

# An Ecological Theme

*Bernard Formoso*

Which traveler, passing through the rural communities of Asia, has not been intrigued by the existence, on the periphery of the village, of shrines, piles of stones, trees, or caverns ornamented with offerings which, at certain key moments during the year, become the focal points of an intense religious activity? These sites are in fact consecrated to chthonian forces that, next to the ancestors, occupy a high rank in the relationship that the peasants of Asia or other regions around the world establish with the divine. To be sure, the earth gods and the ancestors do not put themselves at the top of the pantheon that each society neatly builds for itself; but they nevertheless dominate the immediate sphere of individuals and social groups. They are at the center of their most routine cultic activities, and they are bestowed with a crucial role in the perpetuation of the groups with which they are identified and whose unity they symbolize.

On the one hand, the ancestors are charged with improving the fecundity, prosperity, morality, and cohesion of their descendants. The role of the earth gods, on the other hand, is to secure the livelihood of humans by ordering their connections with the natural environment. Since the former operate within a social group that is regulated by the rules of kinship, and since the objective of their activities is to assure the continuity of the descent group, the sphere of the earth gods in turn is not genealogical, but ecological, in the sense that it allows the local anchoring of a group of families that are not necessarily related. Beyond this, there exist many overlaps between the two categories: in some lineage societies, the ancestors of the founders of the village have been merged with the earth gods, whereas in other groups that are guided by a cognatic system, the communal spirits are in line with the principle of fictive kinship termed "grand-father and grand-mother" of the village.

The articles in this issue, which are part of a collective effort to be published in the near future, illustrate these propositions. At the same time they make it possible to differentiate, within the specific context of Asian societies, between two modes of representing the earth gods and the relationship with nature in which one corresponds to state societies and the other to tribal ones. In fact, the elaborate transformation of the environment that characterizes the state societies as they create wetland rice cultures or other permanently cultivated fields goes hand in hand with the transformation of the earth gods in a process of submission or ancestralization that is enshrined in the mythology; the humans seek to shape them in their own image, just as they try to model and tame the land in which they represent the active element. This ecological practice and the corresponding religious ideas contrast sharply with those of tribes that subsist in an itinerant agriculture of slash and burn or of stock-breeding, to the extent that the latter seek the patronage of the forces of nature by means of a contractual relationship without feeling the power to subvert them. This way of looking at things corresponds to a more direct and reversible harnessing of the environment.

The dividing lines between these two models may partly be undermined by the integration of tribal societies into a state structure which develops from the royal hold over the land and the entities that focus their energies. This is true of Burma since the eleventh century, or equally true of Nepal since the accession of the Shah dynasty at the end of the eighteenth century. The representations and forms of cult that relate to the earth gods reveal the existence of political links between the local and the central powers just as much as they reflect the ecological praxis of the societies under consideration. But in the final analysis and beyond these particular aspects, the earth gods as mediators invite us to consider the manner in which the agrarian societies of Asia or elsewhere reconcile questions of identity, ecological necessities, technical-economic means, political constraints, and religious beliefs within a comprehensive framework of their rapport with the world.