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Rituals, territories and powers in the Sino-Indian margins

Grégoire SCHLEMMER *

The lines drawn in cultural areas usually structure research on continental East Asia into four large zones: two axes of civilisation which form the Chinese and the Indian worlds with, on their boundaries and under their double influence, agro-pastoral societies of the Tibetan and Mongolian highlands as well as agrarian societies in the tropical plains of Southeast Asia. As useful as it may be, that definition, like any delimitation, has its pitfalls. It most notably leaves out a large part of the population, classified by sovereign states as “tribes” or “ethnic minorities” who occupy vast tracts of forest and/or mountains on the limits of the four major zones. We suggest referring to this part of the world as *the Sino-Indian margins*. The present *Moussons* issue is the result of a desire to share information concerning these marginal populations, with the belief that, in spite of great differences, it is pertinent to consider them as a single large unit.

Certainly, this perspective is not new. During the colonial period several studies proposed just such a global approach to these margin populations, attempting to homogenise their troubling diversity (for example, Scott and Hardiman 1900, Risley 1908, Griesson 1909, Abadie 1924). Groups were often defined along “racial” lines according to a supposed degree of “primitiveness”. If these concepts are no longer valid, they still have their modern-day adepts. We did not wish to base our comparisons solely on commonly used linguistic criteria, for lack of racial references, in order to regroup these populations as “Tibeto-Burmese” or “Austro-Asiatic” for example, as though having a common linguistic origin implied shared sociocultural character-

* Grégoire Schlemmer is an anthropologist with the Research Institute for Development (IRD) and a member of the Migration and Society Research Unit (URMIS) IRD/ Paris-Diderot University, Sorbonne Paris-Cité. In addition to his research on the Kirant population of the Himalayas, he is specializing on ethnicity in Northern Laos.

ristics. In the same way we wished to distance ourselves from the approach which consists of reducing presumed population unity to a hypothetical “native base” or “substrate” for which residues and remnants must be sought amongst the practices of those populations thought to be the least touched by “civilisation” as though they had somehow succeeded in maintaining their way of life, unaltered and pristine, since time immemorial.

In reaction to these approaches, and together with age-old battle lines in the disciplines between orientalists and ethnologists to whom fell the study of small writing-less, and therefore history-less societies, ulterior research tended to fall back upon highly localised monographs which studied the minute characteristics of each described population. As useful and necessary as they may have been, these studies excessively gave the impression that the populations in question were autonomous realities, isolated from any other context. It seemed important to us, therefore, to go beyond this type of monographic and culturalist approach and reinsert these populations into their regional context. On the other hand, we also wanted to avoid the strict national framework of these studies, just as we wanted to avoid focalising on cultural areas corresponding to the sphere of influence of a dominant population, language or culture, such as the Tibetan or Tai worlds. Despite their obvious advantages, these groupings tend to isolate the populations on the margins from each other and to reduce them to the sole dimension given them by the relations they maintain with the majority population in their region, making them secondary and residual objects.

Our objective was, therefore, not to artificially isolate these populations while trying to study them as a unit, and at the same time to avoid the reduction of their common points to the fact that they speak languages from the same linguistic family, or the existence of some ancient common substrate or simply in reference to the powers which engulf them, such as ancient kingdoms, nation-states or larger cultural zones. We thus wanted to place these populations on the margins in the centre of our preoccupations.

This issue of *Moussons* is the fruit of collective work initiated during a panel of the first *Réseau Asie* Conference organised in Paris in 2004. Since that date, the work carried out concerning the comparative “zone” has developed, especially following Van Schendel’s proposition (2002) to go beyond the classic map of cultural spheres and to name our area of study using the Chin term of “Zomia” in order to give it visibility and coherence. This proposition was taken up and discussed by J. Michaud particularly, who prefers to refer to the “Southeast Asian Massif” (2006) and J. Scott (2009) who proposes, in a controversial and synthetic work, the use of Zomia as a place of refuge for all those populations who are trying to flee the oppression of a state (see the discussions in Michaud 2010, Jonsson 2010). We have preferred using our term, in a geopolitical sense which is voluntarily vague and therefore less substantive, of Sino-Indian Margins. For a geopolitical approach in the classic sense of the term, see Lim (1984) and for a geographic approach see Bruneau (2006).

In our working hypothesis, we favour the relative unity of these populations stemming from their status as “living on the margins”. To be more precise, this unity comes from the fact that these populations participate in geopolitical contexts which share similar characteristics: a habitat in regions which are difficult to access, be they mountains or forests, but where different coexisting groups which are related in one

way or another to different political and religious spheres, apart from the kingdoms or states on whose margins they live. Because of this, there is a continual interaction process, limited though it may be, between these groups as well as between these groups and the centres of power which encompass them. As isolated and peripheral as these populations may be, they all have been at least partly shaped by interaction with, and in reaction to, their neighbours. These populations have, because of this, elaborated responses which, although they may vary according to their context, contain similar modalities. Otherwise stated, the unity of these populations stems from the fact that they *produce*, from the interactions between themselves and with the centres of power, both a difference—which sets them aside in terms of their identity and their existence—and unity, which gives them the perception that they are participants in a supra-local unit. This leads us to consider the existence amongst these populations of an internal *process* of “heterogenisation” and homogenisation, *simultaneously* producing the local and global contexts in which they live.

ANGLE OF APPROACH: RITUAL EXPRESSION OF THE TERRITORIAL LINK

In the societies under study here, rituals are often privileged places to build and express the political relationships within the group and between groups. Because of this, we have decided to study these rituals in order to gain an understanding of the “heterogenisation” and homogenisation processes. More precisely, we have focused on rituals related to a specific territory (*territorial rituals*), which can for now be defined as rituals performed in order to ensure the prosperity of a group on its given territory. By legitimising control of that territory and promoting its fertility, these rituals represent the crystallisation of many overlapping stakes which involve the relationship to the territory and sources of subsistence as well as modes of belonging and the exercise of power. By focusing on territorial rituals we are joining a long tradition of French researchers around a similar idea, that of “*dieux du sol*”, the gods of the soil. This expression came into play thanks to Sinologues such as E. Chavannes (1910). It was then taken up by EFEO orientalistes such as J. Przyluski (1910) and Father Cadière (1917) in their discussions concerning Tonkin. As early as 1933, P. Mus saw that this concept could contribute to our understanding of the vast region of Sino-Indian margins. The very stimulating article written as a result greatly influenced our research.

This notion of gods of the soil, and more generally P. Mus’s global views on the region went on to influence ethnological research in the Himalaya (notably via A.W. Macdonald, 1975) and Southeast Asia (notably *via* G. Condominas, 1980). Partially the fruit of this heritage, several French research collectives saw the light of day in the 1990’s (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996, Blondeau 1998, *Diogène* 1996, *Études Rurales* 1996). Even though it may not be directly related to our subject, we must also mention the important work done on questions of foundation (Biardeau 1989, Detienne 1990) or geographical work on territory (Bonnemaison 1981, Vincent *et al.* 1995). English language research on this theme and in this region is also emerging under the influence of innovative work carried out by E. Leach (1954), who caused us to rethink the boundaries between ethnic groups and to see ritual as a common regional language. This led to much new work, like those of F.K. Lehman (1967) and

T. Kirsch (1973). The work of T. Kirsch then went on to inspire a current of collective study around the question of “founder cults” which touches upon our subject (Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003). The notion of a god of the soil has not made its way into the English language, whereas the expression “territorial cults” is more frequently used, especially in literature pertaining to Africa (Werbner 1977, Schoffeleers 1979), and this terminology seems more adequate to us.

Over time we abandoned the notion of “gods of the soil” because it often seemed difficult to determine which entity could be thus classified. The category of “soil”, to begin with, is both one of matter and space, and seems too large. We prefer, therefore, the more circumscribed notion of territory, in the sense of a place where a political and landed authority is in place.

How, then, do we go about identifying the god—or spirit—of the soil? Does he represent the soil or does he emanate from it? Is he localised or general? Does he inhabit the soil or is he the master of it? Indeed, included in this contact with the soil or the territory are all spiritual entities conceived by these societies. Because of this, none of the studies in this issue concentrate on any one entity. It has also become clear to us that the populations under study are less interested in the nature of these spiritual entities than in the rituals they use to communicate with them. Rituals is given in the plural form, since it is sometimes difficult to isolate one particular ritual. The large number of spiritual entities of the soil and/or a territory is in direct correlation with the multiplicity of rituals designed to reach them. Taken as a whole, and studied as a global system, these rituals are considered here in their relationship with their territory, even if they sometimes express different and occasionally contradictory types of territorial relations.

The choice made by the authors was to highlight the studies of original cases studies, undertaken in different areas of Sino-Indian margins: the so-called world of Indian “tribes” is represented here by the “scheduled tribes” in the Orissa forests (R. Rousseleau), the peripheral populations of continental Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms via the example of the Phounoy of Laos (V. Bouté) and the Lu’a of Thailand (E. Guégan), the Sino-Tibetan confines of Yunnan occupied notably by the Drung (S. Gros), the example of the Kulung in Himalayan valleys of Nepal (G. Schlemmer).

THE ORIGINAL WORLD, SYLVAN AND CHTHONIC FORCES

One of the major characteristics of these territorial rituals is their place in the natural habitat of each group. The deities to whom these rituals are addressed were conceived as either emanating from or living in the landscapes which give them their shape (Krauskopff 1987). This environmental inscription takes on two aspects: chthonic and sylvan based.

In the places in which these entities live or in the elements which compose their altars, we regularly find two contrasting elements. On one hand: *water*, which is often considered to be feminine, fluid and moving. It may come from subterranean sources such as a spring or a river or the sky in the form of rain, often prayed for in land-based fertility rituals. On the other hand: *stone*, a sterile element the hardness of which marks the permanence and breadth of the territory, and especially the *soil*, frequently appearing in ritual as a termite nest (a hill-like mound which surges out of

the ground, a kind of miniature mountain—the mountain being the culminate point of a territory which it dominates and from which rivers originate). This possibly explains why the combination of alters or Earth/Sky entities is so important and spread out over the entire region (Bouté).

In addition to earth and water, elements stemming from this fertile mixture can also demonstrate the strength of place. Plants, and especially trees, demonstrate the growth of the soil's energy (Chavannes 1910), as do ponds which are ambiguously neither land nor water, and other water sources which seem to spring from the earth. This is perhaps the reason why half aquatic/half earthly animals such as pythons and other snakes (and their sacralised forms: the Indian *nag*, the Tibetan *klu*, the Chinese *long*, the Tai *ngeuak*), as well as crabs, frogs, fish and saurian which seem to be born of both soil and water can represent chthonic power (Allen 1997).

These spiritual entities also share a representation of the world as it was before the arrival of mankind, from which derives the sylvan character of the spirits for whom territory-based rituals are performed. They are the first inhabitants, and therefore, the masters of a primordial pure space, cleansed of man and ready to punish those men who would violate or maculate their territory. They are the veritable indigenous population and masters of untamed resources. Living as they do in unstained places, such as remote forest areas, mountain tops or springs, they are thought to live lives which are opposite those of men: their houses are our forests, their cattle is our game—wild animals living on mountain sides are considered to be their domestic flocks (Dolffus, 1996, Gros in this issue). The importance of land and water game can be found in acts which mirror hunting and fishing in territorial rituals and appear in every article in this issue (also see Rahmann 1952, Macdonald 1955, Krauskopff 1987). Tied to soil, water, forest and game, these entities are the masters of nature's resources. Of course, not every single entity can control all resources at the same time and there are a large number of them. All these entities can, however, be regrouped and classified in one single category, which we will call *force of place*. This force of place is part of its environment and is characterised as the active power of its territory, its fertility as well as its strangeness. It escapes man's grasp in the same way it predates him.

PACIFICATION, FOUNDATION AND ANCESTORS

If men wish to live in a space they must first deal with the forces which emanate from, or occupy that space. Different settlement scenarios exist, sometime even within the same group. They can take the shape of submitting the local force by combat, trickery or faith: according to Buddhist law, for example, a pacified force becomes a protector of the Buddhist faith (Blondeau 1998, Dolffus 1996). There can also be a marriage-type alliance with the local force. This theme occurs often in South and Southeast Asia, as we can see from the numerous texts describing a foreigner becoming the king of a land by marrying an indigene who often is in the shape of a snake (Bonifacy 1914, Przulski 1925, Meyer 1987, Formoso 2002, Schlemmer this issue). The most frequent scenario, however, represents a type of contract based upon a sacrificial act, possibly human (Terwiel 1978), and which calms the local force. These pacification scenarios—more or less ancient depending on whether the groups are still migrating and still performing foundation rituals—can be inscribed in tales and/

or in territorial rituals and in re-foundation rituals (Rousseleau, this issue). Altars used in these rituals are often situated at the places where the village foundation ritual occurred and are marked by stones, representing a condensed territory (Mus 1933), or by posts of wood or stone stuck into the ground and standing upwards (Biardeau 1989). The sanctuary of these forces of place can also be a bit of forest in which any action other than ritual is forbidden. Just like if giving up a small part of virgin space confers upon man the right to take over the rest (Macdonald 1957).

More or less pacified, the force of place can then change its very nature. It can share that part of humanity from which originated the pacification and/or those who continue to practice the ritual. A human dimension is added to the untamed character of the force of place, making it into an ambivalent entity (Toffin 1987). This humanisation is reinforced by the generational transmission of the benefits bestowed by the first pacification and/or the responsibility for renewing it. When it involves all those who, following the initial pacification, worship it to the point of becoming the tutelary divinity of the priestly line, the force then takes on an ancestral character. Even if it is not systematic (*cf. supra*), this ancestral dimension remains recurrent and important. This is notably true because it is by this ancestral link that this abstract, and universally conceived (since it originated from a sylvan and chthonic world; the common space upon which all human societies are built), power exists under a particular shape, both local and personal for the community which is in contact with it (Mus, 1933). Ancestors also act to legitimise the land rights of their descendants and genealogy becomes a land deed, the force of place then can become a guardian spirit and/or protector, keeper of institutions and customary order (Goody 1962). In case a law is broken, such as in a case of incest in the village or the non-respect of a ritual, the power can manifest itself as an extraordinary natural (to us) phenomenon: a tiger entering the village upsetting the separation between within and without, a hail shower which destroys the crops, etc. On the other hand, when it is channeled and pacified by ritual, the power permits the people to occupy the space and obtain prosperity, fertility, vitality, fecundity, etc. These benefits may all have many common points, but there are many nuances which separate them (Gros, Schlemmer, this issue). Pacified and controlled by man *via* ritual, the force of place dispenses its fertile strength over the *space* occupied by the group and this *space* become *territory*.

THE COMMUNITY, THE SACRIFICER AND THE CHIEF

Because they link a human group to a given space, the rituals addressed to this force of place participate in defining that group as a community. Indeed this power is often named in reference to the human entity: *gramma deuta* (village divinity) in the Indian world, *phi ban* and *phi muang* (village spirit and district spirit) in the Tai world, and *yul lha* (divinity of the land) in the Tibetan world (Biardeau 1989, Condominas 1975, Tannenbaum 1992, Blondeau 1998). The different scales of ritual dealing with territory reveal pertinent social units within the society, such as the home, the neighbourhood, the village or some of its inhabitants, a valley or an ancient political-territorial entity. Indeed, in these land-linked rituals, the village dimension is neither exclusive nor obvious: rituals can be carried out on larger or smaller geopolitical scales, or, as is often the case, on several levels at a time (Guegan, Rousseleau, this issue).

If all the participants form a community, all members of that community do not play an identical role in the ritual, creating a hierarchy within the group occupying the territory. This hierarchy often puts men, masters of the house, land clearers and/or heirs of the land they occupy, at the forefront. This is in stark contrast to women who are often relegated to the sidelines. Many hierarchies meet in one place: elders who keep the ancestor altar as well as political and/or ritual authority, over younger siblings; first arrivals of a lineage, a clan or an entire population over new-comers, or the opposite can be the case, where conquerors are above an occupied population. As personified by the sacrificer, the ritual is an expression of power. He is often a chief, and is the mediator between his community and the force of the soil which he incarnates: *in him, soil becomes man* (Mus 1933). The origin of the sacrificer, be he chief or chaplain, linked to the founding clan, from aristocratic lineage, indigenous or conqueror, and the way he rose to this function—election, inheritance, drawing of lots, etc., can be numerous; but legitimate ritual power generally falls into the hands of the descendant of a founding ancestor who holds ritual responsibility and often political power. The ancestors who enter into play in the ritual are either from the founding lineage, an aristocratic lineage or a governing lineage. These can sometimes be separate lineages, as is the case of the Tai Dam in Northern Vietnam. The inclusion process initiated by the ritual is by definition accompanied by an exclusion process, via which the community defines itself. In this way, the ritual is a membership marker and can also take on an identification characteristic (Weiner 1978, Schlemmer 2004).

The sociopolitical dimension of these land-linked rituals can also be found in the spatial element, now centralised—literally, given a centre—and even “verticalised”. The community defines a centre, be it the core or the village square, which can, by a series of overlaps, de-multiply to different geographical levels of social organisation. A home’s central pillar can be an equivalent at the village, a group of villages or the city levels. These units are thus linked by an analogical series, often hierarchized and “verticalised”: numerous rituals are associated with a hill or a mountain which overlooks and dominates the territory (cf. all authors in this issue). This geographic verticality is a mirror image of genealogical verticality since the mountain is often the abode of the founding ancestors, or all ancestors. Between the centre and the periphery, the territory-linked powers can take on a double aspect. This can be the case between a low and a high place, a mountain and the underground, the sky and the nether-regions, the village centre and its borders (Rousseleau, this issue).

NEIGHBOURS AND POWER CENTRES

The identity and hierarchical dimension of territorial rituals occurs not only within any single group: it necessarily finds its rightful place in a larger human landscape. Indeed, by its specific relationship with its own territory, the community marks itself off from its neighbours, as though the group were striving to show its determination to maintain itself by its expression of land control, by its autonomy and its specificity. It is perhaps this shared process of distinction which allows us to explain the recurrence of the ritual schema we are trying to analyse on such a vast scale. We can imagine over a very long term that a constant interaction process passing from village to village has led to each group of these Sino-Indian margins to construct and

reproduce a similar space occupying model. At any rate, this is what makes this land-related ritual the source of a “religious cadastre”, to cite P. Mus. This cadastre is the basis of land-use, dynastic and territorial rights. Indeed, the existence of this same ritual schema ties all localities together in the same political/land-use geography. By using this “regional lingua franca” (O’Connor 2003: 282), different populations express their differences in a universally perceived ritual code.

The others in relation to whom these groups take up a position can be close neighbours, or also and above all the politically dominant population. All the articles in this issue mention a local king or lord who sees himself as the master of the land and the group under study must position itself in relation to that master. The relationship established with the dominant powers can in effect reinforce, modify or contradict the relationship with the soil which was established in the group.

Within each of the articles in this issue, all or part of the figures in relation to territorial rituals can indeed be associated with the region’s dominant power(s). The very names given to designate these rituals and/or the entities worshiped are usually taken from the dominant populations. The use of a common vocabulary indicates the use of common concepts. This also serves to facilitate the patronage of territorial rituals by the dominant power, since giving them the same name makes one consider them as local manifestations of the royal cult. This does not, however, point to a simply unidirectional phenomenon in which a unifying terminology is imposed from above in order to integrate local rituals—even if this is sometimes the case (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996, Blondeau 1998). Any such borrowing does seem to suggest movement from the centre to the periphery; this is notably due to the fact that kingdoms tend to conserve ancient written traces to witness this. And yet, this is rarely simply borrowing (Gros), but rather a process of recuperating dominant cult objects by those living on the margins, as can be seen in all the articles in this issue. The opposite can also take place: the dominant power can recuperate local cults which it wishes to appropriate, control or subject. P. Mus offers the hypothesis that, over centuries, Hinduism was created by the aggregation of local chthonic cults under the coordinating influence of Brahmanism via the figurehead of the king who acted as a mediator between local communities and the soil. These two processes are not in contradiction, and we can envisage repeated and reciprocal influences between the centre and its peripheries. Finally, these phenomena of ritual and cult figure relationships participate in creating one single reference community which reinforces the integration of these populations into a larger regional formation.

In this religious relation to territory a ritual-based dialogue is created in which each group tends to impose its own concept and its particular relationship to the territory. Two main forms of justification for occupying a territory are given: conquest and antecedence on the land. The demands of certain populations based upon their antecedence on the land for autochthony seem spontaneous to us since the rights of a minority population living outside history and in harmony with nature has a positive connotation in the West. Being the exacerbation of group identities, often carried aloft by urban and uprooted intellectuals, this vision of autochthony belongs to globalised thinking more than to the grassroots (Schlemmer 2009). Autochthony implicitly implies rights based upon antecedence on the land, which states that the first occupants of a land are the legitimate owners. But this notion is slightly different

from that of an autochthon, since although a group may be the first it can also have come from somewhere else. This type of legitimising argument can be referred to among local populations, independently of their relation to the dominant powers (Bouté, this issue). The opposite can also be true, and autochthony can be caused by an imposition. Thus, there is an “autochthonisation” process of groups by the dominant powers which assimilate local populations to the forces of the place and have them play that role during rituals, with the king demanding the status of conqueror (Archaimbault 1961). Thus, local populations are linked to wild forces of the place, and held as history-less – and powerless – beings (Izard 1985).

Once again, we find the necessary otherness of the force of place. Be it the forest-based otherness of this force and pacified by the first ancestors (Schlemmer), or the descendants of the pacifying ancestors who then are dominated by the king (Rousseleau, Guegan, this issue), or the inherent exteriority of the dominant political power (Bouté, Gros, this issue), this otherness must be mastered for any possible benefit.

These considerations, the simple contribution of a discussion initiated by others, should be followed up by studies based on societies which distance themselves from the above described ritual schema, like the Drung for whom the link between the ancestor cult, territory and collective rituals is absent. It would therefore be interesting to observe the situation in two areas which are not touched upon in this issue: Northeast India, and especially Arunachal Pradesh and the Indochinese highlands where such rituals seem to have little importance (A. Maurice 1951, J. Dournes 1954, as well as the writings of J.H. Hutton and C. von Furër-Haimendorf). In the same vein, would be interesting a comparison with cases of “de-territorialisation” of the force of place which can be seen amongst groups who claim linear divinity for their ancient local’s force of place, as is frequent in the Chinese and Indian worlds (Berti and Tarabout 2007). Despite these shortcomings, this collective work has enabled us to contribute to the vision that these Sino-Indian margin populations are not insulated societies, and invites us to reconsider the opposition between local traditions and the major religions, as well as the idea that the latter will supplant or “varnish” the former. These territorial rituals, as an expression of localness, and more generally animism which is said to characterise these populations, are not to be perceived as residues of an ancient cultural state preserved far from civilisation, but rather as the result of an interaction based process—both between groups and with the centres of power—and which, through the mediation of ritual, may produce both «heterogenisation» and homogenisation, both diversity and unity.

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Abstract: Taking Paul Mus's idea of a "cadastral religion" as part of the socio-religious organisation of the "Asian base" further, we propose approaching rituals linked to the territorial prosperity of groups living on the margins of state power in the Chinese and Indian worlds in a comparative way. These rituals are organised around the recurring schema of a force of place, both natural and wild, which was pacified by a founding ancestor who, along with his descendants, became the sacrificers representing the entire community—a schema the details and variations of which we have analysed. By legitimising the occupation of a space by one group and promoting its fertility, these rituals are where many interlocking stakes are crystallised. These involve the sources of subsistence and the legitimacy to occupy a territory and also membership and power-play forms, both within the group and in its relations with its neighbours and the umbrella power centres.

Territoires, rituels et pouvoirs dans les marges sino-indiennes

Résumé: Faisant suite à l'idée de Paul Mus concernant l'existence d'une « religion cadastrale » constitutive de l'organisation socio-religieuse du « socle asiatique », nous proposons d'approcher de manière comparative les rituels liés à la prospérité du territoire des populations vivant en marge des pouvoirs étatiques du monde chinois et indien, ce que nous appelons ici les « marges sino-indiennes ». Ces rituels s'organisent autour d'un schéma

récurrent d'une force du lieu, naturelle et sauvage, pacifié par un ancêtre fondateur dont lui et ses descendants deviennent les sacrificateurs représentant la communauté toute entière – schéma dont nous analysons les détails et les variantes. En légitimant l'occupation d'un espace par un groupe et en favorisant sa fertilité, ces rituels sont le lieu de cristallisation de nombreux enjeux imbriqués qui impliquent tout à la fois les sources de la subsistance, la légitimité d'occuper un territoire, mais aussi les formes d'appartenance et l'exercice du pouvoir interne au groupe et dans sa relation avec ses voisins et les centres de pouvoir qui les englobent.

Keywords: Ritual – territory – autochthony – god of the soil – margin.

Mots-clés : Rituel – territoire – autochtonie – dieu du sol – marge.