

The Relationship between Society and Nature among the Hani People of China

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With a total population of approximately one and a half million people, the Hani tribes are comprised of some twenty subgroups (the Lopi, Goxo, Zalo, Yiche, Akha, etc.), each of which possesses its own distinct identity and speaks one of the Tibeto-Burman languages. Most of this population is centered between the middle courses of the Red and Mekong rivers of China; smaller groups can be found inhabiting areas bordering on Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Thailand. The Hani are a farming people who live in densely packed, hillside villages. Their primary crop is rice, which they grow on irrigated terraces located between eight hundred and eighteen hundred meters above sea level. The focus of this paper will be on one of the soil gods of the Hani people of the Red river area. Studying this god, who is accorded a central role in the religious liturgy of the Hani, we will see how the appropriation of a natural space and the exploitation of its resources depend directly on the cult relation maintained with him.

At the outset it should be mentioned that the Hani earth or soil gods are defined in relation to settlement; more exactly, in relation to village communities, each of which operates as a distinct religious unit. Lacking any traditional form of political organization extending beyond the village, this framework also constitutes the limit of political authority. Although it is undeniable that the various spirits associated with village life play a dominant role in the religious conceptions and activities of the Hani groups, the analysis of these spirits nevertheless runs up against a variety of difficulties. For one thing, although they are part of the celestial pantheon, these soil gods are neither contained in a defined hierarchy nor receive clear functional articulation. Moreover, their functions

seem to overlap to the extent that all of them present themselves as guardians of the Hani against the incursions of evil spirits. As a result, they are presented as the source of fertility and prosperity for the totality of living beings (human, animal, and crop) living within a delimited area. In other words, these entities first appear in a protective guise, centered on a human community and its area of cultivation. Throughout this article they will therefore be referred to, in general terms, as gods – or spirits – of the “soil,” since “soil” simultaneously connotes the idea of a geographic area and a of cultivated zone. Nevertheless, an analysis of the various myths reveals numerous divergences concerning the origin of each of these zones, and in the final analysis it seems that it is from this point of view that we can most easily differentiate among them.

Xama and the Hani Pantheon

The Hani, like many other Asiatic cultures, have developed a tripartite vision of the universe, establishing a fundamental distinction among three separate worlds: sky (*thapo*), earth (*thatha*), and underworld (*thawo*). Within each of these categories they establish a complex and hierarchically ordered pantheon. The authority in this spirit world lies essentially in the power of a primordial celestial divinity, conceived as transcendent, who governs – in various forms – all the spirits of all three domains. At the same time, the spirits of this world, as much in the way they are depicted as in the way they are worshipped, play an essentially secondary role and are little differentiated from each other. In fact, most religious representations of these spirits revolve around a polar opposition. On the one hand, we find a limited number of primordial celestial divinities, who are represented as omnipresent and are usually associated with the creation of the world; in this category we have the celestial emperor (Aoma, Momi) and the solar-lunar couple (Yolo/Yobö), to whom we can add divine messengers and certain lower divinities who work for and carry out orders for the supreme power. As guarantors of the universal order established at the outset of the creation, these divinities serve to protect humanity, to whose survival and development they have con-

tributed from the beginning. Most importantly, they are thought of as spirits who are benevolent toward human beings. However, their protection is only guaranteed to the extent that humans conform, in their actions, to the norms established by these creators of the universe.¹ On the other hand, we find a variegated collection of spirits, inhabiting the earth or the beyond, whose separation from the human genus took place at a later stage of the world's creation. As a result, they are essentially of a lower order than the gods of the celestial pantheon. The relationship between human beings and these spirits, who are classed under the general term of the *tsao*, is of a more ambiguous nature and is often cast in the form of an alliance because they are above all seen as competitors who often prove to be harmful and dangerous to human beings and their goods. The Hani identify a particularly dangerous group at the center of this generic class, the *nae*, comprised of the souls of those whose deaths have been a result of demonic forces; unable to take advantage of the power of their ancestors, they become wandering souls who eternally harass the living.

Although the Hani language has no single word to designate the soil gods, as a group they occupy an intermediate position in the hierarchy linking the creator gods to the demonic forces. Indeed, from a classificatory point of view, the soil gods are in the first instance part of that variegated collection of earthly spirits, the *tsao*, among whom they undoubtedly occupy first place in the scale of values that human beings have assigned to them. However, this simple assertion covers up a key ambiguity. It is of course true that the soil gods are identified with the heavenly spirits, and in this way are similar to the primordial celestial divinities; indeed, as a tangible sign of this privileged status, their sanctuaries are constructed at the same elevation or above those of the group's settlement and fields. In this way, the soil gods are symbolically linked to the guardian spirits and ancestors. This is in contrast with the minor gods, who are identified with disorder and evil spirits and whose sanctuaries are but temporary constructions located below the settlement. However, at the same time, some of the soil gods worshipped by the Hani can, by their origin, be clearly identified with the some of the formidable and barbarous earth gods. For example, although their sanctuaries are generally located at the

periphery of the inhabited area, they are nonetheless most often confined to a location outside the actual settlement. Furthermore, virtually all the Hani sanctuaries dedicated to the soil gods are made up of isolated trees or small copses, which is an additional indication that these entities originally belonged to the world of the spirits of the forest.

How, then, are we to explain the apparently paradoxical conception, which consists in the claim that the Hani worship, as equals of their ancestors, forces of the untamed world that their religious conceptions identify with the evil spirits of the forest? A succinct description of the religious representations and activities linked to the worship of Xama, the Hani soil god who plays a pre-eminent role in these rituals, may help us resolve this ambiguity and at the same time define the exact nature of the relations maintained by human beings in relation to this particular category of the pantheon.

Who is Xama? Although the name Xama is found throughout most of the Red River basin, the god as such is lacking in any kind of uniform religious representation. Rather, depending on which group of villages, the myths of origin associated with his name vary. Each local community worships its own god and creates a permanent place of residence for it in a tree inside a copse. This copse is always located at the edge of the village and, ideally, upstream of the first habitations. Annually, at the time of sowing, the god is made the object of a ritual of propitiation, the *Xama-tu* (literally "to offer to Xama"). The Hani attach considerable importance to the ritual and it constitutes one of the major activities of the annual religious cycle. What is at stake in the ritual is clear to everyone: if adequately propitiated, the soil god will provide a vital protection that is essential to the well-being of the community of living beings and to the resources on which the community depends. By guaranteeing the reproduction and prosperity of the living beings that inhabit the village (whether human, animal, or plant), Xama in a sense personifies the connection of a village group to its area of residence and cultivation.

Even though providing a necessary protection, Xama is not depicted by the Hani as being a benevolent figure, at least as regards his origin. Indeed, the myths associated with Xama have

very little in common with those that describe the principal figures of the celestial pantheon. For example, unlike the gods of the pantheon, Xama is no way associated with the creation of the world. Rather, he is one of the *tsao*, those innumerable terrestrial spirits inhabiting a specific locale. All of the narratives explaining the origin of Xama-worship define a process akin to the pacification of a fearsome, untamed spirit, often depicted as a monstrous cannibal who destroys harvests and devours children. Originally conceived as an entity from the untamed world, whether animal or spirit, Xama appears to have been intrinsically hostile to humans; it is only by virtue of the "pact," instituted by the ancestors of the founding line of the community, that the god has in some sense been "humanized." What's more, all the myths of origin depict the nature of the original ties between human beings and the divinity to have taken the form of a contract of protection, in exchange for which the god received a sanctuary, a cult of worship, and the carrying out of periodic sacrifices in its honor.

What are the terms of this original agreement? The prosperity humans expect from Xama is in fact a direct result of the protection that he offers against all possible types of harm emanating from outside the community. Above all, the god possesses the ability to keep danger away. As he promises the Hani in a passage from the foundation myth of the cult: "If you worship me and annually offer me a pig, I will help you chase away all the other wild animals." Within the framework of this contract, the essential role of the soil or earth god is to ensure that the domain of the community, symbolized by the village fence, is not threatened by invasion from hostile forces. In recognition of this protection the community places itself in a position of dependence in relation to Xama, a fact to which the elevated position of the sanctuary – it stands above the village – bears witness. From here on, the living implore the soil god not as they would a terrestrial spirit, which is precisely what they had originally done, but as they would address their own ancestors, situated higher than they both in space and time, and from whom they expect help in return. The Hani soil god thus presents itself in the guise of a "domesticated" or "pacified" monster, but a monster nevertheless, not as some kind of benevolent divinity who participated in the creation of the world. The validity

of the contract of alliance hinges on the community's veneration of the god; and because the god already exists in all places where people decide to settle, this alliance is seen as a strict obligation from the perspective of the Hani villagers.

The Soil God and the Foundation of a Village

This fundamental ambivalence in the conception of the soil god gives rise to an original way of thinking based on the idea that it is necessary, in order to make use of the resources of nature, to work continuously with the spirit world. For the Hani, in effect, the appropriation of any natural space is experienced in the first instance as a religious act by which a parcel of land is snatched from the untamed world and the spirits inhabiting it. In so doing, a living space favorable to human habitation is created; that is to say, an enclosed space which, as the Hani say, the spirits from outside "do not dare penetrate." In order to succeed at this, the Hani believe it indispensable to secure the help of the earth gods, and of Xama above all. An analysis of the rituals associated with the founding of a village reveals that the perpetuation of the alliance concluded with the divinity, along with the installation of the soil god in its wooded sanctuary, simultaneously constitute the initial condition and founding act of any human implantation on a new territory. Thus before the founding of any village can take place, a selection of the copse, inside of which Xama will take up residence, must be made. This selection of the tutelary god's sanctuary is made by divination. Another primary characteristic of the process by which the Hani found a new village is the multiplication of the divinity: the settlers must spread over the site of the new sanctuary either seeds or young sprouts from the tree which serves as Xama's residence in the settlers' village of origin.

Let us now try to describe in some detail the ways in which this ritual appropriation of a new territory is carried out. With the presumed site of the new village already determined by a process of divination (a process that implies the approval of the celestial gods), the heads of household of the emigrating families gather together in Xama's sanctuary of the mother community. After

swearing loyalty to him, they then implore Xama to agree to accompany them to the new site and to protect them against the hostile forces of the spirit world on the territory in which they hope to found their new community. In return they promise to set the god up in a new sanctuary, thereby renewing the relationship maintained between them until now.

At this time, the settlers select one of their number, a man of talent, a "leader" (*axwo*), literally a "man of power," who has shown evidence of qualities acknowledged by the entire community and who, by divination, is assured to have received the support of the god. This man, selected by his fellows and approved of by Xama, plays a crucial role in what is to follow. It is through him that Xama agrees to the idea of entering into a new alliance with the group of migrants and assuring the protection of their new community against the incursions of spirits from outside it. Conferred with such authority, the leader now assumes the responsibility for supervising the series of rituals that will be required before the first houses can begin to be constructed. This job is not without serious risks, since the leader will have to rally all his powers in order to overcome the powers of the untamed world which are present on the site at the moment the migrants take possession of it.

Thus, from the outset of the foundation of a village, the act of mediation with the god is presented to us as dangerous, and demanding uncommon qualities. In fact, clairvoyance (*utse*) and force (*yoxë*) are the cardinal virtues that the *axwo* must possess. His first job is to reproduce Xama. In order to do so, he takes one of the seeds or young branches from the tree in the mother community that serves as the god's sanctuary. He then goes into the heart of a wooded area that has been chosen by divination as the site of Xama's new sanctuary and which from here on will be protected from any kind of human intrusion. Sometimes, in addition to the branch taken from the sanctuary in the village of origin, the liturgical bond linking the group of founding settlers to the mother community is embodied in a clump of earth gathered from the foot of the tree: both are placed at the site of the newly chosen mound. Once this ritual has been carried out, the settlers can consider themselves simultaneously under the protection of the gods

of the sky and the earth, a condition that is required before the appropriation of the new locale can take place.

The actual founding of the village must always take place at night and preferably in winter, because there tend to be fewer spirits in winter than during the rainy season. The ritual takes the form of an armed procession, headed by the leader. To begin, the settlers go to the area chosen as the center of the new village and light a giant bonfire. This fire, just as in the myths of origin, plays an active role in evicting the spirits, because, it is said, "where ash is found, humans live." For this reason, the fire must stay lit without interruption until the first homes are built. The settlers gather around the fire, reciting propitiatory incantations. The village now possesses a ritual center (*akha*), but it is without borders. This is why this initial collective act on the site is followed by another, whose aim is to drive out, by a centrifugal movement emanating from the center, the spirits of the untamed world. This ritual eviction of the spirits, by means of which the village space is created, goes by the general name of *tsao kuu le* (spirit hunting). The participants, the number of whom must always be uneven, smear their faces with earth and turn their clothes – jackets and head-dresses – inside out. They also place knives in their mouths. At the same time, the people gathered around the bonfire erupt in noise, blowing buffalo horns and banging drums and gongs. The leader, who has turned his headdress and jacket inside out like the others, now places an iron tripod – which is used for the cooking of food – on his head. This act recreates part of the myth that tells the story of the original separation of men from spirits.

Next, the members of the procession take up spears, rifles, and sticks. To these are added talismans in the form of weapons, such as the wooden knives that the Hani often place on the rope which is strung across the principal path of the village and which is reputed to have the power to keep back spirits; or those wooden forks and hammers that are the favorite weapon of Alo, the legendary hero famed for his ability to fight off demons. The leader of the group himself brandishes a bow and a broom, the latter to symbolize the act of having cleansed the site and rid it of its stench.

The leader then takes charge of the dog who is destined to be sacrificed and whose blood, along with the ash and grains of rice,

will help to define exactly the border separating the inhabited site from the untamed world. Leading the procession, he begins by marching from the center first in one straight line, then in another, thereby creating two perpendicular axes; the resulting perimeter will be able to contain no less than a hundred habitations. While the procession is taking place, the *axwo's* assistant continually spots spirits whom the head of the group pretends to kill by shooting arrows at them. In this way, the procession takes on the look of a hunt. As he walks, the *axwo* spreads grains of rice along the ground, signifying – as in the myth – that there is human habitation wherever rice covers the ground.

When a sufficient distance has been traveled, the procession stops before a large rock (if the terrain is lacking such a landmark, the participants themselves gather stones and make a pile out of them). This mound constitutes the border (*kokha*) of the inhabited world. It is here that the dog is sacrificed and its blood collected. Then the procession sets off once more, sprinkling the blood along the perimeter traced by the two perpendicular axes. Along with the dog blood, the procession also scatters handfuls of rice, ash, and metal fragments, thereby creating a boundary that will henceforth separate the human domain (*laxo-po*) from what belongs to the outside world (*lanyj-po*). Thus the village, which already had a center, now has a border as well. The Hani give the name of *misa-sapo* (“the place that divides the earth”) to this limit. However, it is crucial that the new site not be trampled in the period just following its founding; if it is, it can become permeable again and the ritual will have to be performed anew.

Having mercilessly driven the spirits out beyond the sacred boundary, the settlers now treat them with solicitude. In effect, the human group tries to domesticate these dreaded enemies who live at the edge of their habitat. A somewhat paradoxical event now takes place: the founders of the village, who have just driven away the spirits, set about “relocating” them. A small dwelling, which resembles a human habitation and is constructed in the same manner as one, is built on top of the rock pile. At the foot of the mound the leader and his assistants offer the flesh of the sacrificed dog as well as several fowls to the gods; this in an effort to enter into a non-aggression pact with them.

The officiating priest then repeats: "Man is the elder, the spirit the younger; we were separated from each other in ancient times; the good lands are for men, the uncultivated lands for the spirits." The leader of the group places the broom, which he has carried with him, next to the dwelling of the spirits. This is to signify to them that they ought never again leave their residence. Finally, in order to compensate them for the loss of their original habitat and to soothe their potential anger, the humans suggest to the "immured" spirits that they will present them with periodic offerings of food. Thus the relationship between the human community and these spirits has gradually evolved: originally seeking their eviction, even attempting their annihilation, the human community has sought to reassure and finally to enter into a contractual alliance with the spirits. Formerly untamed, and although still possessing their demonic nature, the spirits must now yield to a new order, created by humans.

The procession then returns to the center of the village, with the leader, who is armed, walking at the back in order to keep watch for any attempt by the spirits to return. The ceremony of the eviction of the spirits ends with a ritual calling to the soul (*yula-ku*). Its purpose is to verify that none of the souls that participated in the ritual were either captured or lost. It is performed by the *axwo* in the name of all the participants.

After this ritual is completed, the *axwo* removes the iron tripod from his head, and then everyone turns their clothes and head-dresses right-side out. The bonfire is stoked and will remain so until the first houses have been constructed. (If the fire were to go out, it is believed that the spirits would be tempted to try to reconquer their lost territory.) On the first night following the ritual of eviction, the settlers gather to listen for the first sound emanating from the outskirts of the village. If it is a human voice or a bird cry, it is taken as an excellent omen; however, if it is the cry of a wild animal of the forest, it means that the area has not been fully cleared of hostile spirits. The ritual of purification must then be repeated, with a new *axwo* chosen and the original location of the village center somewhat modified.

When the omen is good the founding settlers then construct the first house of the new village. This house, the front of which faces

east, belongs to the leader, who has directed the entire ritual process. From the point of view of the ritual, the founding of the new site is completed with the construction of the “doors” that mark the village entrance, located at the junction of the main road and the border of the inhabited area. These doors, which serve as tangible symbols of the invisible border separating two disparate worlds, play an essential role in the termination of the foundation rituals. This is because the doors, which are believed to possess purifying powers, make possible the risk-free opening of the closed space onto the outside world. The gods that live inside or near the doors “clear” and “purify” (*sao*) both the people returning from the fields or forest and the occasional evil spirits that might be tempted to grab onto them.

In fact, the rituals associated with the founding of a village are something of a replay of the initial scene of the mythical separation of men from spirits. The bonfire, the ashes, and the grains of rice are essential elements of the original rupture as depicted in the myth, when the spirits and humans came to a mutual agreement that henceforth the lands farmed by slash-and-burn methods would become the property of the human community. What's more, the ritual performed to appropriate space recalls the trickery used by humans in the same myth, where they were able to regain the fertile lands by lighting fires all around them and by spreading rice grains over the ashes.

Viewed overall, the founding of a Hani village is an essentially religious act. A village community is formed initially not by the appropriation or economic exploitation of a piece of land, but by the creations of ties that are a result of the acknowledgment and veneration of a soil god. It is in fact the worship of a single spirit that defines a group and its land and reveals the proprietary right of the former over the latter on the basis of an ancestral contract. Such is, in this society, the rudimentary definition of property rights, the exercise of which is established above all by the celestial gods in association with the earth gods, and in particular with Xama. This framework is reminiscent of the way that P. Mus (1933) described the court of custom, which “is guaranteed by religious contract and for which property rights are secured by having access to the soil god.”

In the process of founding a village, which consists above all – as we have seen – in the construction of a “rampart” to protect against attacks from outside forces, the celestial gods (Momi, Yensa) and several of the spirits of the earth (among whom are Miso and the two guardians of the “doors” of the village) play an eminently active role. But Xama, as the first soil god established on the new site, has a particularly central role in this battle. Thanks to the contractual alliance formed between Xama and the villagers at the time of the founding of the village, the potentially devastating telluric power of this ancient entity of the untamed world is, in a sense, channeled to the benefit of the village group in order to keep the hostile spirits outside the reach of the inhabited domain. The role of the leader is crucial in this action, which for the human group consists of the appropriation of a parcel of land. And since order, peace, and subsistence itself permanently depend on this occlusion of space, it is understandable that the *axwo* must perpetuate the alliance established with the soil god in order to help maintain the integrity of each of the separating limits and to assure the boundary of the microcosm. If the contract is broken, the control over the divinity is lost, and it will soon regain the destructive and savage nature it had in the beginning. This is what is at stake during the annual celebration in honor of the soil god, the *Xama-tu*, which we will now present in some detail.

The Celebration of the Soil God

The great annual celebration of *Xama-tu* is officiated by a religious figure known throughout the eastern part of the Ailao mountain range as a *migu*. Performed shortly before the annual sowing of the rice, this ritual in effect reproduces the deed of the strong man who established the original pact between the community and the soil god. The ability to renew this ancestral contract, which was entered into with a god of the untamed world, requires certain special qualities and the approval of the celestial gods. The *migu*, like the founding ancestor of whom he is sometimes a descendant, is chosen on the basis of several qualities, which the Hani first express in terms of purity (*asao*). To be the progenitor of many off-

spring and not to have any close relations who have had a bad death is also a sign that one benefits from the protection of the gods or, as Przymuski put it, "from a divine influence that makes him succeed." This influence, however, does not originally emanate from the divinity Xama, but from the celestial emperor (Momi) and from Yensa. Nevertheless, it is Xama who makes the final selection of the *migu*. After having narrowed the field to a small number of potential candidates, the village assembly proceeds to the sanctuary of the soil god, where the final selection is made by lottery.

The power of the village priest of the Hani is thus made manifest by the revealed action of the gods, who simultaneously incarnate the cosmic order in its totality and the village domain in its specificity. The favor of the gods of the celestial pantheon, from which the village priest benefits, provides him henceforth with an authority he can use to come to terms with the untamed energy of the earth, thereby releasing its potential fertility. The stakes here are nothing less than the reproduction of the community and its natural environment.

The etymology of the word *Xama-tu*, "to offer to Xama," refers in the first place to the sacrifice made to the tutelary divinity of the village, which is the key ritual activity of the festivities; however, the *Xama-tu* is also marked by daily oblations to ancestors, which are carried out by each household for the three to seven days that the celebration lasts. Moreover, offerings are made to the great divinities of the celestial pantheon (notably, Momi and Yensa), as well as to several earth gods other than Xama, especially the gods of the village doors. Taken together, the series of rituals constituting *Xama-tu* can be seen as an attempt at propitiating the totality of gods protecting the village space; and it takes place just before the start of the new agricultural season in order to gather together all those life forces that are linked to the village territory and to its inhabitants.

The celebration of the soil god is also linked to a complex group of ritual taboos having to do with confinement and abstinence. For one, beginning on the first day of the festivities and continuing until the last, when the village door is reconstructed, no strangers may enter the village nor any villagers leave it. During

the three days when ritual activity is at its peak, the inhabitants of the community must abstain from the majority of their usual activities (field work, gardening, wood collection, etc.) and among most Hani groups women are forbidden to sew or wear hats on the day that sacrificial offerings are made to Xama. Finally, the three days of collective ceremonies are followed by a period of abstinence and rest that sometimes lasts until the day of sowing.

The celebratory activities of the second day are centered on the sacrifice, by the entire community, of a large male pig that is offered to the god at his wooded sanctuary. The night before, as a preparatory act, the village priest leads a procession of elders and musicians around the entire village, appealing to the soil god. He also carries out the annual water purification ritual, which consists of making offerings of food to the gods who are in charge of the water that flows from the spring. The sacrifice of the pig, which is carried out by the village priest and several assistants who are chosen from among the strongest and most virtuous youths of the village, is conducted in the copse in complete silence. When the group arrives at the sanctuary, the *migu* makes three low bows to the tree in which the god is housed. Then, adorning himself in a silk tunic and covering his head with a piece of fabric, the priest sacrifices the animal. Once the pig has been skinned, cut up, and cooked, some of its meat, along with other offerings of food, are put on a plate, which the priest places at the foot of the shrine. The participants then form three rows and bow to the tree while the *migu*, standing in the middle of the group, calls to Xama. With their eyes fixed on the tree, the participants then take nine steps backward, at which time they are allowed to turn away. During the sacrifice the *migu* must, among other things, inspect the pig's liver: if its small lateral appendages have a bouncy and healthy appearance, then the god has accepted the renewal of their agreement. The village heads of household, with the exception of the *migu*, divide equally among themselves the remaining meat, the head and feet being reserved for the *migu*. Some of this meat is immediately incorporated into the evening's offerings of food to the ancestors that takes place in each house; the rest will be saved until the crops are sowed, at which time the meat will be brought into contact with the seeds, since it is believed the meat has a fertilizing power.

After the offerings to the soil god have been made, a banquet is held for all the heads of household. Following this meal there is a ritual dance led by the *migu* and the community's oldest citizen. This dance, which is accompanied by the sounds of gongs and drums, symbolizes the union of male and female energies and is believed to add to the community's general fertility. The gong and drum-playing continues in a less formal manner into the evening and includes masked dances carried out by the young men of the village.

The ritual of the third day, which concludes the *Xama-tu* and the confinement of the village, consists of the reconstruction of the main door of the village. Like the day before, the *migu* is assisted by nine chosen helpers who have been culled from among the village's most "pure" and virtuous men. Early that morning these assistants visit all the homes of the village, collecting embers from each dwelling's hearth. These embers are then mixed together and used to feed the fire in which the sacrificed animals are to be cooked. The principal offering consists of a hen and two cocks that have been bought with money collected from all the inhabitants of the village. One of the cocks and the hen are presented to the gods and sacrificed together, their beaks and feet having first been sprinkled with lustral water from the sacred spring of the village. The plain-colored cock is then decapitated in the middle of the path. The cock's head is mounted on a small bamboo pole and placed just outside the village door to "terrify" the spirits.

The act of hanging the door is not a very difficult operation. This is because in regions like the Red River the Hani do not plant wooden poles in the ground but limit themselves to stringing a rope across the path, at a height of approximately two meters. The rope is made of creeping vines woven together, into which several distinct elements are inserted. In the Jianshui district there are twelve of these: three feathers from the bodies of sacrificed animals, three knives marked with black spots, three pieces of sculpted wood, and three blades of grass renowned for their sharpness. To this are sometimes added wooden hammers, which are inserted through the plaits of the rope or are hung from the horizontal cross-bars of the door when such are used.

After removing his shoes as a mark of deference to the gods "from above," the *migu* prepares a plate of offerings to be placed

at the foot of the tree. Facing the sanctuary, the participants then kneel down and bow three times to the guardian gods of the door. Next, the priest removes a small portion of the ingredients from each of the ritual bowls and places these materials on the ground. Then, taking up the platter on which the bowls lie, he exits, walking backwards just as was done during the offering to Xama. Finally, at the end of the ceremony, a representative of each household removes some ash from the principal fireplace of his house and sawdust from the underside of his front door. After adding some grains of rice to them, he wraps the materials in paper and throws it away, out beyond the cord strung across the path. As he does so, he repeats the words of the original pact, concluded at the moment of their separation, which established a link between the spirits and human beings: "Everywhere where there is ash and grains of rice, there you will find men."

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the taboos linked with village confinement are no longer in force. The spring has been purified, the contract with the soil god renewed, the relations with the great celestial powers reaffirmed, the village rid of foul odors, and the protective cordon redefined: the inhabited site is in order once more. With the reactivation of the alliance with the guardians of the door, the interior space of the village can now be reopened to the free movement of human beings. Only field work remains prohibited; and this will remain the case until the *migu* himself carries out a ritual desacralization of the earth.

Having reached the end of this summary description of the annual celebration held in honor of the Hani soil god, one thing in particular has become strikingly clear: the sequence of acts making up the ritual of *Xama-tu* reproduces almost point for point the principal elements of the ritual activity that accompanies the founding of a village. As in the latter case, the officiating priest leads a ritual walk around the village. Also, as a preliminary act to the definition of the interior space, a pact of alliance, which will be repeated annually, must be reached with the soil god; this is done through a ceremony in which the soil god is installed in its sanctuary. Just as in the creation of a village, the celebration of the soil god is marked by the purification of a spring and a period of confinement which lasts until the ritual reconstruction of the village

door is completed, that is to say until the limits of the enclosed space are redefined and the protection of the village perimeter assured by the reaffirmation of the links to the great celestial gods. Once the guardian gods of the door have been appropriately propitiated, the doors to the outside world can now be safely opened. Finally, in both cases the success of the alliance depends in large measure on the talent of the "strong man" who acts as mediator for the village.

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To conclude, what can we learn from the special relationship that exists between the soil god and the officiant in charge of its worship? From the moment of the founding of a village site, the Hani feel the need for a man with mediative powers sufficient to establish and renew a contract with this divinity. The man they seek must be the most pure and virtuous among them, since the Hani believe that these characteristics are sure signs of the favor and grace of the gods. However, even before a man can become a candidate for this "divine mandate," he must benefit from the approval of the soil god, which is received by divination. This is why, it seems to us, that the annual celebration dedicated to the soil god is modeled on that of the founding of a village, the act which marks the original investiture of the mastered supernatural force. Indeed, it is as though the village priest, by his liturgical action, was repeating the procedure by which his illustrious predecessor had once taken possession of the village land. It is as though he were reenacting the exploit of this founding ancestor who, with the help of the celestial powers, managed to establish a pact with the soil god and to transform him into an ally of man. By his ability to harness the energies of the celestial powers – powers that influence natural phenomena and the fertility of beings – the *migu* proves to be a vector of life forces and finds himself at the center of an all-encompassing mechanism of correspondences between the village and the universe, in which he alone is the incarnation of the vital relation that determines the survival and prosperity of all.

In this way, each Hani village is an independent microcosm, centered on its *migu* and the soil god who assures the protection of

the land. This unity is identically made and remade anywhere and anytime that a group of settlers sets foot on a new territory, choosing one of their own who is capable of controlling the forces of the spirit world and thereby making possible the group's access to the resources of nature. Such is the way in which the relations between the untamed and anthropized world are conceived in this society. Moreover, by the way it conceives the soil god, this society creates a coherent symbolic system in which man's action toward nature cannot be separated from his action in the religious sphere.

Notes

1. To this must be added the ancestral Manes of which the statute is a part, but which play an essential role for securing the prosperity of the living through the family cult.

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