

The Theme of *abduction* in the Himalayan Folk Tales: From Narrative Topos to Primary Symbol in the Semiotics of the *ādivāsī* Language

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Abstract

This article analyzes the theme of ‘kidnapping’ in myth, folklore and traditional storytelling among some *ādivāsī* communities in the Himalayas. Although it may refer to a remembrance of remote historical events, the theme of abduction in the narrative acts as a religious element closely connected symbolically with that of shamanic initiation. Furthermore, the legends about mysterious kidnappings in the tribes unfold a complex semiotic relationship with the creatures of fantastic imagination, while in an epistemological key they stand as a rebalancing element of the relationships between man and surrounding nature. The study proposes a comparative investigation between *ādivāsī* and *janjāti* groups of the central (Nepal) and eastern Himalayan (Arunachal Pradesh) ridge, supported by ethnographic field data.

Key words: Himalayan shamanism, theriantrophy, folk tales

Brief introduction to shamanism and fantastic creatures of Himalayan folklore

According to a purely statistical perspective, studies on South Asian shamanism seem to focus more on the Himalayan ridge than on peninsular India. The reason for this is probably to be found in the dominant presence of the shamanic element in local religiosity, or at least in its constant role in the general cultural landscape, in particular in Nepal, but also in the Tibetan area, as well as in the contiguous mountain territories of Northern India. The entire northeastern Indian region, or the states surrounding the alluvial plain of Brahmaputra, so rich in indigenous traditions and ethnic minorities, can be considered to as possessing a certain cultural continuity with the eastern Himalayan ridge. However, going down to the heart of the subcontinent, the incredible regional variety of religious expressions—belonging to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, (but also Zoroastrianism and Christianity)—is so dense and protean that the

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shamanic/animistic element, typically based on tribal culture, would seem to have become diluted through the millennial history of India. In such a diversified and historically complex scenario, the variety of such phenomena as possession, exorcism, divination, healing, and other ritual activities which are openly ascribable or identifiable as shamanism must be related diachronically to the history of religions in the local context (Assayag, Tarabout, 1999). However, today the best representation of this complex comes from the religiosity of indigenous peoples (*ādivāsī*).

In South Asia, in fact, and in India in particular, so many typical characteristics of the so-called Central Asian shamanism recur they seem to suffice to include the subcontinent as an integral part of a vast cultural basin characterized by a certain constitutive continuity of shamanism (Maskarinec, 2004: 741-743). But the shamanism of South Asia presents unique characteristics, both for its atavistic coexistence with Hinduism (and other religious systems), and for its embeddedness in the complex dominant social structures that these systems have determined in South Asia. There is a certain amount of scientific literature that we cannot deal with here, which has identified shamanic elements in the sacred texts of the Tamil area (Harper, 1957: 267-287), in ancient Sanskrit (Ruben, 1940: 164-205), or even hypothesising its presence in the religious cults of the Indus valley (During Caspers, 1992: 102-127). We should also note that a certain affinity between shamanism and ancient elements of Indian sacred literature (e.g. Vedas) was recognized both by scholars of the "first school" (Shirokogoroff, 1935: 274), and more recently (Thompson, 2003). Conceiving the concrete possibility of a descent of the deity, as an act of grace, to the world of humans, is an idea not so foreign to the widespread religiosity among the *ādivāsīs*. Oracular dynamics have found their rationalization in a uniformly widespread devotional ethics since the early Middle Ages, and perhaps before. On the one hand the deity inspires a state of possession, on the other the shaman evokes in himself the subtle world: nevertheless from a traditional perspective this type of *ādivāsī* religiosity might also be seen as a product of devotion (*bhakti*), an emotional, intense, totalising act of human and divine reciprocity (Smith, 2004: 778-784). Throughout history, however, institutionalised religion (especially Hindu) has often looked askance at these practices, because in the tribal context opening the door to the non-human dimension involves the risk of the intrusion of polluting elements and dangerous forces, over which there is no a guarantee of control. Sudhir Kakar (1991), however, has highlighted the reverse process, scenarios in which medical tradition, religiosity and Hindu devotion are wonderfully combined in a 'psychic' environment, with clear shamanic connotations, where -medical tradition, religiosity, Hindu devotion are perfectly combined (see also Dwyer, 2003).

But in order to show a plausible correspondence between Central Asian/Siberian shamanism and similar phenomena in India, it is necessary to analyze the great harvest of studies of the 'tribes' of the Subcontinent. Over the past two centuries, as in the contemporary era, *ādivāsī* communities have always preserved a very rich cultural universe in this respect. In addition to the Himalayan traditions, evident shamanic traits have also been found and documented in the indigenous communities of deserts and jungles, from Rajasthan to Maharastra, from Odisha to Madhya and Andhra Pradesh. Anthropologists and ethnographers of the British colonial period, such as Turner, Elwin, Fürer-Haimendorf etc., had no hesitation in distinguishing the shamanism of what they called *tribes* from other forms of religiosity in the same sphere; an example frequently followed by Indian colleagues (Carrin, 1999).

Today great changes are taking place among the *ādivāsī* minorities, due to the modernization and the homogenizing pressures of the missionaries of various hegemonic religions, such as Christianity, neo-Hinduism, local reform movements etc. Nevertheless I have emphasized the traditional presence of shamanism in the *ādivāsī* environment in order to justify its distinctive culture and because this phenomenon is symbolically linked to the theme of abduction, a *topos* not yet sufficiently researched and which deserves a thorough analysis. A further connection exists with the theme of the fantastic, of the imaginary creatures populating local folklore with all its regional variants: but these are only an external aspect of the mystery that we are investigating. In the Himalayas, what is prodigious, but which can also prove dangerous and obscure, therefore takes shape almost spontaneously in the extreme natural setting that frames this cultural matrix. The phenomena we are dealing with here constitute an attempt to rationalize otherness: that is relationships with everything that is perceived as alien to society, the different, the extrinsic, human or non-human, living beyond the established boundaries. Generally speaking, in a Buddhist perspective the rocky mountains, rising towards the sky from the mists of the jungles below, almost seem to symbolize a lotus flower ascending from the swamp of the *samsāra* towards the *nirvāṇa*. But for the indigenous peoples the peaks, the high mountain passes, the glaciers, have always been the abode of spirits and gods who are the protectors of the places. An army of liminal creatures, such as spirits, demons, ghosts, and fantastic creatures in general re-emerge forcefully among indigenous cultures in contexts of transition and change, as in the rites of passage, such as birth, death, and *post mortem* ceremonies (Beggiora, 2016, pp. 8-9). These embody the relationships between the human dimension and the surrounding, non-human, world inhabited by beasts, plants, rocks as also by beings with a subtle nature, such as spirits. Fantastic creatures are manifested in and therefore explained by introspective, existential dynamics, when each community looks within itself, examining its values, its knowledge, or its intrinsic fears. The prodigy of the 'monsters' (a term deriving from the Latin *monere*: to admonish, warn, remember, but also to foretell) appears here as something true, lively, real. This is the reason why, in the interviews collected from shamans or other *ādivāsī* informants during my fieldwork, the implicit reality of strange cases of abduction, or the existence of what we are inclined to define as "fantastic" was never questioned.

Helping spirits and terrifying deities: on the trail of *ban jhākri* and similar creatures

One of the most compelling and complex mysteries about the study of shamanism is its initiation phase. Contrary to what many neo-pagan movements and self-styled western shamans (*plastic shamans*) would like to believe, when aping the healers of the various indigenous peoples, is not possible to become shamans by personal will. Instead, there is always a particular call, or election, received from the spirit world. The initiatory process, in Asia and among the tribal populations of the Himalaya, combines an ecstatic experience or revelation with a generally long period of "mechanical" improvement aimed at mastering the tools of what Mircea Eliade (1951) once defined as techniques of ecstasy. The link between these two fundamental aspects of the "call" is generally an overwhelming event, initially reported as the culminating experience of a complex period: a fainting, falling into a state of spontaneous trance, having particular and recurring dreams, or being struck by lightning.

These are the prelude to what is defined as an initiatory disease, which is rather a sort of psychophysical ordeal, in which the shaman experiences an initiatory journey in the world of spirits, or a real katabasis in the world of the deceased. (Hoppál, 2007: 27-38). Moreover, like any initiatory experience in the various cultures of the world, the candidate must, at least symbolically, die to himself/herself² in order to be reborn as a spiritual guide, healer and custodian of the religiosity of his/her group.

According to the scientific literature on the subject, spiritual and initiatory death seems not sufficient for the shaman novice who, alongside the psychological drama, is forced to a sort of dismemberment, piece by piece, organ after organ, of his own body. Subsequently, these will be replaced with new ones. There are many regional variations, especially in Asia, of this concept and it is also reflected in the *ādivāsī* cultures in India and on the Himalayan ridge. In some cases it is said that the shaman's body is recomposed by the very demons that pulled it to pieces, with new and better organs, or with precious metals and stones/minerals, thus adding secret ingredients or components. Some scholars (Edou, 1996, pp. 53-55; 61; 77; 112) have highlighted an analogy between shamanic initiation in the Himalayas and the spiritual practices of the Chöd of the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa Buddhist schools. In the praxis of eliminating the obstacles or constraints of the phenomenal world, the *sādhaka*, or spiritual aspirant, configures his body by dividing it in minimal parts and, through an internal meditative path, offering it in sacrifice. In doing so, he distributes all his elements to the demons of the world, those of directions and cardinal points, fulfilling their desires. The analogy between the shaman and the *sādhaka*, however, stops at the alchemical nature of the body and more general concepts of cosmology. In effect, the shaman is reborn to return to this world, while the *sādhaka* practitioner transcends it.

The exoteric meaning of this is that the new shaman receives knowledge and mastery of the effects and causes of suffering and of the world's diseases, having experienced them ~~on~~ himself (Lewis, 1989, p. 70). At an esoteric level this experience is inspired by the reciprocity between macrocosm and microcosm, a fundamental concept of Asian doctrines and religions. In fact, there is a certain correspondence: acting on the microcosm, when sacralized and reproduced artfully, the shamans of the Himalayan populations manage to affect the order of the universe. The *mandala* traced on the ground, as well as the mountain with its axial symbolism, are different levels of representations of the cosmos. The shaman's body is therefore the most sublime consubstantial representation of the universe (White, 2012, pp. 21; 184ff), and the ordeal of the matter configures a palingenesis of the world, following its decomposition into its

² The gender issue in shamanism is very complex since involves issues of social relations between groups, authority and charisma. There are no statistical studies on this, but the male gender seems to be prevalent around the world. Despite this, in many societies, religious life revolves around the feminine. In other communities both are equally present. The issue is intrinsically connected with the group that, according to local tradition, has the most control over the supernatural, and this in turn is determined by the gender of the guiding deities (usually of the opposite sex to that of the shaman). On the other hand in shamanic cultures all beings are containing a combination of masculine and feminine energies and aspects including possession of a female and a male soul. "Shamanism is a fluid gendered practice, a reflexive and highly contextualized discourse about femininity and masculinity, as well as a mutually constituting dialogue between women and men. Shamans who often cross gender boundaries during their performances address a co-gendered deity or spirit, who presides over ceremonial feasts and enforces ancestral law" (Tedlock, 135). In the Himalayas this heterogeneity is well represented (with perhaps a prevalence of male shamans in most communities)

smallest alchemical components. In the West the most obvious parallel is the Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus. It would therefore be an understatement to define the initiatory experience as merely propaedeutic: the shaman knows the deepest secrets of the cosmos and the forces moving it because he has experienced its destruction and regeneration in himself.

Shamans of different ethnic groups—Chepang, Tamang, Hyolmo, Lepcha, Rai, Murung, Tani, Monpa etc.—inhabiting the Nepalese and Indian Himalayan slopes, still interact today with the universe of the mountains surrounding them, by virtue of this initiatory mystery. The dramatic experience that has marked their life is generally never sought after: because it is terrible and frightening it is shunned. It is probably no coincidence that the call occurs most frequently in youth or adolescence. From this state of suffering in which the initiate is forcedly induced, one can escape only through the acceptance of the call which may be spontaneous, but is more often consecrated by an elderly shaman who classifies the disorder as a sign of election. The initiatory process normally ends with the presentation of the new shaman, reborn, in front of the entire village community (Sidky, 2010, pp. 213-240). Indeed, the shamanic initiation is characterized by intriguing features and deserves a detailed analysis. Different phases seem to develop in succession, such as an initial irrational behavior, an escape into the forest or to the mountains, followed by intense dream states, fainting, spontaneous trance, or conditions very similar to debilitating diseases. In some cases all these are present, with a real temporary departure of the youth to wild locations far from the villages. In other cases, the exterior manifestation is reduced, but the experience is lived inwardly with equal intensity by the initiate. He will therefore have to deal with the ranks of subtle beings, who begin to hunt him in order to tear him to pieces (Shirokogoroff, 1982, p. 350). The reversal during the initiatory experience is intriguing: the man, usually a hunter, here becomes a fugitive: a prey fleeing the spirits from the wildest dimension of nature, which often, not surprisingly, take on animal forms. He is captured, seized and dragged to dark places in the forest or in mountain caves where he will face his initiatory path. It goes without saying that once returned to the home village, the boy will never admit to have fled or left voluntarily, but will claim to have been kidnapped by the *rākṣasas* or spirits.

Although *ādivāsī* cultures are distinctive, this particular condition, of subjugation of the individual by a subtle being, corresponds in classical Hinduism to the phenomenon of possession by a *yakṣa* (Misra, 1981). Of course, the nature and name of these beings vary from area to area; however, it is interesting to note that throughout the Himalayan range, in particular from Nepal to Arunachal Pradesh, the conception of the *ban jhākri*, or "wild shaman" is widespread. This is an initiatory spirit in the tales of popular folklore, standing out among other spirits and demons of the mountains. The term *jhākri* is generic and widely used by the main ethnic groups of the central Himalayas and designates the shaman, differentiating him from other ritual specialists, while the prefix *ban* means forest and derives from Sanskrit *vana*. The *ban jhākri* is therefore a kind of primordial spirit: some scholars believe that he is an ancient divinity, capable over time of developing hybridization with the major religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. In fact in many areas today he is considered the direct creation of the god Śiva, or Mahādeva, but more importantly he still retains his original characteristics: considered the keeper of the secrets of the forest, he is the guardian of the sacred places of the mountains, as well as the lord of the spirits who dwell there. He is also the protector of hunting and of wild

animals and, not least in importance, the tutelary deity of shamans. These functions are today increasingly attributed to tribal cultures, since *ādivāsīs* are envisioned as custodians of the indigenous knowledge on the forest. This indicates that the *ban jhākri*, like similar fantastic creatures, are “native” in indigenous culture.

To train new initiates, the *ban jhākri* uses to kidnap potential candidates by taking them to his secret home in the forest, where they will have to face several terrible tests, but also live idyllic experiences of knowledge in contact with a primordial nature. Fortunately, there is a fairly good anthropological literature from recent decades defining where the figure of this initiatory spirit stands in clear relation to the initiatory kidnapping/education theme and to the wider context of shamanism (Paul, 1976, p. 145; McDonald, 1976, pp. 309-341; Desjarlais, 1989, p. 295; Maskarinec, 1995, pp. 196; Winkler, 1976, p. 250, Sidky, 2008, pp. 147-162).

The description of this wild man or creature is a sort of prototype, albeit with some slight cultural differences from area to area, which we may superimpose to the image of the *yeti* in the Sherpa tradition. External characteristics such as hirsutism, the feet facing backwards, the ability to replicate the human voice, as also to produce unrepeatable sounds (generally high whistles), the disproportion (there are mainly two types of *yeti*: distinguished by gigantism or vice versa by somewhat reduced dimensions) are all superimposable qualities and common to the slightly distorted images of the *yeti* which fascinate Western imagination.

The themes of reversal of proportions, of the cardinal points, or of codes of behavior, are quite common in different cultures, where they indicate exit from the conventional world and entry into a subtle dimension, or very often into the realm of the dead³. *Ban jhākri* is said to feed on exquisite dishes, but also on all kinds of impure and repulsive substances. To do this, he uses the back of the hand instead of the palm, forcing its victims to feed by this bizarre technique, as if it were an initiatory test (Filippi, 2015, p. 156). But it is the theme of the kidnapping that is fundamental in these testimonies because it reveals the true nature of the *ban jhākri*.⁴

Diana Riboli, who worked intensively among the Chepangs of central Nepal, reports several anecdotes of kidnapping of very small children in the forest, who were unknowingly exposed to initiatory experiences. They are reported as a journey in a parallel, marvelous dimension, rather like a fairytale but with disturbing features. The exact knowledge of what happened, as well as the memory of the events, would be gradually recovered with age, ~~when~~ until the *ban jhākri* returns to manifest himself in the dreams of the initiate, consecrating him to his function. He is a small, tawny, shaggy being: bestial and human at the same time, he plays with the little one as if he were his equal, gradually taking him further and revealing himself as a real supernatural mystagogue (Riboli, 2000).⁵

³The Little People, fairies and witches and other creatures of the so-called fairy tales of old Europe and the Nordic cycles have, in the end, similar characteristics (Tolley, 2009).

⁴I omit here the numerous western journalistic sources of the last century, but according to what has been handed down by local folklore, or according to the various testimonies of alleged sightings by natives, the *yeti* would very often kidnap people, feed on human flesh, and so on (Sawerthal, Torri, 2017, pp. 121-148).

⁵Other almost similar references from the Italian anthropological school that worked in particular in the Nepalese area: Nicoletti (2002, pp. 21-22) for the Kulunge Rai in eastern Nepal; Torri (2020, pp. 147-148) for the Hyolmos of the Helambu region, Mastromattei (1988, p. 63) for the Darai of Chitwan and Nawalparasi valleys.

It would therefore seem that the *ban jhākri* and comparable creatures, which probably inspired the all-western construction of the so-called *yeti*, and finally the *yakṣa* of Hindu or Buddhist religiosity, are very similar figures. The first scholar to reach this conclusion was Larry G. Peters (1997, pp. 47-62; 2004), who particularly stressed the affinities between the characteristics of the creature reported by the Himalayan legends and the subtle beings of the Hindu myth. He was not followed by many, since shamans generally tend to reject associations with hegemonic religious systems in the area (Hinduism and Buddhism), reasonably insisting on their own distinctive culture. While many scholars tend to avoid excessive generalizations in order not to be accused of diffusionism, we still have to consider the existence of many traits spread in very different traditions we must at least accept that the different cultures of the Subcontinent have conversed with each other over the centuries, operating processes of syncretism and mutual cultural exchange.

Müller – Ebeling (*et al.* 2002: 105) confirms the close relationship of figures such as *ban jhākri*, *yeti* and similar ones to the shamanic initiatory experience, but also suggests some affinities with the Hindu god Hanumān. The external similarity of the divinity, portrayed in the shape of a monkey, shaggy and powerful, is probably less interesting for our study; conversely an investigation of his function in epic as well as in folklore seems fruitful. In his terrible manifestation, Hanumān is a destroyer of demons: these are understood in the spiritual realm as the laces keeping the devotee tied to *samsāra*, as obstacles to salvation. But in the real world these are understood simply as the malignant, supernatural and evil entities threatening man. The task of the shaman is precisely to dispel this negativity. On the other hand, in his benevolent manifestation, Hanumān is a link: just as in the epic his role is indispensable in reuniting Rāma with Sītā (masculine and feminine principles of the divine), likewise in the Indian tradition he symbolizes the connection enabling the individual soul to rise to the divine; almost a master who directs the devotee towards a path of knowledge. To this, we may add that Hanumān is a *vānara*, or a mythological creature living in the forest, as a keeper of its secrets. There are various hypotheses on the etymological origin of the word *vānara*, but in any case *vana* mainly indicates the forest. Mythological beings with supernatural powers, spirits with the appearance of monkeys, or tribal peoples (from the words *van-* and *nara*, man), are mentioned in the Indian epic, but they are not found in previous Vedic literature. It is also interesting to note that the Rāmāyaṇa describes them with human faculties, but simultaneously with bestial attributes. There is a certain literature (Shimkhada, Pave, 2011: 113) connecting the figure of Hanumān with shamanism, or rather with the faculty of the “medicine man” who knows the traditional remedies of the forest (Kakar, 1991: 57ff). This function is explained in the myth by the search for the magic herb *sanjīvanī* (*Selaginella bryopteris*) to heal Lakṣmaṇa, brother of Rāma, shot dead on the battlefield by a poisoned arrow thrown by demons. It is also interesting in this case to note that the medicinal herb was located in a secret place near the sacred Mount *Dronagiri*, in the heart of the Himalayas (today identified with the Dunagiri massif in Uttarkhand). Hanumān, therefore, would have reached the place through a prodigious flight from Lanka, at the antipodes of the Subcontinent. It is true that in the myth, Hanumān seems to get confused about the recognition of the plant, so much so that he opts for the uprooting of the entire mountain with all that it contains. In this episode there is an emphasis on the brute force of divinity, but his intervention is ultimately decisive. The faculty of Hanumān to be a shapeshifter, like *ban jhākri* and

many forest spirits of *ādivāsī* traditions, is of great interest. Furthermore, his jump - canceling the geographical distance in a heartbeat - is evocative of the so-called shamanic flight, through space and time, during trance sessions. Here, it is not my intention to retrace the trite hypothesis of enculturation of tribal cultures to the Hindu background: this may have happened but in fairly recent historical times. Rather, I would like to emphasize the importance and the role, not at all marginal, of *ādivāsī* culture in a much older praxis of mythopoiesis in the Indian religious world.

From the field notebook: towards a possible interpretation of the phenomenon

From more than ten years of field research in India, I can say that the presence of various fantastic figures is a constant in the folklore of almost all ethnic groups living on the southern side of the Himalayas. Although these beings are described locally with different forms, they correspond *latu sensu*, by analogy, to the function of ancestral guardian spirits of mountains and forests with initiatory potential. Among these regional variations, it would be appropriate to reiterate at least the two great categories of *yeti*-like figures: that of a gigantic being and that of a smaller figure - spirits of ethereal consistency or creatures with more tangible physicality - which present the characteristics and functions of *ban jhākri* (body covered with hair, upturned feet, a characteristic whistle-like verse, the ability to reproduce language and human behavior). Villagers almost invariably meet these beings in the forest and in the snowy moors, and the reports of these visions (or sightings) tend to characterize them chromatically in a homogeneous way. The smaller creature is described as reddish or yellowish-brown in color, while the largest generally appear dark, black or gray. Many testimonies believe them capable of making incursions into cultivated areas, in order to destroy crops, attack livestock, and bring havoc (Sawerthal, Torri, 2017: 125; Oppitz, 1968, Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1957: 136; 1993: 4-8). Even where the issue of abduction is not explicitly connected to shamanic initiation, but remains an implicit possibility, the phenomenon of predation towards humans is still present.

In this regard I would like to discuss the results of a research conducted in the Apatani ethnic group, located in the district of Lower Subhansiri in Arunachal Pradesh. It is important to premise that the idea of evil (or disease) in the Apatani system of care, is thinkable only when integrated within a set of symbolic representations connecting the bodies of individuals, the society of humans, and the essence of non-humans, particularly spirits: the *uyis*. In order to investigate the causality of evil it is necessary to enter into the traditional shamanic cosmology of the group. The etiologies of the diseases have their roots in the relationships between men and *uyis* and revolve around an economy of blackmail and redemption that sees the symptom as a message, and the human body as a means of communication. In fact, the action of the *uyis* consists mainly in the kidnapping of the *yalo*, or the individual soul of men: its absence generates an imbalance in the body from which the pathology emerges.

When a *yalo* is seized by a spirit, it is believed that it is enclosed in a kind of oblong container, called a *piibii*. This shell is also reproduced in miniature on the famous *agyangs*, or a sort of bamboo altars in which the Apatanis weave, from a complex theory, decorations, miniature objects, and symbols made with different vegetable fibers. It is believed that the *uyis* subsequently bring the souls to an undefined dimension: a sort of suspended place, located on the border between *Neli*, the chthonic realm of ancestors, and *Tali*, the atmospheric dimension dominating the human community. About sixty

years ago Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1962: 147) wrote that "When a man is ill and loses consciousness, his soul or *yalo* may leave his body and stray to *Neli* (Underworld). A shaman priest, called to minister to the sick man, may trace the errant soul to the house of one of the many gods and spirits who dwell in *Neli* and are ever avid to draw unsuspecting souls to their sphere. Once the shaman has located the *yalo*, he offers to ransom it with the sacrifice of an animal". After several years of field studies and the publication of other important studies on Apatani cosmology (Beggiora 2013; 2018), I can say that this is partially exact. The dimension of the subsoil is properly the world of fathers and as an afterlife it is a sort of reflection of earthly life: in fact this dimension is described as mirroring and inverted compared to reality, as if it were a vision on the surface of a lake. The territory of the *uyis* is rather the forest, the mountains, the wild and uncontaminated landscape of the non-human world, a dimension that is at times pathless and contains even more inaccessible dimensions. Interesting, however, is the idea clearly reported by Fürer-Haimendorf, of the abduction by the spirits to this non-place, and the fact that it was a shaman (*nyibu* among Apatanis and Nishis and *miri/uyu-miri* among Adi groups) who would have the task of mediating a solution, perhaps because he was the only one capable of cross these subtle boundaries. These relationships constantly fluctuate between the alliance and the feud, the giving of gifts and the sending of diseases, the kidnapping and the ransom. In what could be called a "political affair", the responsibility of weaving and regulating these incessant negotiations falls precisely on the *nyibus*, the local religious specialists.

Kago Tajo, shaman informant of the village of Hang, described the possibility that this kidnapping could take place not only *in spiritu*, but in a concrete physical sense. He said: "Beyond the mountains, beyond the forest, there is a distant and secret place that is inside and outside the world at the same time. This is at the exact point where heaven touches the earth; those who are kidnapped by spirits and who can see them are brought there. That is the home of the terrible Yachchu [spirit of madness], Nikotania, Nishi shaman, was brought there and never returned". This testimony is important because in addition to the theme of the kidnapping, it confirms its possible initiatory value, and finally the dramatic possibility of a failure in finding the solution.

In addition to the spirit of madness (perhaps a reference to the *initiatory madness*?) there is a sylvan deity among the Apatanis in some way relatable to the *ban jhãkri*. His name is Yapun: he presides over the growth of the forest plants, the abundance of rains and weather conditions in general. To Yapun is ascribed the control of a series of environmental dangers such as storms, fires, and some types of epidemics; venerated in the jungle with rituals dedicated to stones considered sacred, today it is considered almost exclusively as a uranic entity (in the Apatani language *yapun* is one of the many terms to indicate the sky). Yapun is accompanied by the Doji spirit: he is considered by shamans to be the very essence of the forest, another deity who presides over the manifestations of nature. Understood in a benevolent form, it takes the name of the divinity Miele, while in its wrathful manifestation it is known as Mioin. Another of his forms is Mioro (*myoro shu*), in particular responsible for cases of kidnappings in the forest: it is no coincidence that this entity is believed to be the origin of the lineage of the *migun mire*, or dwarf-looking creatures, covered with hair (similar to the monkeys?) provided with superhuman strength, living hidden in the thick of the vegetation. They would be an ancient race, related to men, whose existence is narrated in the cosmogonic saga of Abo Tani, the mythical ancestor of the tribe. Being able to see them is considered

a disaster, a certain omen of an impending kidnapping by Mioro. Finally the creature named Jivuka, the dark one (from the root *ji-*, black / dark) is also an embodied form of the divinity Doji, able to take control of a large feline, such as the leopard, and therefore basically a shapeshifter capable of carrying its prey deep in the forest (Beggiora, 2013: 149-174).

Among the neighboring population of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, unevenly allocated from the region of Tibet to the various districts of Siang, I found the current belief in a creature called Yepom (sometimes Yapom or Epom). The root *ye-* could perhaps refer to the Sherpa *yeh the* (whence the word *yeti*), I can't say for sure, but certainly this name boasts such an assonance with Yapun that it leads us to think that it is the same entity. Even the Yepom of the Adis is clearly an *uyi* (here *uyu*), or a spirit dwelling in the jungle and considered by the villagers as the lord of the forest. Not much can be said about his appearance, since he too is essentially a shapeshifter, an invisible, impalpable being, an indefinable spirit of the woods, which takes on different forms as he likes and which causes death and disaster to those who cross his path. In some cases the Yepom is compared to the wind, however man can only see its external disguises: he can take human form or drag its prey to ruin, simply by imitating the laughter, the crying or the call of people known to the victim predestined. Scheid (2016, pp. 54-83) states that even the Adis distinguish between a more powerful creature (called *yepom pomro*, or "strong" Yepom) and a more minute creature (called *yepom pompak* or "weak" Yepom). The first is a tutelary deity of the large trees of the forest, covered with fronds and creepers, while the second may manifest itself in the form of wild animals (in particular birds), theoretically distinguishable from the higher, or in any case anomalous, number of the joints of the legs.

On the other hand, in the ethnographic framework of the eastern descending ridge of the Himalayan massif, nestled between China, India, Bhutan and Burma, it is important to note that the Apatanis and the Adis are part of a cluster of ethnic groups defined as Tani, which are considered descendants from a single progenitor, Abo Tani. The Nyishi, Apatani, Mishing (or Hill Miri) and Tagin groups, spread in the Northeast of India, therefore speak related dialects, share very similar religious traditions and consider themselves related to each other. But what is important for our research is that figures very similar to *ban jhākri*, *yapun*, *migun mire*, are known everywhere, especially among the subgroups Minyong and Galo.

There are many stories in Arunachal Pradesh telling about people disappeared in the forest, attracted by these entities, seized and kidnapped in mysterious circumstances, who have never returned to their villages or of whom only a few personal belongings have been found. In these cases, shamans generally investigate the fate of the victim by addressing the spirits; searching information in a state of trance, they try to barter the life of the one who has been kidnapped against replacement victims. Having prepared a series of amulets and magical defenses, a group of men goes to the forest with a shaman where they sacrifice animals or make offerings, praying the spirits to free the prisoner.

Scheid (2015: 223-265) tells us that in some particular cases the Adi shaman can adopt a coercive method: if the negotiation and bartering technique does not work, the *miri* can decide to attack the realm of the Yepom directly. This alternation of attitudes, flexible and direct, is typical of the shamanic skill in many cultures where shamanism survives; though generally such problems are resolved with exorcistic practices designed

to subjugate and remove the malignant entity. But in the case of an entity which eludes such solutions, the scenario becomes more complex.

It therefore happens that if the conditions are propitious, it is decided to attack the trees where these entities reside, cutting the trunk with an axe if the shaman's invocations and exhortations have no effect. It is as if man, overwhelmed by a wild nature and the subtle forces inhabiting it, threatens a desperate revenge, taking in hostage the plants of the forest, which are considered living entities, like men and animals. There are numerous testimonies of kidnapping cases in which, after the ritual incision of the trunks or the cutting of some branches, the spirits have succumbed to intimidation and the kidnapped miraculously reappear near the villages. This is an extraordinary story, codified through a deeply symbolic ritualism, of a people in constant struggle for survival against a nature that is still majestic, extraordinary, but also hostile.

In parallel to the *ban jhãkri* stories in Nepal, in Arunachal Pradesh too the victims of the kidnapping tell of having visited caves, hollows, waterfalls, magical and secret places in the forest. But others report having been kidnapped in flight through the atmosphere, having been able to see houses, villages, people from above, and having made a journey through the wind and clouds before settling finally on the mountain peaks, or jungle trees. Here they remained prisoners: in some cases, although they could see or hear the desperate family members search for them from a distance, they could not communicate with them, until the moment of their release.

Peculiar is the fate of these people, who will now be considered by the community as in some way special: some are destined anyway to die soon, as if they were bearers of a curse that can no longer be countered; others report impairments of the body or oddities of character as a sort of pisco-physical stigma of the experience they have survived. Others, finally, will manifest supernatural powers or simply enjoy a blatant fortune in life. This wide range of possibilities, as well as the erotic-familiar interactions with the world of spirits that I will analyze in the next paragraph, is not incompatible with the general characteristics of Central Asian shamanism and the phenomenology of initiation. It is no coincidence that among the Monpas, and the Tani groups I have worked with, there are numerous stories of kidnappings of children and adolescents. Sometimes those who return have brought small objects with great symbolic value that the shaman is able to interpret: twigs, shells, seeds of various plants are decoded as attempts to communicate the favorable or nefarious predictions for the future of the villages.

It is nonetheless in this context important to note that kidnapping spirits, though considered creatures substantially hostile and dangerous to humans, may present benevolent traits. In fact, all cases of attack or kidnapping are attributable, at least theoretically, to taboo infringements, unresolved conflict situations or some instability created in the balance between human space and surrounding nature. To give an example on occasions of major social changes - such as the political reorganization of the districts, the introduction of new and modern technologies (creation of roads, works of various utility, the advent of foreigners on the territory), and so on - these "traditional" communities often experience the transition phase with discomfort. At these moments there is a tendency to report a greater number of accidents involving interaction with the spirit world. Whenever the human world invades the non-human, a fracture is created in the order of things. According to these cultures this induces - as a natural side-effect - the removal of the seals guarding a liminal, ancestral, wonderful and at the same time terrifying world, inhabited by the most ancient forces dominating the cosmos. Not

surprisingly, when man respects the jungle taboos, revering the sacredness of nature and its rhythms, on the other hand, the *yakṣas*, the *yeti*-like creatures and other natural spirits, are generally seen as benevolent custodians of the pastures, protectors of the harvests or hunting grounds, harbingers of good fortune and material fortunes, precisely because they are custodians of secret treasures. This typically *ādivāsī* folklore can rightly be considered an indigenous ontology, which is important because it is a philosophy about the relationship between man and the environment that modern societies have now almost forgotten.

A mystical, sensual, erotic, dreamlike *abduction*

Sometimes the *uyi* is like a lover and seduces man during the dream...⁶

It is not rare, however, to find in the traditions of the Arunachal Pradesh tribal groups, the ancient idea of a subtle marriage between some human beings and the spirits. There is literature about legends, or stories of particular cases, telling of the union between a man or woman with the corresponding female or male opposites in the non-human world (Elwin, 1970, pp. 115-116). Those who entertain these types of relationships with spirits are thought to undergo a series of particular constraints with regard to mundane village affairs but this is generally compensated by a great fortune or a special destiny. It goes without saying that all those who have accepted this type of union with spiritual creatures consider themselves particularly sensitive or inclined to communication and interaction with non-human entities and with the subtle world in general. This is not new in the study of shamanism, nor that of archaic religious traditions, agrarian cults etc. where the experience of an ecstatic dimension is concerned (Ginzburg, 2002: 8).

Generally speaking, in the central Himalayas all the figures that we have defined conventionally as *yeti*-like are normally accompanied by a female *paredra*. From the numerous testimonies of those who have undergone the experience of kidnapping in the secret ravine, home of these creatures, two entities would always be present: male and female. These perform complementary functions, while one is benevolent, reassuring, and has the task of instructing the initiate, the other is a terrifying, insidious, intimidating presence, which in some cases - at the height of the apprenticeship in a scenario wonderful but with still terrifying connotations - is the cause of the "escape" or the return of the chosen one to his village of origin. In the context of shamanic initiation, the erotic element is once again the discriminant for the configuration of these two functions. The young shaman is therefore kidnapped by a feminine spirit, a splendid and demanding lover, very sweet and terrible at the same time, but he is also brought to live the period of captivity in the simultaneous presence of a threatening male spirit. Conversely, the initiated girl is generally seduced by a male guiding spirit and in turn threatened by his female counterpart (or consort), very similar to a witch. Sometimes this diversification remains more nuanced: it is clear that they can be two aspects of the same phenomenon.

To give some examples, the creature known as *nyalmo* (from which the two subcategories of *rimi* and *rakṣī-bompo* originate) is a sort of *yeti*, known on the Tibetan side of the Himalayas and in part of Nepal. With bearish features, the *nyalmo* is often considered the "wife" of the *yeti*, also covered with hair and of considerable size (over

⁶ Kago Nabin, shaman from Hang village, interviewed on the nature of spirits (Lower Subhansiri, December 2002).

four meters, dimensions always larger than the human standard for the *rimi* entity and reduced, instead, for the *rakṣī-bompo*); she is described with long sagging breasts which she uses to throw behind her back to run faster when chasing her prey (Kesar, 1988, pp. 26-31). Like a witch, capable of gruesome apparitions, she induces diseases and the death of cattle, as well as scaring men to the point of making them mad. The Nepalese *ban jhākri* has in turn a *ban jhākrinī*, or *ban bokṣī* (literally, witch of the forest) next to him, who has the characteristics that are found everywhere: hirsutism, feet facing backwards, dangling breasts, and the ability to change shape. The recurring attributes of the sickle and the skull necklace are a clear reference to the iconography of the terrible Indian goddess Kālī in this area.

As a consolidating leitmotiv of Himalayan folklore today, the stories of the abducted narrate the terrifying experiences of initiation. The witches are pervaded by an insatiable lust and moved by anthropophagous instincts towards human prey. The *ban jhākri* is the balancing element that protects, at least to a certain extent, young initiates. *Ban bokṣī* is said to be especially gluttonous of the meat of young children, but the consort - as much as he is also inclined to the same appetites - keeps them alive through particular foods and gifts that confer a strong initiatory symbolism (Riboli 2000: 85). In the end, in one way or another, young people are very often put to death, ripped open, gutted, and then reassembled organ after organ in the process of reversal, reconstruction and rebirth, so typical of shamanic initiation (Torri, 2017: 253). A no less interesting variant presents a further reversal of roles and attitudes: according to some reported experiences, the subtle mystagogue becomes more malevolent and dangerous over time, while the consort, at first hostile and unpredictable, ends up sweetening and becoming infatuated with the young man. At the appropriate time, it is therefore the witch, in a sort of surge of *pietas* (which would be nothing more than the formal recognition of the new faculties acquired by the shaman novice), to free the prisoner or provide him with the means to escape and return to his village. However, this does not affect the experience of katabasis in a parallel world and the overall preparatory process for the initiate.

Below I would like to report four testimonies, selected by four different types of ritual operators during a field investigation carried out in the district of West Kameng, near the Indian border of Arunachal Pradesh, nestled between Bhutan and Tibet. They are the life stories of two shamans, an oracle and a general practitioner.

At the village of Jerigaon I met a shaman (*bonpo*) of the Butpa ethnic group, a subgroup of the Monpas. He told me that he was seized and taken away into the forest by a female entity called Juhung, who had then become his guiding spirit, with the appearance of a big cat. As a kind of incarnation of the forest and the surrounding peaks, the entity protected and helped him in his battle with the evil entities besieging the village, through the sharing of what he described in words as a sort of *unio mystica*, or a state of possession during the trance or dreamlike vision. He described the entity as the spirit of the forest with the strength of the tiger; he defined her as a *śakti*, clearly using a Hindu term. He said: “I met her during the *rukten* [shamanic initiation]. Her appearance is that of the big cat catching the fish [unidentifiable]. After calling her, through her in the condition of *chauphu* [trance/tremor] I can defeat any demon”.

Another shaman of the neighboring Koitham (Lish) ethnic group in the Salari area claimed to have been kidnapped in the jungle by a female entity known as Nampaye. He contracted a sort of marriage with this guiding spirit, which taught him the secrets of the spirit world. He described the experience of the kidnapping as follows: “She carried me

away in flight, rising towards the sky and the clouds, and took me up like this [mimicked the gesture of lifting someone astride the shoulders]. I took a trip into the mountainous nature of the surrounding places and she showed me the natural medicinal remedies and introduced me to the higher spirits”. The expression he used to describe these is somewhat ambiguous about their nature (*upar-vālā bhut*), however he regarded Nampaye as a sort of doctor of the gods.

This theme combining the irate figure of the goddess and her role as a doctor is also found in the local Buddhist tradition. For a time I worked with an oracle (*kuten*) living near the Indian Army sapper camp, on the slopes of Se La Pass. Under the control of a lama he was habitually possessed by a sub-emanation of the Tibetan god Pe Har *gyalpo*, but he was also strongly influenced by øf his subtle consort, who may well have been a female deity worshiped by villagers, before her inclusion in the Buddhist pantheon. He described her: “solemn and powerful *smān mā* [female doctor of the gods], she is dressed like a goddess, with her head adorned with precious gems. With his right hand she holds an arrow with colored silk fringes, while on the left she carries a jug full of long-lived nectar. She rides a blue water steed bearing the banner of victory over the diseases inflicted by the *mā mā* [class of angry female spirits]”.

This testimony would seem to follow an iconographic description taken from some liturgy: on the other hand, the whole Monpa region, which in particular goes from Se La Pass to the mountains of the Nafra Circle, is culturally very close to Nepalese and Tibetan traditions. The proximity of the *gelugpa* and *nyingmapa* centers often tends to color local folklore according to the forms of Buddhist iconography. Otherwise, the old Monpa doctor of the *dzong*, the fortified citadel, of Dirang, gave details during our interview about his apprenticeship during sleep, in which for the first time three female figures appeared to him, with whom he had sexual intercourse. “Manpa Chenten Droma, Renchin Bhu, Yashe Droma, beautiful goddesses, came to pick me up when I was a boy and took me to a secret place in the forest. Here they made love to me and taught me the secrets of medicine. Even now they keep coming and I join them in a dream. The precise place is also visible from here and is located beyond that lonely tree you can see on top of that peak [from the door of the house he indicated an unspecified place on the mountain above the valley]”. Interestingly, this doctor was not a shaman or a ritualist. Yet even in this case, the keystone of access to (medical) knowledge was through the erotic-oneiric/erotic-ecstatic experience and the union with non-human entities. These were defined as the doctors of the gods (corresponding to the class of *smen mā* deities of Tibetan Buddhism), but they were also characterized by a deep bond with the surrounding environment and nature. Among the various names referring to these initiatory spirits, the bisyllable Dro-ma often recurs: in all probability it translates the Tibetan *sgrol mā* or Tārā, expression of the female power of the divine and goddess of the Buddhist pantheon considered protector of therapeutic and healing techniques (Beggiora, 2017: 66).

From social studies to ecological turn, through science fiction: an attempt at conclusion

To return to Apatani traditions, there is a rather interesting term that, from a linguistic point of view, justifies a final excursus. The word *doji* indicates foreigners in general; the fact that different spirits are intended as a sort of sub-emanation of the entity called Doji (see above), suggests that the expression is a sort of hyperonym used to evoke the

concept of otherness, or "the other" in all its facets. This is true for peoples from outside the Tani ethnic cluster, as well as for subtle entities outside the human dimension of the village. The fact that everything coming from outside is seen as potentially dangerous and obscure, expresses a cliché already well known in anthropology that counterposes the "wild and the tamed" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), but also conveys a certain ancestral xenophobia, in the real sense of the term. Beyond the social conflicts of a region that has always been crossed by migratory flows and characterized by local feuds for the control of the territories, the hospitality laws are considered sacred in this section of the Himalayas since the night of times, perhaps as an implicit consequence of the common struggle for survival in an undoubtedly difficult territory. But as much as the foreigner is generally welcome, according to the perspective of indigenous religiosity, he is also dangerous because he may inadvertently bring with him the impurity and the noxious influence of the demons of his homeland or of other places he has visited, which it is not certain that local shamans are able to confront (Elwin, 1955: 180-182).

In this regard, it is interesting that Apatani women acquire markedly distinctive bodily changes when they reach adolescence. Alongside the expansion of the so-called nasal wings with the help of progressively larger bamboo discs (*japĩ-hulo*), a long bluish line is tattooed in a descending position from the forehead to the nasal septum (*japĩtipe*). Under the mouth, the vertical lines are five and the signs express a sense of ancestrality and belonging to the territory. The single tattoo line represents the Kele River (*Tabyu-kille*) - which crosses the area and has a particular role in the tribe's cosmogonic myth - while the other five would represent its tributaries. Other informants told me that the single line represents the mythical ancestor of the tribe, Abo Tani, who gave rise to the five lineages from which the tribes of the area descend: Hill Miri, Nishi, Apatani (represented by the central line), Adi and Tagin, who consider themselves related to each other and boast a similar tradition. In this case, the correct realization of the tattoos would be the prerogative for the entry, after death, in *Neli*, the abode of the ancestors. But for the dilation of the nose, these changes would make the girls sexually attractive; conversely, the tattoo also disfigures the female face. In the composition of the color, animal fat (generally of pig) was inserted, which often caused serious infections on the girls' faces, making them temporarily unpleasant. This practice is still considered necessary today for the best absorption of color and, moreover, the imperfection disappears quickly with the healing of the scars, making the girls ready to contract marriage. The supposed 'uglification' of women, precisely at the time of reaching the marriageable age, may have had the purpose of defending them from the kidnappings that occurred in the past on the occasion of feuds and incursions of the opposing tribes: generally by the neighboring Nishis. The stories of such kidnappings, however, are interesting since they confirm many plausible elements: the historical feuds between the tribes of the area, the ethnical importance of the rites of passage, and the theme of the abduction which here no longer has a religious symbolism, but a social value in power relations among the groups.

An ancient Apatani legend tells us more about the topic of kidnapping. It is said that originally the people of the waters (fish and aquatic beings) managed to capture a young woman belonging to the people of the sky (stars and celestial bodies), who like a meteor had fallen from the clouds onto the earth. They sacrificed her and ate her meat. But ~~also~~ the people of heaven had similarly kidnapped a young man from the water people, and he had finally been sacrificed. The two groups learned of their mutual misdeeds and the

sad end of the abductees thanks to the tip-off of the Bat (here a *trickster* figure), so they began to fight each other. The war still continues today, and although the inhabitants of the sky have a slight advantage by virtue of the superiority of their position, the results of the conflict are always in a state of balance. Furthermore, the two peoples enter into temporary truces and when this happens it is said that the light of the stars, reflecting on the scales of the fish, glimmers on the surface of the waters. An Adi variant of this story avoids the dramatic end of the abductees and resolves the conflict with the return of the prisoners. This story is fascinating because it raises the theme of kidnapping and conflict to an uranic and chthonic dimension; on the other hand in the Indian world the waterish element characterizes the hells (*pātāla*), but also the passage to the underworld. This religious symbolism does not deny a possible reminiscence and adaptation of historical memories belonging to a remote past (Dai, 2005: 26-28).

In the context of indological studies, the shining that links the fish to the star recalls the semantic nexus of Parpola's studies (1994), which have no relevance to our scenario, though it does suggest an archetypal compatibility of symbols. Moreover, the story lends itself to an interpretation in a modern key that calls into play sci-fi interpretations of visitors from space. The topic was recently dealt with by Hodayun Sidky in his recent book on *ban jhākri* (2008: 158-162). Sidky notes that some elements of the abduction stories of young initiated shamans correspond surprisingly with the alleged alien abductions that have colored science fiction and superstition of the modern world from the 1950s to today. The recurring themes are the dynamics of the kidnapping *per se*, loss of memory, loss of time, dissection of the body or part of it, theophany, and a final return to the real world but with some unusual details (e.g. without clothes, in a different place, with wounds, with particular objects), etc. Too simplistically in my opinion, Sidky dismisses the question by saying that the analogy has no relevance since, in the case of shamanism, this experience constitute the beginning of a religious path belonging to an established structure in the mythological corpus of tribal traditions, while the so-called *alien abduction syndrome* is characterised by stories of graft, visitors from other worlds, and a different imaginary inspired by a technological-futuristic world and a science fiction narrative.

In my opinion, the phenomenon is complex and deserves more in-depth analysis. Putting science fiction aside, many scholars have tried to rationalize the narratives of UFO encounters by following a strictly scientific perspective. Some have interpreted the abduction syndrome as a psychiatric disorder (McClenon, 2012), others propose a more common neurological matrix relating it to sleep paralysis, nightmares or sleep disturbances (Adler, 2011, pp.96-98). This theme has equally been used to interpret the phenomenon of trance and shamanic powers (Law & Kirmayer, 2005). Above all, the syndrome is analyzed in sociology as a neo-pagan tendency of the new religions (Tumminia, 2007; Bullard, 1989). There is also a rare periennialist study (Robin, 1979) that identifies the old stories of sightings and contacts of the small people (and similar) in the woods of European folklore with the UFO records. To him, this is the same phenomenon, though its interpretation changes in accordance with the cultural transformations of the different eras through the history of man. It would then be a perception of what the ancients called *anima mundi*, which in Kali Yuga, the obscure present age, tend to intensify, confirming the transience of time. In the dark era in which we live, the manifestations of demons, ghosts, and of the supernatural would be more and more frequent, as if they were the avant-garde of the end of time. In this sense, the

shaman, the custodian of the archaic techniques of ecstasy, is a momentary 'barrier': one of the last warriors to seal the spread of darkness (Guénon, 2001: 172-180). This perspective is certainly intriguing because it restores a fundamental importance to indigenous traditions, while placing them in a subordinate position with respect to the major spiritual religions in the East. But on the other hand, in such literature all the arguments on the theme of contact with the subtle world are resolved in the dispute, already old in the last century, between traditionalism and scientism. In fact, in the Himalayas and in the *ādivāsī* cultures, too, there are stories of sightings of bright flying objects, during the night in some sacred places. In the absence of explanations of the phenomenon from an empirical point of view, these sightings are generally interpreted as contact with a spiritual world, such as fleeting manifestations of spirits or divinities. In my personal opinion, all these narratives should be brought back to a dimension of relationship between the community and the environment, an ancestral relationship that tends to be lost in modernity but which still lives in the *ādivāsī* traditions. The moments of change, liminality, uncertainty and fear opens the door to a frightening and fantastic world in which the theme of kidnapping acts as a rebalancing element. In this sense, *ādivāsī* narratives are invaluable in understanding how much man is an integral part of a natural order superior to him.

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