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THE INVISIBLE WORLD : LADAKHIS AND ILLNESS

Patrick Kaplanian

In the 1970's, gradually, through conversations with both farmers and scholars, through the analysis of various rituals and further explanations I obtained from Ladakhis (concerning, for instance, shrines to local gods (*lhatho; lha-tho*) and spirits of the earth or water (*lhubang: klu-bang sometimes klu-khang*)), the supernatural world including ideas about witchcraft began to unfold before me.

However, what originally drew my attention to these questions was illness, because most of the time it is ascribed to a *tsan* (*btsan*, a red demon), a *gyapo* (*rgyal-po*, another deity who curses the robbers), a witch or the like. After a circumstantial study of all the phenomena I was able to witness and listening of the interpretations the Ladakhis gave of them, a key notion became apparent to me, that of *snotpa* or *notpa* (*gnod-pa*).

The Ladakhis call (*s*)*notpa* (*gnod-pa*) also called *rdon* (*gdon*), *skyon* or *gek* (*bgegs*) any form of damage caused by a supernatural entity. This can range from drought, poverty, the death of animals, etc. to physical or mental illness. (*s*)*Notpa* can manifest in many other ways: a violent gust of wind that destroys crops, a wolf who enters a house are other forms it can take besides illness. However the Ladakhis concede that illness is not always a result of (*s*)*notpa*. They say that there are some 80,000 different kinds of (*s*)*notpa*. This is doubtless a fanciful figure intended to reflect the countless entities and supernatural occurrences that can cause (*s*)*notpa*.

Illness caused by (*s*)*notpa* is opposed to natural disorders. According to traditional Tibetan medicine (which Ladakhis follow, see Meyer, 1981: 146-147) there are 404 kinds of disorders, subdivided as follows: 101 are considered incurable, 101 are curable by

medicine, 101 cure on their own and 101 are *(s)notparelated*. Since an educated Ladakhi volunteered the same information, this fourfold division obviously applies in Ladakh too. Other people, such as the *amchi* of Yurtung (Leh), extend this figure to 424 diseases and believe they are chiefly due to natural causes, *(s)notpare*remaining an exception.

Ladakhis adhere to the Tibetan classification of diseases into two major categories, those originating from natural causes and those caused by *(s)notpa*. Naturally-caused diseases are strictly the domain of the *amchi* (*am-chi*) or *smamba* (*smam-pa*, *smam* meaning remedy), the traditional Tibetan doctor. *(s)notpa*-related disorders are referred to the monk, oracle (*lhaba*; *lha-pa*) and notably to the astrologer. The Ladakhis all agree on one point: *(s)notpa*diseases cannot be cured by the *amchi*'s remedies alone and therefore require religious ceremonies (*skurim* or *rimdro*; *rim-gro*). In some cases these ceremonies suffice, in others, the *amchi*'s treatment is also needed. The *skurim* is therefore a necessary measure but not always sufficient in the case of *(s)notpa*.

In Ladakh, like most Lamaist societies, popular and scholarly cultures constantly interact and it is virtually impossible to dissociate one from the other. Elements of scholarly knowledge pop up in almost every conversation, even that of the illiterate and inversely, the scholar's discourse is always impregnated with popular beliefs. This is not surprising since the scholars' and the lay world are intimately intertwined: the *amchi*s and *onpos* are village notables, monks come from peasant families; hence farmers and scholars meet on a regular basis. As long as you base yourself on conversations with Ladakhis, you will find that they conform to what is written in the texts and claim that almost all diseases arise from natural causes, *(s)notpa*being a rare exception. This is all very well, but I had learned not to take my informants' declarations at face value, because I had long realized that what they professed to believe did not always correspond to their actual behavior.

Several occurrences showed me that they believed in (*s*)*notpa* more than they liked to admit. I will relate here two such instances.

1) Like others I interviewed, S.T., an illiterate goldsmith living in Chilling, assured me without giving any figures, that illnesses due to natural causes were by far the most numerous and that those caused by supernatural entities were very rare, even exceptional. He definitely did not obtain this information from texts (which he could not read) but, more likely, from scholars who came to visit him. A week later, when he told me his three-year old daughter had fallen ill, I innocently advised him to go and see a doctor. He refused as he was convinced she would be cured, at the latest the following day, because he had already called upon a lama to perform a *skurim*. The girl's condition worsened (she had chicken pox) and so S.T. finally consulted the *amchi*. However he persisted in believing that the illness was not "natural", and with no valid reason, remained obstinately convinced that it was due to (*s*)*notpa*. At length, the child was taken to the hospital where she eventually recovered. S.T. never doubted for a minute that he had taken the right course of action and that, without the *skurim*, modern medicine would have been ineffective.

2) The following anecdote is most revealing. M.T. has studied at university and now holds an interesting and stable position. He can read, write and speak fluent Tibetan, Urdu and English. In all these ways, he is the opposite of S.T. Furthermore, he married a girl out of love and against the girl's parents will — which suggests a great deal of emancipation from traditional Ladakhi ways. He ran away with his wife to Chandigarh in order to be married by the Indian civil administration. When they returned, his wife reconciled herself with part of her family (an aunt) and a traditional wedding was arranged to "legalize" their situation in the aunt's house. The night before the wedding,

M.T. showed signs of discomfort: he had a little fever and pains in his back and legs. I asked him whether this wasn't (*s*)*notpa*. He brushed my question aside and asked me for some medicine. I did not have any so he went off to bed. The next day, the wedding took place as planned with no particular incident. You can imagine my surprise when, about ten days later, I met M.T. again during a session at a *lhamo's* (oracle). When the consultation was over, he told me, somewhat embarrassed, that he was afflicted with *mirdech*s (*mi-bde-byas*), a sense of ill-being that often heralds possession by a spirit. He explained that another girl was in love with him and that her mother being a *gongmo* (a kind of witch whose soul possess the body of her victim), there was a good chance that she had become one too, after she had found out he had eloped with another. He admitted that he believed that he was the victim of the neglected girl's attempts to possess him. These examples (and there are many more I could give) seem to show that the Ladakhis, despite scholarly knowledge, give a greater importance to (*s*)*notpa* than to natural causes. This irrefutable fact is not only due to the *amchis'* poor standards or to their tendency to prescribe *skurim* rather than their own remedies (*sman*); one must also take into account the multitudes of supernatural entities liable to cause (*s*)*notpa*. The daughter of S.T., a traditional mind, ends up in hospital. M.T., a more modern-minded man, first asks for medicine and then goes to see a *lhamo*. That Ladakhis are paradoxical is putting it mildly!

I related S.T.'s story to my friend Phuntsok, a practitioner of Western medicine who once cured me and to whom I bring medicine every time I go to Ladakh. "It's always the same!" he exclaimed, "they try everything, the astrologer, the *amchi*, the lama, the oracle and only in desperation do they turn to us, but often, by that time, it's already too late."

Let us say a few words to introduce the different kind of healers.

The *amchis*

In Lamayuru Norbu is a young fellow in his twenties, who has inherited his profession from his father, as is usually the case. He is not one of the lucky few who have had the opportunity to complete the training offered by his father either in Lhasa, at the well-respected medical College, or at the Astro-medical Institute in Dharamsala, capital of the Tibetan Government in exile.

"One does not have to inherit the profession from one's father", Norbu explains, "anyone can receive the teachings here, and then, if he has the means, go to college". He pretended to ignore what I already knew, that hereditary amchis, the *gyut-amchis* (*gyut* spelt *brgyud* means lineage) are considered to be the best. One who cannot boast a long lineage of *amchis* in his family has little chance of gaining widespread recognition. Open-minded as he is, Norbu is interested in Western medicine and even has a stethoscope of his own, which he apparently knows how to use. He has no qualms about using Western medicine imported by the Kashmiri nurses and even asked me for some. "True enough", Norbu tells us, "not all Ladakhi doctors are *amchis*. Those who work in the hospital in Leh or Kargil have a degree in Western medicine. But it is not as though we live in two separate worlds". This may be true as far as doctors like Norbu are concerned, but further investigation was to question this point of view. *Amchis* are far closer in their ways to those involved in exorcism and possession than to Western doctors.

Meme T.G., the old *amchi* of Stok, claims that pulse diagnosis and urine analysis are enough to immediately determine whether the disease is natural or (*s*)*not* related.

However, with the exception of *mirdech*s, which I will discuss in further detail below, most *amchis* rely on more empirical methods. For instance, A.T. believes that since, *a priori*, doubt always prevails, the *onpo* (astrologer) should always be consulted first. For

H.T, from Sabu, however, the failure of medicine to cure a disease is always a clear indication of *(s)notpa*. As for *amchi* P. who lives in Shankar, he is even more pragmatic and uses both medicine and *skurim* simultaneously. "In this way", he says, "the patient is sure to recover!" If *onpo*, *lama* and their *skurim* fail, one may still call upon the *rinpoche* (*rin-po-che*) as a last resort. And when all else fails, there remains one last remedy: meditation (*tshams*).

Although we may find it unusual, the use of spiritual methods combined with traditional medicine when faced with *(s)notpais* quite within accepted norms. The great Tibetan Medical Treaty devotes an entire chapter on spirit-related disorders. Obviously, from a theoretical point of view, Tibetan and Western medicine do not have much in common. The Tibetan system is based on simple notions such as the balance between the three bodily humors: air or wind (*lung* spelt *rlung* meaning both air and wind) bile and phlegm. For a general outline of traditional Tibetan medicine, I will refer the reader to the work of Fernand Meyer, an acclaimed French Tibetologist, who is also a doctor in Western medicine. The following passage is taken from his study *Gso-ba-rig-pas, Le Système Médical Tibétain* (published by the CNRS, 1981).

Firstly, a child is not born from the fusion of sperm and an ovum but from the merging of sperm and menstrual blood. According to popular belief, the bones are formed from the sperm and the flesh and skin from the mother's blood. A proverb says *ame thrak abe rus* (*ama'i thrag aba'i rus*), "the blood of the mother, the bones of the father". When Ladakhis talk of nobility, they speak of *rus*, bones, and one inherits rank, title and bones from one's father (whereas we talk of "blue blood"). According to the medical tantras, if there is more blood than sperm, the child will be a girl and if there is more sperm, it will be a boy.

The body's proper functioning depends on the delicate balance between the three basic elements, wind, bile and phlegm, which are located, in specific quantities, in different parts of the body. Disorders arise when this balance is disturbed. For instance, you are a wind (*lung*) victim if the wind in your body is not where it should be and/or in inadequate quantities.

Amchi establish a diagnosis by pulse reading and urine analysis. Recovery is most often obtained with medicinal plants. "This is one of our tragedies", Norbu told us, "most of the plants we use do not grow here and we have to rely on the Indians or the Nepalese to obtain them".

Astrologers

There are two types of astrologers (*onpo; dbon-po*): those who work with calculations and those who practice divination (*mopa, mo* meaning divination). Both might make mistakes at times but, no matter, there is always an explanation for any error that they might make. For instance, the *mopas* have a simple though rather unusual story concerning their Book of Divination (*mospe; mo-dpe*) in case of a mistake: one day, a wicked witch threw the book into the fire and when the legendary hero Kesar managed to retrieve it, half had already been consumed by the flames. This is why the *mopas'* predictions are correct only fifty percent of the time.

Rtsikspas are astrologers as we know them in the West: according to dates, time, the position of planets and stars, they determine the future of a newborn baby, the favorable day for a wedding, etc. To the same end, *mopa* throws dice and interprets their position, according to the famous book mentioned above.

Astrologers, soothsayers and even monks engage in the practice of exorcism and use one of the two following methods:

— either the exorcist makes a statuette representing the demon the victim is persecuted by, and then destroys it; the demon supposedly suffers a similar fate. This statuette is called *storma* (*gtor-ma*);

— or he shapes a figurine, this time representing the victim. Deceived into believing that the effigy is the actual victim, the demon throws himself onto it and the real victim is thus released. This figurine is called *lut*(*glud*), sometimes translated into English by ransom.

“Psychological” categories

Here a note of caution must be sounded concerning Western psychological terminology which cannot, in any way, be applied to Ladakhis. Even though men and women are basically similar throughout the world, they abide by laws and regulations inherent to their own culture and these differ from one culture to another. This fact becomes even more obvious when one has to compare two radically different cultures. Consequently, I will only use terms such as "psychology" or "concept" sparingly and I do not use them in reference to a notion of the subconscious.

The existence of malevolent entities alone does not entirely explain the damage they occasion. In addition, there are a number of abstract categories or psychological conditions favoring the manifestation of (*s*)*notpa*. These subjective conditions must be distinguished from direct causes such as injuring a *lhu* (*klu*, underground deity) or soiling his abode (*lhusa*), perceiving a *tsan* (*btsan*, red devil without back) from behind, performing a ceremony (*skurim*) incorrectly, or disregarding the restrictions which follow birth or death.

One such notion is that of *namstok* (*rnam-rtog*), which I will temporarily translate as "belief" or "faith". If a person does not believe in those entities (the *lha*, *lhu*, *tsan*, etc.) he or she cannot be a victim of (*s*)*notpa*. One often hears the Ladakhis say: *rangrang seme*

namstok, "It depends on the person's *namstok*, *namstok medna dra met*, "no *namstok*, no enemies", *namstok medna ch(i)an metk(y)ak* "if there is no *namstok*, then nothing can happen".

According to S.G., a monk of high rank, this is not altogether true. Lack of *namstok* might protect you from *tsan*, witches and the like, but not from the *Ihu* and other powerful deities such as higher-ranking gods like *gyapo*. F.E., from Sakti, at first claimed that there was no exception to the rule before conceding that (*s*)*notpa* could sometimes be inflicted by a very powerful *lhu* or *choskyong*, whether you believed in them or not.

For others, however, the rule suffers no exception: the occurrence of (*s*)*notpa* depends entirely on faith in the entities which provoke it. Meme R, from Sabu, told me that he is hardly able to walk now because of a *lhu*. One of his employees cut the branch of a tree that happened to be a *lhalchang*, a tree inhabited by a *lha* or a *lhu*. The employee, being a Muslim, did not believe in them and therefore suffered no harm. However, Meme R., who does believe in them, is almost completely paralyzed from the waist down. T.P, from Skara goes so far as to include belief in astrology as a determining factor. He told me of a man who married on the most inauspicious day of the year (*ngang-pa tozom*, *ngang-pa 'tgo-dzom*). His father was furious but the son could not care less and thus nothing happened to him. Today, both he and his wife are in excellent health and have many children. Moreover he has become one of the richest men in the country. According to T.P., if his son had believed in astrology, things would not have turned out so well.

It would be misleading to speak of *namstok* in terms of superstition and conditioning. Faith, as irrational as it may seem, is not superstition. The objective existence of demons (*rdut*; *bdut* or *dre*; 'dre) causing (*s*)*notpa* is never questioned. However they are rampant only in the presence of *namstok*. In addition to the notion of faith, the term *namstok* also conveys the notion of fear these revengeful entities inspire. "If, while I am quietly

writing, a gust of wind suddenly blows my window open and if, at that moment, I am seized with fear, it is a sign of *namstok*, and a demon will surely sense it and attack me", Wangchuk told me.

Thus, both faith in these various deities and the fear they inspire as a result are expressed by the same term, *namstok*. K.T. told me the following episode from the life of Milarepa, which conveniently illustrates this point. One day Milarepa reached the foot of a mountain where he came upon a cave. He wondered what kind of creature dwelt in it and despite his high spiritual powers he was filled with apprehension. A demon came out of the cave and grabbed Milarepa by his big toe. "Why do you wish to trouble me?" asked Milarepa. "I do not wish to trouble anyone", answered the demon, "but I can't help attacking someone who has *namstok*".

(s)Parka (par-kha) is another "psychological" factor which also explains the effectiveness of demons and other supernatural entities. Like *namstok*, *(s)parka* is a difficult word to translate. By *(s)parka*, the Ladakhis generally mean spiritual power. A monk, a scholar well-read in Buddhist scriptures, is almost by definition a person endowed with high *(s)parka*. A spiritually weak person has low or very low *(s)parka*. Thus the strong and brave hero is distinguished by an exceptionally high *(s)parka* and curiously enough, this very hero is usually none other than the well-read and devoted monk himself. A Ladakhi legend tells how one day, a great warrior from Yarkand came to Ladakh with the intention of defying the strongest Ladakhi in combat. The warrior appeared to be invincible and the king of Ladakh became afraid about the future of his kingdom. Meanwhile, a monk returning from Tibet stopped by a bridge in construction. He helped the workers by removing, unaided, a huge boulder that they had been trying to displace in vain. His exploit earned him instant fame. So the king sent for him immediately and the monk defeated the Yarkandi warrior within a few seconds.

(s)*Parka* also conveys our notion of morale. A good morale can be understood in terms of high (s)*parka*. Similarly, low morale can be described as low (s)*parka*. However, (s)*parka* is not an entirely subjective factor: contact with impurity, with a low-caste person for instance, will lower the (s)*parka* of the one who becomes contaminated.

(s)*Parka* finds its physical expression in the prayer flags or *tarchok* (*dar-lchog*) one sees floating above all the houses. Their five different colors indicate the five different directions. Each flag carries the image of a wind horse (*lungta*; *rlunta*) bearing a gem on his back, surrounded by mantra syllables (*sngaks*; *sngags*). Low quality material is deliberately used so that the prayer printed on the flag may be released to the four quarters of the universe. When a person has low (s)*parka*, an additional flag is hoisted on the roof top. The higher, the better the chance of recovery. For more effect, one may also add one's name and even astrological sign (*lostak*; *lo*, year; *stak*, sign). According to some, rubbing one's forehead with the flag is also helpful as the forehead is the seat of (s)*parka*.

When someone is seriously ill, as many flags as the ailing person's age should be planted on a hill top. This will undoubtedly cure him. The name of the actual flag (without the pole) is *lotrang* (*lo-grangs*, *lo* meaning year) and refers to this custom.

We can gather from these examples that (s)*parka* is related to the concept of high and low: (s)*parka* is said to be high or low, and to rise or fall. This notion is concretely expressed by placing flags in elevated places. H.T. from Nubra told me he once trekked up a mountain to erect a flag. Certain dreams are also associated with (s)*parka*: if you dream you are falling from a cliff or mountain, it means that your (s)*parka* is low.

A person with a high (s)*parka*, a monk or highly spiritually realized person, will not be endangered if he meets a *tsan*, he won't even see him. Again, this does not mean that such entities are non-existent, but simply, that, in certain circumstances, they are harmless,

even invisible. Insofar as they are shapeless shadows, they are immaterial, invisible and powerless. Only a person with low *(s)parka*, for example, affected by *namstok*, becomes visible and in potential danger.

On a more general level, *(s)parka* also affects *gongmo* during possession. If a woman is bewitched by another, this means that her *(s)parka* is lower than that of the woman possessing her. One way of neutralizing a *gongmo* consists in lowering her *(s)parka*.

Thus, you can be malicious and still have a relatively high *(s)parka*.

Low *(s)parka* and *namstok* are therefore two subjective conditions favoring the development of *(s)notpa*. It is important, however, not to confuse them. In both cases, high *(s)parka* or lack of *namstok*, the demons become harmless, even invisible. However, the notion of *namstok* is stronger than that of *(s)parka*, as an *onpo* living in Zanskar explained to me: someone who has a high *(s)parka* can be attacked if he has *namstok* (and this is precisely what happened to Milarepa in the anecdote above). A former monk from Nubra opposes these two notions even more radically, saying that, as you may have no *namstok*, i.e. no "faith" or "belief" in *(s)parka*, *namstok* is above *(s)parka*.

Certain *(s)notpa* develop from a general feeling of ill-being, called *mirdeches* (*mi-bde-byas*), stemming from the word *rdemo* or *ldemo* (*bde-mo*) signifying "beautiful". This ill-being is generally characterized by insomnia, nightmares, as well as diffuse pains.

Mirdeches is characterized by its sudden irruption and, for this reason, is associated with another notion, *parchat*. *Parchat* (*bar-chad*) is the element which disrupts the normal course of events, the obstacle created by a hostile force. For instance, distraction in meditation can be ascribed to a *dre*. *Mirdeches* is a form of *parchat*, the brutal, unexpected interruption of a normal routine. *Mirdeches*, by its suddenness, indicates the presence of *(s)notpa* and can be explained as follows: the heart, seat of all emotions and thought is affected; consequently, *mirdeches* is the forerunner of possession and as such,

already part of this "illness". Thus, the term *mirdeches* is used as an euphemism to indicate that someone is possessed or is a victim of a disorder related to possession. We can say that *mirdeches* is a symptom or *parchat* which, by its very abruptness, betrays the presence of *(s)notpa*. On a more general level we can deduce that all forms of *parchat*, any accident, sudden illness and even sudden death, are likely to be a sign - or result - of *(s)notpa*. Ladakhis, whether they actually acknowledge it or not, ascribe all mishap, from the most insignificant to the gravest, to supernatural entities and agree that their nefarious influence can only be undone by a qualified expert such as an astrologer, a *lhaba* or a *lama*. Western medicine therefore is only used in last resort and is not likely to make a successful breakthrough in this part of the world*.

*I give the ladakhi pronunciation followed by the transliteration of orthography in Classical written Tibetan.

I thank Sophie Day for rereading this paper and correcting my English.

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