, see Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow* (Richmond: The Japan Library, 1999 [1975]).

[22] Aoki Tamotsu recognises that while there were certainly more than 880 registered groups around the mid-Nineties, the total number of believers was uncertain, possibly even two million. Aoki T., *Ontake junrei* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994), 147. The situation has changed now, not only in light of the 2014 volcanic eruption and the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of the constant decline in membership, due to a possible lack of generational

先達 who organise annual pilgrimages to the mountain (like the *natsuyama tohai* 夏山登拝 or "summer mountain pilgrimage", which I will describe below), as well as local festivals dedicated to Ontake worship.[23] My research was conducted during spring and summer 2009. In particular, during the summer I was introduced to one of these groups, the Jingū Meishin Kyōkai 神宮明心教会 from Aichi prefecture 愛知県, and invited to take part in their pilgrimage activities.

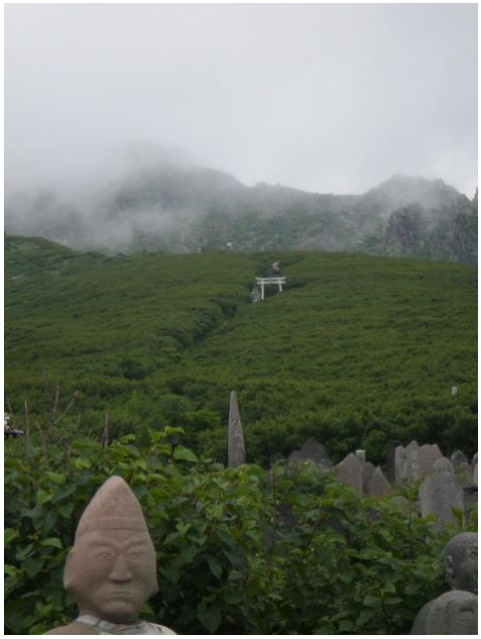


Figure 1. Mt Kiso Ontake, July 2009. Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

The two main characteristics of the pilgrimage are: the worship of ancestor spirits called *reijin* 霊神 ("spiritual gods") – who are deified spirits of the pilgrims' ancestors inhabiting the mountain – and the practice of possession, through the body of a medium called *nakaza* 中座 ("the one who sits in the middle").[24] Such rituals of spirit possession or *oza* 御座 ("honourable

change and an increasing urbanisation which was observed by scholars even decades ago: Akaike Noriaki, "The Ontake Cult Associations and Local Society". *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (1981): 77; Sugawara T., "Toshi ni okeru Kiso Ontake shinkō". *Komazawa daigaku bunka* 13 (1990): 96. Although it is difficult to have total estimates due to the large number of scattered organisations, we can see from official records how the number of affiliated believers in Ontakekyō and Kiso Ontake honkyō, two of the major umbrella organisations, respectively, shifted from 577,470 and 214,118 in 1993 (Bunkachō, ed., *Shūkyō tōkei chōsa kekka: heisei 6 nenban*. Tokyo: Bunkabu shūmuka, 1994, 166-67, 162-63) to 42,550 and 41,986 in 2019 (Bunkachō, ed., *Shūkyō nenkan: reiwa 2 nenban*. Tokyo: Bunkachō shūmuka, 2020, 58-9, 54-5).

[23] An example of these religious festivals is the *Fukan reijō shunki taisai* 普寛霊場春季大祭 ("Grand Spring Festival of Fukan's Holy Place"), celebrated in Honjō 本庄, Saitama prefecture 埼玉県, which I could attend on 10th April 2009. The festival hosts a series of ritual performances by *Ontake gyōja* 御岳行者 ascetics, including *yudate* 湯立 (hot water ablutions), *kamanari* 釜鳴り (sounding pot divination), *hiwatari* 火渡り (fire-crossing), and *hawatari* 刃渡り (climbing of sword-ladder), some of which are also open to active participation from members of the public. Interestingly, this spectacularisation of ascetic powers, also covered in the media, has the effect of stimulating interest among a lay audience, while also creating cohesion between ascetics and the local community. For an analysis of this festival and some other Ontake-related practices, cf. Tullio Lobetti, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion* (London: Routledge, 2014), 36-53.

[24] Cf. Sugawara, Tokieda and Nakayama, *Kiso no Ontakesan*, 174-175.

séance"), performed throughout the pilgrimage to the top of Mount Kiso Ontake, are controlled by a shaman called *maeza* 前座 ("the one who sits in front"), thanks to the collaboration of four ritual assistants called *shiten* 四天 (or "four *deva*", presiding the four cardinal points).[25] During my fieldwork, the medium (a heavily built man working as Shinto priest), the shaman (a middle-aged woman, descending from an important family of religious guides) and the four ritual assistants (all male), led a large group of about forty people in total, most of whom were elderly women, apart from a few exceptions.

Gods on the Trail

On the first day of the journey, pilgrims visit the physical abodes of *reijin* spirits located at the foot of the mountain, called *reijinhi* 霊神碑. These are large stones, more than twenty thousand on Mount Kiso Ontake, which are considered as residence of the ancestors, and on which their divine names are inscribed. Spirit possessions occur during the visits to these sacred abodes, and continue all over the climb at night and during the following day, when the shrine on top is reached by the group, after a few hour stop in a shelter located halfway through the pilgrimage (the seventh station or *nanagōme* 七合目). These possessions consist of oracular pronunciations by different deities, gods and ancestors residing on the mountain, including deceased relatives of the group members, when deified as *reijin*, and the supreme spirit of Kakumei, the founder of Ontake worship revered by this particular group.



Figure 2. Ontake pilgrimage with the Jingū Meishin Kyōkai, 27th-28th July 2009.
Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

[25] Following Caroline Humphrey, I use here the term "shaman" in the general anthropological sense of "inspirational specialists" with the ability to control spiritual agencies (C. Humphrey, "Shamanic Practices and the State in Northern Asia: Views from the Center and Periphery", in *Shamanism, History, and the State*, edited by Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 194), and "shamanism" as a loose category referring to various "forms of inspirational religious practice". N. Thomas and C. Humphrey, "Introduction", in *Shamanism, History, and the State*, 1. For an anthropology of inspiration, which investigates the relationship between ritual language, poetry and oracular possession, see John Leavitt (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

Regarding the content of the oracles, they usually deal with personal requests made by the believers, written on small pieces of paper and given to the shaman before the pilgrimage starts, and they also consist in divine messages delivered to the whole group, often about the weather conditions during the climb, and the outcome of the journey itself. Requests by followers include inquiries on the relatives' condition in the Other World, as well as health and resolution of personal problems.

But the most interesting element of these séances was perhaps the immediate effect that the presence of divine spirits had on the audience of lay pilgrims. When gods and spirits are channelled through the mouth of the medium, in fact, a strong affective reaction is generated among all group members who, deeply moved, start crying as soon as they hear the divine oracles.[26] As I was able to verify through participant observation and interviews, such a reaction was not staged as part of the ritual itself, namely it was not planned or expected as ritual lament, rather it was an emotional effect produced by the oracular possession on the audience, which spread among them as a form of *affective contagion*. In order to investigate the reasons for this phenomenon, and its significance within the group of pilgrims, we need to analyse the different phases of the séance.



Figure 3. Oracular séance performed by two brothers, both skilled ascetics, at the Ontake Shrine (Ontake jinja 御嶽神社) on top of Kurosawa path, Mt Kiso Ontake, 28th July 2009. Courtesy of Tatsuma Padoan.

[26] This affective response from the audience was also noted by Aoki Tamotsu, during his fieldwork on Ontake pilgrimage. See Aoki, *Ontake junrei*, 79.

Ritual Enunciation and Forms of Subjectivity

Possessions may be induced or unpredictable (called *tobiza* 飛座, or "flying séances"). The unpredictable ones are the most dangerous, as they may happen suddenly, at risk of going out of the shaman's control, and of causing the intrusion of demonic presences. Induced séances follow instead four different stages, according to my analysis below.

Although instances of induced séance punctuate the whole pilgrimage trail during the climb, I decided to focus on the one occurring halfway to the top, right in the middle of the pilgrimage. This is because of the broader and more complex structure of the ritual performed in this place, which displays more clearly the characteristics of oracular possession. As mentioned above, members of the Jingū Meishin Church usually stop in the afternoon at the shrine located at the seventh station *nanagōme*, before continuing with the night climb to the top. Here, at 5pm, they start reciting Buddhist and Shinto prayers, while the medium *nakaza* unfolds a cosmological diagram (*maṇḍala*) on the ground, portraying the five fierce esoteric deities known as *godai myōō* 五大明王 (Skt. *vidyārāja*). Although the *maṇḍala* is not used in outdoor oracular possessions, its presence may be considered an interesting addition to the ritual event. As it will become clear in fact, the presence of the *maṇḍala* confirms and clarifies the ritual process, instead of obscuring it, by creating a setting in which spatial operations of projection and identification, continuity and break, are made visible. However, even when the cosmological diagram is not employed, we can still distinguish the following four phases of *ritual enunciation*: manipulation, break, stabilisation, and contagion.

Following the definition of "enunciation" proposed by semiotician Paolo Fabbri, we will define ritual enunciation as a particular instance through which subjectivities and intersubjectivities are constituted within ritual discourse itself.[27] By tracing back the theory of enunciation to the work of Émile Benveniste, we will see how this notion will help us to describe the construction of different forms of subjectivity in spirit possession, using body, language and the affective response from the audience. In other words, by mapping the use of pronouns, verbal and nonverbal deictics, and bodily language in ritual enunciation, we will be able to trace the connection between senses, discourse and subjectivity set by this oracular possession.

Manipulation and Shifting Subject

In the first part, Shinto and Buddhist prayers, like the *Amatsunorito* 天津祝詞 and the *Hannya shingyō* 般若心経 (the *Heart Sutra*, Skt. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya sūtra*), are recited by the group, and the shaman *maeza* starts performing a protective ritual called "nine characters" (*kuji* 九字). The nine characters are nine magical mantric syllables spelled out by the shaman, together with nine hand postures (*mudrā*) "cut" (*kiru* 切る) into the air to create a protective square. These movements and ritual formulas can be considered as acts of enunciation characterised by *indexical-deictic value*, through which a certain sacred frame is "enunciated", by means of gestures and words that *indicate and produce* a marked space, the magic square itself.[28] But while the slow litany of the prayer is collectively recited by the audience—creating the effect of a constant, continuous and pervasive "carpet of sound"—the shaman shouts the

[27] Paolo Fabbri, *La svolta semiotica* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2001), 54.

[28] For an analysis of the deictic construction of ritual space in shamanic practices, see William Hanks, "Exorcism and the Description of Participant Roles", in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, edited by Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 160-200.

magical syllables with loud voice and in *controtempo* or offbeat syncopation ("*rin byō tō sha kai jin retsu zai zen*" 臨 兵 鬪 者 皆 陣 裂 在 前), thus creating a disruption of time.[29] The shouting of syllables by the shaman tries to introduce cracks and breaks into the slow and constant rhythm of the litany, while the medium *nakaza* stands and prays, holding in his hands the *gohei* 御幣 wand, a wooden stick with purificatory paper strips attached.[30]

Moreover, during the ritual séance performed at the *nanagōme*, the medium at this stage points his hands (another nonverbal deictic) and directs the divine forces first to the *maṇḍala* on the ground, inviting the deities to move on it, and then upon himself, calling the *myōō* on his body. Finally, he enters the diagram, realising a full identification with Fudō myōō 不動明王, the deity depicted at the centre. By crossing the threshold of the mandalic diagram, the *nakaza* breaks the spatial limits of its representation, between this world and the cosmic world of the Buddhas, creating an overlap between the two domains. We may call this first preparatory phase *manipulation*, when certain times, spaces and actors are set but also put into question by the very dynamic of ritual. As a result, a *shifting subject* is produced, one that is projected ("shifted out") on the ritual scene through the deictic gestures of the shaman, but which is also manipulated by the chants and charms, and is ready to move to a different stage.

Break, and the Non-Subject

After a while, the medium starts to shake as a result of the induced possession. The *break of rhythmic sound and time* created by the offbeat syncopation produces a *break of actors*, namely a fracture in the personality and identity of the medium. He begins to move in a violent and unpredictable way, screaming with loud voice and throwing himself on the ground. We may analyse this as a second phase of the ritual, when the body of the medium becomes an open channel or flow, a sort of highway for a myriad of spirits without names. It is at this stage that the shaman gets busier trying to control and master the séance, while also driving demons or evil spirits (*akuryō* 悪霊) out of the medium's body. The four ritual assistants instead try to block the medium movements, in order to prevent any harm to the pilgrims. If this second phase corresponds to a *break*, the kind of subjectivity produced is, using a term coined by Jean-Claude Coquet, a *non-subject*, a pure somatic instance without a personal identity.[31]

The only sounds produced by the medium in this second phase are screams engendered by a flow of spirits who do not declare their own identities to the audience, *pure enunciation without a speaking subject*.[32] It is a non-subject, a body without name that seems to dominate the subjectivity of the medium himself. During all this second stage, the medium firmly holds the wooden stick in his hands, as this ritual instrument works like a sort of antenna for

[29] The *kuji* ritual first emerged in a Daoist text from 320 CE, the *Neipian* 内篇 by Ge Hong 葛洪 (c.283-c.343), and was later incorporated in Japan into Shugendō 修験道 ("The Way to Acquire/Master Ascetic Powers") and in other ascetic traditions. The formula can be translated as "May those who preside over warriors all be my vanguard". See David Waterhouse, "Notes on the *kuji*", in *Religion in Japan: Arrows to Heaven and Earth*, edited by Peter Kornicki and James McMullen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 2. Cf. Irit Averbuch, *The Gods Come Dancing: A Study of the Japanese Ritual Dance of Yamabushi Kagura* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 1995), 100-1.

[30] A similar ritual sequence is also described in Aoki, *Ontake junrei*, 235-236.

[31] Jean-Claude Coquet, "Les instances énonçantes", in *Phusis et logos. Une phénoménologie du langage* (Vincennes: PUV, 2007); It. trans. "Le istanze enuncianti", in *Le istanze enuncianti*, edited by Paolo Fabbri (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), 7-80.

[32] This particular regime of enunciation closely resembles the mode of existence defined by Bruno Latour as *metamorphosis*. B. Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2013) 181-205.

channelling the spirits into his body. This phase continues until the shaman manages to stabilise the possession, while at the same time the ritual assistants successfully replace the *gohei* wand with a similar one, used by the medium when the ancestors eventually speak through his body.

Stabilisation and Quasi-Subject

This could be considered as the start of a third phase, or *stabilisation*, when the possession ritual produces what, following again Coquet, we may call a *quasi-subject*.[33] When the medium calms down, he starts speaking with the voice of those spirits and deities whose presence had been waited for by the pilgrims. "Who are you?", the shaman asks. In a few particularly poignant occasions, the spirit replies "I am Kakumei" ("*Warewa Kakumei de ari*" 我は覚明であり), pronouncing the name of the most important deity, the founder of the movement. From this moment on, a dialogue takes place, between the deities and the human actors, including the shaman and pilgrims. The speaking actor is a quasi-subject, as his identity is hybrid, constructed through accumulation of ancestors' spirits who take turns in possessing the medium, and speaking to the living.

This dialogical structure ("I-you") based on pronominal forms (like the archaic first person pronoun *ware* 我), through which spirits and audience are mutually constituted, is precisely one of the mechanisms described by Émile Benveniste with the term "enunciation" (*énonciation*).[34] In a famous article entitled "Subjectivity in Language"—also used by anthropologist Viveiros de Castro in his discussion of Amerindian perspectivism[35]—Benveniste defines subjectivity as "the capacity of speaker to posit himself as 'subject'". Also, "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of being".[36] In defining these concepts, Benveniste assigns a particular value to the category of "discourse". According to him, discourse is "language put in action, and necessarily between partners".[37] And also, "Each speaker can pose himself as a subject only by implying the other, the partner […]. It is, indeed, in and through language that the individual and society define one another".[38] If the reality of being and the reality of language are the same, this is only made possible by a structure of interaction already embedded in language itself. Such a structure of interaction allows the emergence of society as a *network of intersubjective relations*, in which *identity* is constructed *through alterity*.

In other words, the subject emerges as a position (e.g. "I" or "we") in discourse, only through a relation of reciprocity with a partner (e.g. "you" or "them", implicit or explicit), a

[33] Ibid., 24-25.
[34] Émile Benveniste, "L'appareil formel de l'énonciation", in *Problèmes de linguistique generale II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); It. trans. "L'apparato formale dell'enunciazione", in *Essere di parola*, edited by Paolo Fabbri (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2009), 119-127.
[35] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, n. s.* 4, 3 (1998): 469-488.
[36] É. Benveniste, "De la subjectivité dans le langage", in *Problèmes de linguistique generale I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Eng. trans. "Subjectivity in Language", in *Problems in General Linguistics I* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 224.
[37] Ibid., 223.
[38] É. Benveniste, "Coup d'œil sur le développement de la linguistique", in *Problèmes de linguistique generale I*; Eng. trans. "A Look at the Development of Linguistics", in *Problems in General Linguistics I*, 23.

relation made possible by the actual use of language—or, as semioticians now prefer to say, by the use of verbal and nonverbal "languages". Why? Because: "Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*", and vice versa.[39] It is important to note that "I" and "you" should just be considered as the linguistic morphological façade for deeper mechanisms of enunciation, related to positionalities and to the construction of subjectivity in different semiotic systems, including gestures, visual texts, etc. Also, such positionalities are not necessarily marked by pronouns even in Japanese language, where the subjectivities of speakers are more often constructed according to a situational cline of positions, along polarities like *uchi* 内/*soto* 外 ("inside"/"outside") and *omote* 表/*ura* 裏 ("in front"/"in back"), frequently across vertical hierarchical relationships.[40] However, it is precisely the problem of how subjectivities are constituted through discourse that leads us to consider Benveniste's definition of enunciation as particularly fit for describing oracular discourse on Mt Ontake:

> To characterise enunciation is, in general, *the stressing of the discursive relation with the partner*, being this real or imaginary, individual or collective. This characteristic necessarily determines what may be called the *figurative frame* of enunciation. As discursive form, enunciation poses equally necessary figures, one at the origin, the other as the result of enunciation. It is the structure of *dialogue*. Two figures in the position of partner are alternatively protagonists of enunciation. The definition of this concept is the necessary background.[41]

In the case of Ontake séance, the dialogic relation in this phase is still producing a quasi-subject, a hybrid speaker (both human and nonhuman) which characterises the figure of the medium. But there is something more. This relation also produces an effect of simultaneity, a *copresence between the parties*, ancestors and believers, by making the spirits present in front of the community through the *speech and body* of the medium, what for lack of better terms we could call its "body-voice". Pilgrims experience this as a *simultaneity* of *actors*, *times* and *spaces*, as the ancestors are brought into presence, the past memory concerning them is made alive, and the sacred abodes of the *reijin* are evoked in the "*we-here-now*" of the oracular discourse.

Contagion and collective subject

However, it is only after this stage, once the spirits begin to speak, that we can observe the strong affective reaction I mentioned above, when pilgrims start crying all together.[42] While tears fall down their faces, they thank the gods: "*Arigatō, arigatō*" ありがとう、ありがとう

[39] Benveniste, "De la subjectivité dans le langage", 224-225. On similar perspectives related to the notion of dialogism, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Cf. also Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (eds.), *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

[40] Jane Bachnik, "The Two 'Faces' of Self and Society in Japan". *Ethos* 20, 1 (1992): 3-32. See also Jane Bachnik and Charles Quinn, Jr. (eds.), *Situated Meaning: Inside and Outside in Japanese Self, Society, and Language* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994).

[41] Benveniste, "L'appareil formel de l'énonciation", 124.

[42] Steven Feld describes an interesting parallel to this case, in his analysis of how sound, myth and ritual mediate expressions of grief and sentiment among Kaluli in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, and how women's ritual songs produce pragmatic effects on men, moving them to tears. S. Feld, *Sound and Sentiment* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).

("Thank you, thank you"). Kakumei replies: "*Yorokonde, yorokonde!*" 喜んで、喜んで ("rejoice!"), and keeps on giving individual oracles, like e.g.: "You don't need to worry about your dead relative, enjoy tomorrow's ascent!". In this fourth and last phase, which we may call *contagion*, a form of *collective subjectivity* is finally produced, a collective and social body which *perceives and feels together*. This somatic intersensory reaction was so strong, that even I (as a non-believer) could not hold the tears and avoid being invested by such a collective affective state. Paolo Fabbri, in his comments on Coquet's work on enunciation ("Les instances énonçantes"), notes that according to the French semiotician, former student of Benveniste, an intersubjective experience of empathy would sustain the creation of "us". The position of "we" should not only be intended as a plurality of "I", but also as an "intensive expansion" based on body, affect, and a way of *perceiving together*, that is a collective mode of perception shared among others.[43] This would be a form of collective identity understood not as a set of individuals, but as an expanded subjectivity, an *expanded body* which assumes a social dimension and significance.[44]

As argued by Eric Landowski in his *Passions sans nom*, sense is configured through contagion, as a mechanism of social cohesion triggered by passions, and by the affective dimension of senses and the body. We could define this process as an *aesthesic* contagion (from Greek *aisthēsis*, or 'pertaining to sensual perception', cf. the English word 'synaesthesia'), a way of communicating through senses, using our bodies as "conduits".[45] Communication, following Jakobson, should not be intended in this case as the denotative, *referential function* of language, but as a way of expressing the passions of the enunciator, the effects on the receiver, and the contact or communion between the communicative partners (*emotive*, *conative* and *phatic function*).[46]

Meaning, in other words, does not only emerge from a process of signification articulated into oppositional categories, but also from continuous and gradual processes, modulated by tensive dynamics, and connected to the body and to the social sensibility of a collective.[47] However, in contrast to Durkheim's classic idea of collective "effervescence" which would characterise participants in a religious festival—bonded by the collective excitement and emotion expressed through chants and dances[48]—the form of aesthesic contagion and expanded subjectivity experienced by Ontake pilgrims also includes nonhuman and divine actors, who become part of the social body assembled by members of the group.

[43] P. Fabbri, "Tra Physis e Logos", in J.-C. Coquet, *Le istanze enuncianti*, xiv.
[44] On the other side, affective communion does not necessarily exclude recalcitrance. On recalcitrance in social relations, see Tatsuma Padoan, "Recalcitrant Interactions: Semiotic Reflections on Fieldwork among Mountain Ascetics". *Acta Semiotica* 1, 2 (2021): 84-119.
[45] Eric Landowski, *Passions sans nom. Essais de socio-sémiotique III* (Paris: PUF, 2004). On positions close to this, see the phenomenology of language formulated by Merleau-Ponty (for example in his *Signs*, op. cit.), whose work has influenced Paris School semiotics since Algirdas J. Greimas's early publications, becoming dominant from the Eighties on. Cf. Coquet, "Les instances énonçantes", op. cit.; A. J. Greimas, *De l'Imperfection*, (Périgueux: Fanlac, 1987); It. trans. *Dell'imperfezione* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2004).
[46] Roman Jakobson, *The Framework of Language* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1980), 81-92.
[47] Algirdas J. Greimas and Jacques Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Passions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). This perspective on meaning, which explores the intrinsic connection between sense and senses, is in stark contrast with the separation of affect and discourse proposed by various representatives of the affective turn in anthropology. For a critique of these positions, and an alternative take on affect, see Padoan, "Recalcitrant Interactions", 105-113, and notes 6, 67.
[48] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

Finally, it is important to stress that this last stage, i.e. the construction of a collective self (stage 4), was only possible after the *break of the individual body* of the medium (occurring in stage 2), and after a simultaneity of times, spaces and actors was produced by the oracular discourse, during the stabilisation of séance (in stage 3). Such a process of *affective group-making triggered by oracular discourse*, is repeated again and again during the climb, each time creating a new "we-here-now" and using the body of the medium as a *movable portal to the divine*. I summarise below the four ritual phases emerged from my analysis of oracular possession on Mt Ontake, where each stage is linked to the production of a different form of subjectivity:

Stages of ritual enunciation in oracular possession

1) [MANIPULATION] shifting subject

2) [BREAK] non-subject

3) [STABILISATION] quasi-subject

4) [CONTAGION] collective subject

Conclusion

From this ethnosemiotic analysis of Ontake worship, we have seen how spirit possession may shape and arrange pilgrimage as a succession of "we-here-now", as an iteration and procession of events characterised by *presentifications* of spirits and gods. Every time a séance occurs, we perceive a collapse of *actors* (human and nonhuman), as a variety of gods, spirits, and Buddhist deities flock into the body of the medium. But we also experience a collapse of *spaces*, so far as the *reijinhi* stones, physical abodes of the spirits in the landscape, are mobilised by the possession, and converge into the space of ritual séance. And finally, we sense a collapse of *time*, when the past memory of ancestors, and the future predicted by the oracles (connected to the horizon of expectations of the pilgrims), are evoked in the present time of the spirit possession. As argued by Michael Lambek in relation to the Sakalava in northwest Madagascar, the practice of spirit possession produces a co-presence of different temporalities. Living and dead belonging to the same lineage become, for the duration of the trance, contemporary, and history folds on itself *in the present moment*.[49] This would produce, according to Lambek, a momentary collapse of the distinctions between past and present, history and memory.[50]

What is made present in Ontake pilgrimage is the collective memory of the group, linked to the lineage of their ancestors, which is evoked and synchronised with the ritual scene that unfolds in front of the pilgrims. The ancestors *reijin* are in fact there during the séance, they take turns in speaking through the body of the medium *nakaza*. Here we can trace the connection and overlap between the semantic and the somatic sphere. The way spirit possession is played out in this pilgrimage intertwines in fact discourse and affect, meaning and perception, sense and senses, beyond any modern ideological divide which considers these as two different sets of oppositions. By mapping the connections between language and body, instead, we were able to trace the emergence of different forms of subjectivity. In order to describe this process, we referred to the concept of "enunciation" as first outlined by Benveniste, and then developed

[49] Michael Lambek, "On Being Present to History". *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, 1 (2016): 320.
[50] M. Lambek, "Memory in a Maussian Universe", in *Regimes of Memory*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (London: Routledge, 2003), 202-16.

in semiotics. This concept helped us analysing the oracular possessions as *ritual enunciations* which in turn produce what we defined at different stages as shifting subjects, non-subjects, quasi-subjects and, finally, collective subjects.

The study of this pilgrimage thus highlighted the need to retrace the intrinsic connections between senses, discourse and subjectivity, as we saw how the encounter between spirits and pilgrims is only made possible through the medium's body and language, what we have called his "body-voice". This body-voice becomes a portable shrine activated during the pilgrimage, a moving portal through which pilgrims are able to access and communicate with the unseen world of gods and spirits. But the idea of language as body-voice, and of communication as a way to create hybrid subjectivities, suggested by these oracular possessions, forces us to radically reconsider our assumptions about language, discourse and meaning. The object of oracular discourse is indeed *the pilgrim itself*. Oracular language, in other words, makes sense not much for what it says, but as a *maker of identity*. In order to operate however, it needs to come from an elsewhere, from a "not-here". In order to configure the group identity, language needs to *become an alterity*, to present itself as "an-other" from ourselves, through which we are able to see ourselves, but *in negative*. Alterity must then leave space to recognition. The recognition is that this "other language" comes from the *social memory* of the group, from remembering our ancestors. Oracular language re-actualises a past which renews the group at every séance, always in a different, risky way.

Therefore, the body-voice of the medium not only speaks to the group, but also *makes* the group. Namely, oracular possessions generate an intersensory collective based on what we defined as *aesthesic contagion*, assembling together gods, ancestors *reijin* and pilgrims. But in order to do so, they undoubtedly proceed in a singular way. They "disassemble" the group in order to reassemble it, they introduce a fracture in order to create a new social collective. The mechanism of ritual enunciation requires that such an operation ought to be conducted through the body. Spirit possession, therefore, produces a break by *opening an individual body* (the medium), in order to actualise the *closure of a social body* (the group and their ancestors). This reconstruction of a collective aesthesic body may only occur through the disintegration of its centre, the body of the *nakaza*, placed in a figural, metonymic and *sensory relation* with the totality of the group. By connecting together senses and discourse, this body produces new complex subjectivities, and brings about a deep somatic renewal of the group identity.

To conclude, I would like to recall a particular oracle which was delivered to me during the séance, despite the fact that I had not presented any request to the spirits. During the central ritual session at the shelter, I was in fact called by god Kakumei, and given the following words: "If you see with your eyes and listen with your ears you will receive half-truth (*hanbun no shinjitsu* 半分の真実); but if you listen with your eyes and see with your ears, you will get all the truth (*subete no shinjitsu* 全ての真実)". Besides being a *performative utterance* in itself, enacting a playful *recombination of senses through language*, this oracle was an invitation, to me and probably to the other pilgrims as well, to leave our ordinary perception (the sensory syntax connecting eye and sight, ear and hearing),[51] in order to embrace a different way of seeing and listening to the world. What god Kakumei was perhaps doing, was to challenge, together with our perception, also the social role we ordinarily play in daily life, and invite us

[51] On the figurative syntax of sensory processes, and how their interplay in discourse produces signification, see Jacques Fontanille, *Séma & soma. Les figures du corps* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2004); It. trans. *Figure del corpo. Per una semiotica dell'impronta*, edited by Pierluigi Basso (Rome: Meltemi, 2004), 126-90.

to take the risk of accepting a radical alterity, in the gaps and cracks of the self, to establish a new sense of existence.

This particular way of producing a collective by using body, senses and language, leads us at last to reconsider and radically rethink the structure of discourse itself. We have too often the tendency to reflect about language by using written communication as point of reference. Of the latter, we often only consider cognitive and categorising aspects associated with words, neatly distinguishable on the page, black on white, each of them understood as representation of an idea or, for the pragmatist philosophers, an object of reality. Instead, it is rarer for us to think about language as a vocal flow and somatic practice, *as a discourse*, whose characteristics are pauses, silences, inflections, intonations, gestures, facial expressions, gazes, sighs, hesitations, stress, sounds, exclamations, shouts, rhythms, which *make sense of*—i.e. provide intentionality and orientation to—our communication and interaction with the world around us. This is, in other words, everything that occurs not much upon the words, but in punctuation, and *in the blank spaces between one word and another*. If there were any benefits deriving from such an analysis of oracular possession, these would be to draw our attention to these blank spaces and punctuation marks, too long forgotten, which have always been at the centre of the social phenomenon known as *communication*.

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