

Ancestors and the Forest among the Brou of Vietnam

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The Brou and Their Pantheon

The Brou people, whom we shall be discussing here, belong to the ancient Austro-Asiatic stock of the Indochinese peninsula. They are spread out on either side of the border separating Vietnam and Laos and settled in particular to the north of Route Nine, which joins Savannakhet (Laos) to Dong Ha (the Vietnamese provinces of Quang Binh and Quang Tri), with their area of the greatest concentration being the district of Huyen Huong Hoa (Khe Sanh) where we studied them.

One cannot discuss Yiang Su, their earth god, without first situating him within the Brou pantheon, in particular without comparing him to another important figure: Yiang Kaneaq.¹ Let us first mention that the Brou divide the gods (*yang*) into two distinct groups: on the one hand, the *yang tâng dông* ("the household *yang*"), who frequent the spaces built or used by man; and, on the other hand, the *yang tâng nsak* ("the brushwood *yang*"), who live in the forest. While the first category has only five fixed divinities and a few other occasional ones, the number of forest deities is potentially infinite, although some recur more frequently than others in the rites. One can draw a parallel between certain entities from these two categories, and this is especially the case for Yiang Su and Yiang Kaneaq. In fact, as we shall see, Kaneaq is the equivalent among the household *yang* to what Su represents for the forest.

The Ancestral Divinity: Yiang Kaneaq

Yiang Kaneaq is, in fact, the *yang* of the patrilinear ancestors,² and more precisely of the deceased who have been absorbed into the pool

of lineal divinities by virtue of their remote deaths. We should specify here that, according to the Brou way of thinking, when a person dies his "soul" (*ruviye*) leaves his body, but remains on the earth, staying close to his tomb and near the house-shaped altar (*dong nsak*) that is built in the forest for the "recent" dead.³ In this place, after the liminal phase of a year, and on the occasion of an annual sacrifice, it joins the group of recent dead. Furthermore, each decade these agnatic dead as a whole are the object of a second funeral, which is repeated for three generations. It is only at the end of this series of very complicated funeral rites, during which the memory of the deceased becomes slowly blurred, that the soul "rises" into an ill-defined "sky," where it becomes a *yiang*, which is to say a god. The definitive rite of burial, through which this celestial ascension takes place, is called *rapup poq doq* ("burial during which the soul rises"). It is later followed by a sacrifice performed to make the soul descend from the sky, so that it might gather around the ancestral altar and fuse with Kaneaq, the divinity personifying the different generations of patrilinear ancestors.

The path followed by the "soul" of the deceased is thus circular. First it withdraws from the world of man, then eventually becomes reintegrated into it at the end of the cycle, in the form of a collective *yiang* – Kaneaq – composed of an amalgamation of anonymous ancestors from the descent group. The purpose of the funeral rites is to set this circular movement into motion, as well as to depersonalize the deceased in favor of a global ancestor. The role of this amalgamated ancestor in the creation of the unified group is fundamental, because the descent line is defined first and foremost in reference to a common Kaneaq and the group of "recent" dead who have not yet been integrated into it.

The altar of the common Kaneaq is set up in the house of the oldest member of the oldest patrilinear branch. It is at the foot of this altar that all the reunions or events concerning the fate of the group take place. Its placement in the space well reflects the superior status of Kaneaq with regard to the other domestic spirits, since his altar is placed right next to the sacred post of the house and because he is always first in a double horizontal and vertical hierarchy.

When, for marriages or other reasons, the members of the descent group leave their community, they leave behind their altar to Kaneaq, as well as the forest shelter of their not-yet-deified

dead. They continue, however, to be part of the group as long as they have relatives to make offerings to the dead and ancestors of the same name. It is not until the ties with these relatives become too distant that there is a split in the descent group. This takes place during a ceremony of the second funeral. At this time, separate altars to Kaneaq and forest shelters are built in such a way as to "divide among themselves" (*tampeh*) both the deified ancestors and the deceased who have not yet become deified.

Every human being is related to Kaneaq. As a newborn, one becomes "introduced to Kaneaq" (*amut tang Kaneaq*) so that the deity recognizes him as one of his own and takes care of him. Then, during marriage, according to the rules of patrilocal residence in effect among the Brou, when the bride leaves her group to join that of her mate, she is "given away" to annul her former attachment, and then "introduced" to the Kaneaq of the group she joins. In the case of divorce, the same procedure takes place but in reverse. Finally, at the moment of death, the deceased is shifted from the care of this god to that of another, Yiang Su, about whom we shall speak later on. Everything that happens in the household or the community does so under Kaneaq's attentive gaze, be it birth, marriage, death, the construction of a new house, the arrival of a guest, or any other important event. Kaneaq must be continuously informed of everything, and if he is not he inflicts illnesses and misfortunes on members of the descent group. Consequently, there are no ceremonies during which Kaneaq is not "invited" to receive a plate of offerings; and of all the divinities he is the one most often honored, even though rites devoted specifically to him are few. Yiang Kaneaq is thus at the core of the patrilinear identity, as much as a synthetic figure of the different generations of ancestors who rules over the space inhabited or controlled by his descendants, as for his status as an omniscient and omnipotent god. At the same time he has the ability to multiply himself by virtue of the proliferation of descent groups.

The God of the Soil and of the Area: Yiang Su

Let us now examine the *yang* of the forest, who are the main focus of this study, and in particular Yiang Su, who rules them as *yang* of

the soil and master of the entire natural space controlled by the local community. We suggested above that Su is to the natural world what the Kaneaq of each descent group is to the village. This is certainly implied in the name he is often given – Kaneaq-Su – which is also confirmed by the people themselves when they assert that “Su is the Kaneaq of the forest,” or that “Su is the Kaneaq of the land [the area].”

In fact, these expressions refer to a fundamental quality shared by Kaneaq and Su: ancestrality. But whereas Kaneaq symbolizes the patrilinear ancestors, Su represents another method of organization, based on locality this time. In fact, man has more than one ancestry and thus a particular temporal origin, but he also comes from a specific place, and Yiang Su represents precisely this belonging to an area through ancestral right. Hence the simultaneous reference to both Kaneaq and the region. The central problematic of Yiang Su involves the first occupants of an area and their rights to the earth.

Here we must return to the Brou patrilinear concepts, to specify that they define themselves both in terms of descent and residence. In other words, these descent groups are localized. While in theory each village is composed of a single descent group commanding a single Kaneaq and a single forest sanctuary for the dead, in practice several descent groups usually live together. In spite of everything, each lineage is part of a larger social structure – the clan (*mu*)⁴ – which has its land “of origin” where, by virtue of the rights of the first occupants, it is considered “indigenous.”

The villages are spread out over the clan’s territory known as the *kuruang* (“area,” or “land”). Irrespective of the people belonging to other descent groups settled locally, the nominal ownership of the territory always belongs to the one belonging to the “indigenous” clan. People say that their clan “owns the land” (*yong kuteq*), and that its members are the only ones with the power to address prayers and present communal sacrificial offerings to Yiang Su.⁵ In other words, its members see themselves as obligated mediators between the divinity and the people who settled in the area at a later date.

Yiang Su is conceived of as the god of the natural site since the beginning of time. He is the lord of everything that lives on the

earth: mountains, rivers, animals, plants, etc. In certain ways his duties are similar to those of the "master of wild animals" as conceived of by the Siberian and North American peoples. But Yiang Su is more than this since, aside from the animals who have their own master in the person of Yiang Chih Taranh, he encompasses all of nature, both organic and inorganic. When they came to the area, humans could do nothing more than make a pact with him. On the one hand the divinity took care of them like the other creatures of the place by assuring their health, good crops, a generous hunt, and the punishment of reprehensible acts. On the other hand, they recognized his authority and guaranteed his benevolence through sacrifices and the respect of certain rules of behavior.

In short, Yiang Su is the god who, like Kaneaq in the home, "watches over" (*chao*) men, "recognizes" (*sarkoal*) them, and must be kept informed of everything that happens in the village and surrounding area. Consequently, there are no open-air ceremonies in which Su is not invited to accept sacrifices. Like Kaneaq on the domestic level, he is of all the gods of the brush the one that receives the most offerings, even though here again there are few rites organized specifically in his honor.

The members of foreign descent groups who have settled in the village clear the land and enjoy the same rights as the "indigenous" villagers, except for the right to enter into direct contact with Yiang Su. In all the important phases of the agrarian cycle, but also during all changes in the management of the space, they must invite the chief of the "indigenous" lineage (or his mandated substitute) so that he may present the sacrifice and say the prayers in their name and place. Their foreign origin is never forgotten: if they contribute to the sacrifices, they can only "nourish" (*sang*) Yiang Su, not watch over his sanctuary.

The privileged relationship between the first occupants and Yiang Su is at the core of the office of "master of the soil" played by the chiefs of indigenous lineage during certain rites linked to the working of the earth. In fact, certain phases of the agrarian cycle cannot be undertaken unless the lineal chief, who is master of the soil, has given the sign for the opening procedures. It is thus his duty to be the first to tear up an overgrown rice straw from the previous year's clearing of the land. It is also he who is called

upon first to winnow the grains. In short, he introduces the spirit of the rice goddess (Abon) into the swidden plot.

Above we mentioned the sanctuary devoted to Su, but in fact the site of the worship of this divinity should be spoken of in the plural, because one must distinguish, in decreasing hierarchical order, between the clan's sanctuary, that of the founding lineage, that of the village, and finally the sanctuary of the swidden plot. These different, small shrines are usually found in a sacred grove, on the outskirts of the village, most often in a picturesque site (near a waterfall, cliffs, large rocks, for example). Another common trait is that they all contain three or four bamboo altars (*prong*) that symbolize a celestial abode, and at the foot of which rocks are placed. Two of these altars are dedicated respectively to Yiang Su and Yiang Kuruang, whom we shall discuss shortly, while the third altar is dedicated to the divinity of infectious diseases, known as "illness" (*proih*). In the village sanctuary one often finds a fourth altar, called *prong teh rana* ("the closing off [to illnesses] of the way [to the village]").

It is at village sanctuaries such as those described above that all the ceremonies concerning the territory take place. They are also the site of the two great ceremonies of the agrarian cycle involving the entire village, as well as the site of the ceremony during which Su is informed of a definitive arrival to or departure from the village. Just as one introduces the members of the descent group to Kaneaq, one "presents" all the village inhabitants to Su. The people who settle there cannot in fact clear their land until they have been "introduced" to the deity during a ceremony, which includes an animal sacrifice. In a similar fashion, as soon as someone leaves to live in another locality, he informs the Su of the village from which he departs as well as the Su of the village he joins. Dispensing with these notifications would certainly provoke Su's wrath.

As one can see, just as the altar to Kaneaq is the symbol of the descent group, the sanctuary of Su is the symbol of the local community. While the former is the site at which the unity and at times the splitting up of the descent group take place, the latter is the site at which the wholeness or the division of the local community (through the departure of some of its members) is enacted.

Divine Land Organization and the Hypostasis of Yiang Su

Let us now examine in greater detail the three types of sanctuaries to Yiang Su mentioned above. It is clear that the two sanctuaries on the higher level are a projection of social organization onto the spatial plane, since the first of them is devoted to the clan's territory and the second to that of the founding lineage of the local community. Since the clan is tied to a specific place through its myth of origin, the altar to Yiang Su erected on this site bears witness to the clan's territorial rights over the area. This sanctuary, called *lape kuruang* ("sanctuary of the land") or *lape put* ("great sanctuary"), is used solely for the periodic ceremonies that take place but once in a decade or when a catastrophe affects the entire population of the territory (an assassination, war, epidemic, etc.). Thus, when the Brou of the area around Khe Sanh regained their place of residence at the end of the Vietnamese war, they "cleansed" the region of all the dead who had bloodied it over the years in a *lape kuruang* ceremony. They repeated the same rite in the middle of the 1980s, but this time to cleanse the region of the contamination brought about by a fisher who lost his hand by breaking the taboo of fishing with dynamite.

The sphere of Yiang Su's influence on the level of the village sanctuaries (*lape vil*) is naturally more restricted than that of the Yiang Su who protects the clan's territory, since it includes only local concerns. These village sanctuaries are used twice a year (sometimes only once) for agrarian rites involving the local community as a whole: in the beginning of the cycle during which one "borrows Yiang Su's swidden plots," and then again after the sowing, when it is a matter of "making the rains come" (*loah doq*).

The sphere of influence of the third sanctuary, that of the clearing of the land (*lape sarai*), is smaller still: it covers merely the land cleared on the same side of a mountain. There are thus as many sanctuaries as there are groups of swidden plots. In these sites of worship, only one annual rite takes place, after the rice shoots have sprouted from the earth.

At this point in our discussion it is important to note that Yiang Su is given different names according to the levels upon which he

operates and the aspects of his power being emphasized. Like the Christian trinity, Yiang Su encompasses several personalities. He is called Yiang Su when one speaks of him as the earth god in general terms. In this case he is conceived of as a spiritual power immanent to all natural elements. He is considered to dwell in the sacred grove devoted to him by his cult, but he frequents big trees as well and can appear in any place. When, on the other hand, he is conceived of as the patron of a specific territory, he is known rather as Yiang Kuruang ("*yang* of the area") or as Achuaich Diu (Diu's grandfather). Based on these specific designations, some villagers go so far as to differentiate between Yiang Su and Yiang Kuruang, considering the former as the older brother of the latter, or seeing them as "cohabiting" (*ot parnoi*) the way the Brou and the Vietnamese do. The majority, however, think that Yiang Kuruang is Yiang Su in a different guise, that "they are identical, yet different." Yiang Kuruang is the same as Yiang Su, since like him he is within all things in nature and usually frequents big trees; but he is different from him in that he exercises his power over a circumscribed area and specifically punishes those who needlessly disturb the silence of the forest. In such cases he inflicts stomach aches or colic upon them. As yet another hypostasis of the earth god, we should mention Yiang Sarai ("*yang* of swidden plots"), as Yiang Su is called when he manifests himself to certain men, notably to punish them for a crime they have committed.

In a certain sense these three names, as inclusive categories, can be compared to the different levels of the social structure. Referring to the divinity as it is conceived in the most general and most abstract sense as the god of the earth, the notion of Yiang Su is equivalent to the equally abstract and encompassing notion of the clan. The much more concrete level of the village community and the lineages that compose it correspond to Yiang Kuruang. And finally, with the notion of Yiang Sarai, one finds the level of the familial swidden plots and the individuals who control them.

Rich in the variety of its hypostases, the Brou divinity of the soil is likewise rich by reason of his multiple *yang*. In fact, just as *kaneaq* is the amalgamated product of a multitude of anonymous dead who have become ancestors, Su gathers a mass of *yang* associated with the two main elements of the landscape, mountains

and rivers, into a single figure. "In the person of Yiang Su," said one of people we spoke to, "many *yang* come together, and he is the chief of them all!" Indeed, these spirits are nothing more than those corresponding to the mountains and the space occupied by the local groups and the rivers that originate there.

The most remarkable elements of the Brou landscape, the mountains and rivers naturally occupy a prominent place in this population's imagination. For the Brou people, there is no mountain that is not likewise the source of a stream, and the two elements are interconnected for them. Thus when I asked about the toponymy, I was informed that terms "mountain" and "water" were synonymous. For the Brou, the mountain Ramai and the river Ramai are the same thing. Spatial orientation thus naturally occurs through references to mountains and rivers. The Brou use these two fundamental elements of their landscape to describe and catalogue the space they inhabit, for both practical and ritual purposes. Consequently, when someone invites Yiang Su to partake of the offerings presented to him, he includes the names of all the mountains and rivers that make up the Su of the given area in his prayer, beginning with the *yang* of the place to which the myth of origin of the lineage's masters of the soil refers. To quote one of our informants: "First one invites the 'great Su,' (*Su toar put*), then his sons (*Su kon-kon*), then the *yang* of all the rivers and mountains." Their enumeration also recalls the extent and limits of the region controlled by the local group.

To illustrate the procedure, let us take as an example the Bleng clan who were masters of the soil in the Coc and Dong Cho villages where I stayed. Their "great Su," which is to say their place of origin according to mythology, is a lake, the Taling Sung ("gun lake"), which is situated at the edge of the Hoong village, a few kilometers from the villages just mentioned. In the Hoong village lives the oldest lineage of the Bleng clan, and the clan sanctuary of Yiang Su is set up there. Yiang Su is thus invited to come from Taling Sung to eat the offerings; then they invite the mountains located on the territory of the family village and the rivers that originate there: Ramai, Kul, Coc, Plang, Asing, Khel, and Saving. On the other hand the great river Nghi that crosses the Bleng territory is not invited, because it originates in the mountain Dong Pua, which is located in the administrative area of another clan.

We can gather from this example and the ideas it illustrates that spatial reference plays a large role in the identity of the local group. To this unity of people corresponds in fact a unity of worship, and thus, consequently, the Yiang Su of the Brou is a deity of both soil and area.

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We began our examination of Yiang Su by suggesting that this deity was the equivalent in nature of that which Yiang Kaneaq represents for the lineages making up Brou society. We should first recall that both *yang* personify the two modalities according to which Brou society is organized: the principle of ancestry defined patrilinearily, on the one hand, and the idea of a locality on the other, which also refers to ancestry, though here it is in terms of the religious preeminence of the first occupants. Furthermore, the two *yang* are made up of many different elements, with Kaneaq including the entirety of the deified ancestors of the lineage, while Su synthesizes the *yang* of all the local mountains and rivers. Third, Yiang Kaneaq is the supreme god of the inhabited space, the domestic sphere, while Yiang Su rules over all that is the opposite: nature and the areas situated outside the permanent control of man. But aside from their complementary relationship, the two supernatural entities present themselves as absolute masters of their realms. They know everything, watch over everything that takes place, and protect all living beings from their birth up until their death or departure. In short, the two divinities play a crucial role in the process of segmentation that results from the demographic growth of lineages (the case of Kaneaq) or of the local community (the case of Su), since they give their assent to any separation. And while Kaneaq possesses the ability to multiply himself to accommodate the proliferation of descent groups, Su possesses the same ability to accommodate the proliferation of local communities. In spite of the fact that Kaneaq embodies the principle of descent while Su embodies that of locality, in the final analysis Su also symbolizes the descent group, or clan. Only the clan is a group where, due to the ancient and presumed nature of descent, this principle gives way to that of locality.

Notes

1. *Yiang* in brou language means "spirit," "divinity," "genie." The term is similar to notions of *yang* and *yaang* that are to be found in other Austro-Asiatic societies.
2. The main unifying bond in Brou society is exogamous patrilineage (*ntang*) which is forged essentially in the course of ritual activities. The residential pattern in this society is patrilocal.
3. The more recently deceased comprise three or four rising generations.
4. The clan is distinguished from lineage in that the common origin is assumed since it cannot be demonstrated.
5. The sacrificial animals are ranked within a hierarchy that is related to their size. At the bottom one finds the chickens, then above them the pig and the goat, with the buffalo at the top of the hierarchy. The sacrifice in question here relates at least to a pig.