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# Inter-species interaction rituals in yak herding practices in Nepal

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# **Inter-species interaction rituals in yak herding practices in Nepal**

## **Abstract**

In the Nepalese Himalaya, yak herding systems depend on cooperative interactions involving the shepherd with his animals. For the milking of the yaks, grazing and returning to the settlement, the shepherds are using inter-individual techniques aiming to build trust-based relationships over time. The construction of these relationships is negotiated on a daily basis between the two of them. Indeed, each of these relationships is lost if it is not nurtured. Strongly based on ethological results and studies on domestication mechanisms, this chapter will question the importance of setting-up daily rituals and rhythms- as Erving Goffman (1974) has defined them for the human daily-life- as a condition for extensive pastoral sustainability. At the same time, we will see how the shepherds organize their working life and their relationship with the yaks and their surrounding environment around strong moral values and a symbolic organization of the realm of life.

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## Introduction

Research on domestication (St Hilaire, 1861) revealed very early that domestication is a process characterised by an unstable equilibrium that requires relationships to be updated on a daily basis. Feralisation, thus refers to the ecological and social adaptation of domesticated species when they lose their relationship with humans. This chapter focuses on the means used to avoid feralisation and on the maintenance of domestic relations between humans and yaks in an extensive farming system that relies heavily on the autonomy of the animals to survive in the Nepalese Himalayas. Indeed, it has been shown that, to be possible, cohabitation between humans and large mammals in extensive systems requires mechanisms to induce cooperation or, as Charles Stepanoff has called it, 'joint commitment' (2012). These relationships are closely dependent on the environment and thus form a relational triad.

By following symbolic interactionism and by taking into account the postulate of hybrid communities (Lestel 2008) in pastoral environments, which considers that the hybridity of inter-species relations is a cultural fact that can lead to cognitive innovations (1998), we will focus our observations on the communication interactions between herders and their yaks. This study is based on a participant ethnography split into two five-month fieldwork visits conducted between 2017 and 2018 in Manang, Nepal. I stayed in six camps with thirteen shepherds, both men and women, of all cultural backgrounds, whether Gurung, Dolpali, Sherpa, Ghale, Tamang or Kami. I nevertheless stayed in a privileged way with Purba and his wife Poltu with whom an apprenticeship situation (Downey, 2014) was initiated. The master's thesis that resulted from this ethnography focused on the techniques of the shepherds that they use to relate to their herd and the types of knowledge and skills they require to keep it.

During these ten months spent in the company of the shepherds, the recurrence of certain interactions that all the shepherds pointed out to me, the situations of embarrassment brought about by my errors in the help I tried to provide, led me to attempt to define the role of these interactions in the setting up of the process of cooperation between the shepherds and their yaks. Thus, in this chapter, the description of these interactions is derived from a corpus of direct and participatory observations collected during the collective movements of the herd produced by the herders, milking, tying the young every evening on a rope and the distribution of salt. These observations were then confronted during semi-directive interviews which

focused on the reactions to the reading of my field observations. This ethnography finally led me to identify certain stereotyped and daily repeated interactions which, as I would like to show in this chapter, can be considered as inter-specific interaction rituals that humans and animals use to communicate and maintain a stable relationship over time and which lead to the development of a hybrid community organised by bio-semiotic interactions.

After reviewing how the notion of ritual can be a heuristic for the study of the ways of communication between men and animals inside domestication processes, we will go further into the ethnography of the Manang herders. We will observe the intimate relationships that develop between a shepherd and his yaks. We will then see, from aggression to cooperation, how the passage from one to the other is frequent and depends on the interaction framework according to Ervin Goffman's concept (1991). Finally, we will see several types of interaction rituals that we have tried to organise into a non-exhaustive typology.

## **Interaction rituals**

The anthropological theory of ritual has evolved considerably since Emile Durkheim. Without going back over the review by Frederik Keck (2004) on the notion of ritual in anthropology, let us summarise that it tends to be extracted from the religious field and extended to everyday interactions (Goffman 1982), to play, or to the regulation of emotions (Collins 2005). The ethologist John Smith (1977) identifies 'formalised interactions' in animals that organise ritual gestures, both in animals and in humans interactions. The contexts in which they can be observed are often the same: greetings, seductive approaches, challenges and contestations. (Lecomte 2019).

Everyday rituals, or rituals of daily life from Ervin Goffman's expression (1982), shape social behavior in animals first, as his ethological inspiration to Julian Huxley indicates, and then in humans in the ways of greeting, politeness, meals, and postures of dominance. Indeed, at first, ethologists extended in the same way the application range of interaction rituals that Julian Huxley (1966) defines in this way: "Biologically, a ritual is an adaptive formalization or channeling of emotionally motivated behavior and responds to the pressure of natural selection (...) in order to promote a more elaborate signaling function both intra- and inter-specific" (ibid). As Bernard Conein (1992) explains in his discussion of the contribution of ethology to sociology: "When Goffman borrowed the notion of ritualisation from ethology, he sought to link the analysis of communication more closely to that of the actual bodily behaviour of the

protagonists (...) Huxley and Lorenz sought in the analysis of model micro-behaviour and patterns of action in which social intelligence played a minor role. The success of classical ethology, which explains its fascination with Goffman's microsociology, is to have been able to break down animal behaviour into micro-units in order to establish, with complete accuracy, what an animal does. (...) The inadequacy of the ritualisation model was that it did not take into account the social properties of interaction. (Conein 1992). If we finally follow Erving Goffman's minimal acceptance of the situation in which the ritual is implemented, the animal as well performs ritualised actions in a social 'frame' (Lecomte 2019): 'I argue that any definition of situation is constructed according to organising principles that structure events - at least those of a social character - and our own subjective engagement. The term 'frame' refers to these basic elements" (Goffman 1991: 9).

Charles Stepanoff (2015) even comes to compare the modes of communication to spirits in shamanic rituals to a type of communication known as 'analogue' which aims to share experiences with non-humans. As he proposes: « religious rituals can be compared to other situations of communication between humans and non-humans. This is the case with human-animal communication, where humans exchange signals and sometimes cooperate with animals (game, livestock, pets) » (ibid). There are many examples of interspecific communication in nature (attack signals, distress signals, exchange of environmental signals between sympatric species). « The general question to be asked is: what are the implications for humans of communicating, of sharing experiences with non-humans? What are the consequences for communication and interaction of the fact that the participants are not supposed to belong to the same community, but to profoundly, ontologically distinct universes? How does one construct a common world with such beings? » (stepanoff 2015)

## **A yak older than the shepherd, when a yak shapes the shepherd**

We felt the snow coming. The icy wind from the heights blew across the interstices of the tent and whispered to us that the storm was coming. While we were resting and dreaming to the sound of the storm's roar, five yaks, with their imposing heavy build, approached the tent. We hear their grunts all around our shelter. Their request is clear and Pau Roti, who understands what is happening, hastens to get dressed to satisfy them: they are looking for salt. Without delay, we leave the tent to give them some.

Pau Roti approaches slowly, the yaks perfectly calm in front of him. His step is light and silent but confident, without hesitation. A few meters away from the first one, he put his hand forward after having dipped it in the salt bag. Thulo Rato (the big red one) with his broken right horn, slowly stretches his neck to reach the hand without moving his massive body that he is holding back. As he moistens his tongue with salt, he leaps backwards, head down and performs a series of small jumps with his body arched. The others move aside startled. Pau Roti enters the circle they form and places several handfuls of salt on a stone polished by the tongues of yaks for nearly a hundred years. The yaks wait for him to finish and, as soon as he moves away, they rush at it and fight for the biggest share with great blows of horns in the flank, they fight, head against head and we hear their blows resounding in the whole valley. The big red one dominates them all and takes a large portion of the salt. The younger ones, smaller in size, do not dare to approach him and wait until he is satiated before taking their share. Pau Roti tells me that he has known the big red one for twenty years, when he first arrived in the village. This yak saw him become a shepherd, and he confides to me that he will be very sad when he dies. He has seen the youngest born and is quite familiar with them all. He also tells me that there is no risk around the camp, but you have to be very careful when you come across the horde on the pastures (*Jaṅgalī maa*) because they can be aggressive. When the salt is finished, the yaks set off again at a slow pace, together towards their solitude.

## **From aggression to cooperation**

A few days later, I decide to pay a visit to the horde on the highest plateau; their domain is at the top of the cliff which overhangs Yak Kharka. I pass the last fold of the mountain which hides me from the plateau. I had become used to the cauri's cooperation and when these males began to charge me I even didn't try to run away at first. It seems that, as Pau roti warned me, when the free yaks are on the pastures, they protect their territory and scare away foreigners who approaches them. This was also the information that I had been given by the yarsagumba gatherers who all were really scared about meeting during the day yaks onto pasture.

The day after this traumatic experience, the yak that had attacked me came among the *cauri*. I didn't recognize him at once and tried to throw stones at him to make him join the herd. At first he did not react. I then approached him and threw the starting hooting "Ah!" and "Chhe!" but without any result. I tried to scare him by running after him, but he didn't move. Only then did I recognize who I was dealing with. We looked at each other for a moment, and I froze,

remembering the scene from the day before. He then slowly went back in the opposite direction to the herd, alone.

Unlike during the rut, male yaks do not respond to stone throwing and hooting by joining the herd, but go in the opposite direction. It is then impossible to bring them back to the camp, reminding us once again that whatever happens the shepherd only produces the signal to return to camp. It is only followed by effects if the yaks want it and hear the ritual gesture that the shepherd proposes. When a single yak joins the herd, it does not become cooperative.

In contrast, when the rutting yaks join the herd, they adopt the same cooperative behavior as the *cauri*. This change in behavior is extremely marked. They respond to stone throwing and hooting, in reply to the signal of the herders, join the herd and follow it back to camp. This contrast between male and female behavior and the ability of males to change their attitude upon joining the herd, makes yak pastoralism an extremely rich case for studying domestication and its possibilities in terms of animal agentivity in bio-semiotic mechanisms. I was constantly surprised by the shepherds' radical change in behavior, which seemed quite normal to them. But what are the mechanisms at play so that these semiotic atmospheres are set up? What are the relevant factors that cause these changes in yak behavior, ranging from cooperation to rejection and even aggression? In order to maintain a domesticated relationship in a pastoral space and practice that relies on the animal's cooperation, herders must enter into a set of daily interactions. We will see in what way we may call these "ritual".



**Figure 1** : a cauri is negotiating her dominance with me

## Cycles

Winters are long and often harsh in Manang. This difficult climate and in recent years, predators' attacks have caused the death of a large number of yaks, often reducing the size of the herds by half or more. In Manang and Tanki, four herders (*gothalo*) and their yak herds share the village pastures, stretching from Ghunsang to Thorong Phedi, along the valley (4000-5000m high) that runs north from the village and up the hillsides (*daada*) above them. In this valley, six seasonal camps (*Kharka*) are inhabited alternately by different herders. Each of these camps is dedicated to a species. However, Purba and Khansar, two yak herders, have joined forces and mixed their herds at the Ledar camp like others. They mix their herds during the day, but tie their young separately for the night, thus maintaining the identity of each herd. During the Summer, three yak herders from Manang gather at Pripche, on the heights of Ghunsang. Snow covers the land from October to March. In spring, some snowfall still occurs, but this is the mildest season. From June the monsoon rains that accumulate on the peaks plunge the pastures into fog and rain, sometimes for several weeks. This rainy season is the richest period for grass.

It is during this season that the *cauri* are strongest and it is also the only season during which the shepherds can milk the *cauri* without risking to weaken them or their young. Autumn is the hottest season, but also the driest. The grass is often scarce and the herd's range becomes wider and wider. The transhumance is also determined by the needs of the *cauri* which cannot stand the heat. Thus, as autumn approaches, the shepherds go up to higher altitudes with their herds and come back down when the first snows arrive, thus completing the pastoral cycle.

Yaks have their own rhythms. Like all other mammal species, yaks are governed by circadian rhythms that alternate between day and night, feeding, digestion and movement phases. But many other physiological aspects shape the rhythms of daily activity. Shepherds adapt themselves to the rhythm of ruminants in order to stay with them. Unlike us, ruminants must feed for more than ten hours a day and alternate between stubble phases during which the ruminants chew after their grazing the stubble grass. The seasons are marked by rhythms that have their own particularities. Autumn is calm like the herd, which stretches out over large areas, without moving. Spring is excitement, vivacity. Summer is heavy, humid and Winter is hard. There is a musical score of actions according to the seasons that is reflected even in the approach of a shepherd to his flock. This sense of rhythm is even imposed in the transformation of the raw material. The shepherds churn the butter by counting in rhythm the five hundred strokes of the churn necessary before adding the hot water that will separate the milk from the butter. If the strokes are not regular, the efficiency of the process suffers.

Through walking, shepherds and yaks alike survey the same territory, undergo the same unevenness, twist their ankles on the same slope, experience the emptiness on the edge of a ridge, and discover the mountain together. The shepherd leads his flock to the corners and areas that he has identified for the quality of its grass and the herds, by the march of the pasture, slow down that of the men. The step of the shepherd gets closer to that of his flock and he begins to observe differently in the silence that inhabits the space left between each step. The story goes that it was a shepherd who discovered the yarsagumba. A village gatherer once told me, "As the shepherd was grazing his yaks and observing them, he realized that the bold ones were eating and enjoying a tiny black blade of grass that the shepherds had never paid attention to before. Digging at its root, he discovered the yarsagumba. All the virtues attributed to the yarsagumba stem from this. Thus, it is by observing the yaks that the shepherd learnt the existence of a miracle plant that has become the elixir of youth in the Chinese pharmacopoeia.

The yarsagumba is the result of the union of the fungus *ophiocordyceps sinensis* and the caterpillar *thytarode*. The young caterpillars are infected by the fungus through their food.

During the season, the pickers scan the pasture all day long for this small spike. The yaks spend their days grazing these stretches of grass where the yarsagumba grows. Vegetative state, banal at first sight but if we look at it from another angle, the action of grazing is a state of intense focus. The yak's senses are fully immersed in the search. They scrutinize the ground in its smallest details, discovering all its nuances. They penetrate a dimension unknown to our eyes. They leave their space-time and enter the one of the grass and the insect. This is how, according to the shepherds, the yaks discovered a great number of medicinal plants: food that the shepherds are aware of. For this reason, the inhabitants consider the milk products of the yak as real medicines and consume them as such.

"It's like looking for a needle". It's even more complicated than that because the needles are shiny. The yarsagumba is black. When you look from afar, you can't see anything. So you have to get closer. It is like the tip of an incense stick. Some of them are so small that, even if you look very closely, you can only see a tip. Those who recognize it will be able to pick it while others won't even see that it's there." Were saying a picker. The hybrid community that is formed between humans and herds, by the rhythms it imposes, shapes a common attention formed by the juxtaposition of the environments of each species.

For several weeks now I have been busy bringing back to Purba all the *cauri* that have escaped from the herd. I thought that it was an important task, without which the herd would fall apart day after day. But I realized while discussing with a owner that the shepherds also rely on the needs of the *cauri* as a result of predictable behavior. "The *cauri* always come down to drink" he told me. This is why the camps are always set up near a water source where watering troughs have been created and fed by a catchment. This way, the herders ensure the attractiveness of the camps and rely on the predictability of the behavior of those groups that have fled the herd.

Manang is a semi-arid region where grass is quite scarce. The grass growth is the main reason of transhumance and here again, the behavior of the *cauri* marks the departure date. A few days before, the herd becomes more and more fragmented, climbs higher and refuses to return to camp in the evening. Without enough grass to satisfy the *cauri*, the shepherds would be unable to bring the herd back. The snow melts first at the bottom of the valley where the spring camps are located. Once the higher pastures are cleared and the grass has had time to grow after a few weeks of rain, the herds move to the summer camps. As soon as the first snow falls, the herds go back down to the valley bottom where the snow cover is thinner. The herders' herding modes varies seasonally for this reason. In Autumn and Winter, the *cauri* are left in total autonomy. Returning to camp is too cumbersome a system to allow them to reach the

inaccessible places where they can find the grass they need. This cycle and the rhythm of the grass also have consequences on the breeding and the relationship of the herd towards the shepherds.

This need to leave the herds in autonomy during the winter leads each year to a small loss of tame of the *cauri*, which lose the group cohesion of the herd that gather in small groups of affinity. Spring is the season of the birth of the calves. This season is particularly hard for the shepherds because the *cauri* who get birth has a will to isolate herself. Once she did it is almost impossible to bring it back before the calf is one week old. For this reason, it is imperative for the shepherd to gather all the groups every evening, or they risk suffering during the summer season. In the summer, the return to the camp must imperatively be assimilated again by the herd, which, if the work of the shepherd has been properly carried out during Spring, is almost done by itself. The shepherd can then milk the *cauri* every morning. If he lacks *cauri* daily, his milk production will inevitably be affected. This cycle also corresponds to the learning cycle of newborns during their first year of life. The shepherds must tie the young around the tent. In this way, they teach them to have confidence in themselves, and to assimilate the camps as a space of confidence and security.

There are, as we saw, many actions that are repeated daily according to a precise rhythm in order to create a habit and transmit certain behavior such as returning to the camp, letting themselves be caught, milking and forming a united herd. We will now see how these daily actions can have ritual value. Before returning to the yaks, I would like to make a small detour to introduce this notion through the means of protection against predation that the shepherds have put in place. The rituality of the relationship is indeed also found in the means of avoiding predation by the snow panther, which, although turned towards avoiding close contact, nonetheless uses the same daily semiotic mechanisms.

## **Avoidance rituals: the snow leopard**

Recently, thanks to the work of Tashi Ghale, a wildlife photographer who has been very involved in the conservation of the snow panther while protecting the interests of herders, shepherds are multiplying the installations that signal human presence in order to combat predation and offer more security to their animals. One finds at the four corners of the camps solar lamps hung on long poles which, during the night, illuminate the *goth* at regular intervals. One can also find scarecrows placed at the ends of the *goth*. It also happens that the shepherds

install fires of *gophaal* (dried dung) and *choupa* (small conifer usually burned for the daily puja). Thanks to these installations, *shituar* hardly ever attack at night on the *goth* and have now started attacking the herds during the day on the pastures (*jangaal*). These solutions to the dangers of predation, which of course are not unanimously accepted, and the use of poison, are in contrast to the response of French herders who, in such circumstances, use herding dogs (Patous) capable of competing with wolves. In Nepal, shepherds prefer to indicate human presence by mobile structures, clues and signs reproduced daily, whereas in France shepherds rely on continuous surveillance and direct confrontation with another species as well as electric fences.

Upon arrival at Thi's *goth*, Kunga explained to me how he placed the scarecrows and lamps. "It's not enough to put them in the four corners of the camp," he told me. "You have to put them where the *shituar* will see them as soon as he arrives in the valley. If, for example, he comes from up there, you have to put him there. Then put one over there if he comes from the other side. When he comes to the camp, he comes by this path. The scarecrows have to lead him around the camp. If you put a scarecrow in and it's makes it go right over the *cauri*, it can't work." The position of the scarecrows is therefore thought out according to two factors. First, according to the morphology of the land and the views it offers, but also according to the habits of the *shituar*. The shepherds project themselves into his field of vision in order to anticipate his movements and divert his trajectory with the help of lamps and scarecrows. The *gophaal* fires must also be placed so that the smoke spreads over the entire camp. To do this, the herders look for a place where the wind is more or less constant and comes from the same direction.

The herders also burn every day the *gophaal* (dried yak dung) which gives off a particular acrid smell. These fires spread the sign of human presence in the mountain and are intended to dissuade the panther from approaching this scented area. Finally, as with the rituals to the deities, the shepherds enter into a relationship with the *shituar* through an odor perceived on a daily basis. Through these multiple indexical processes, the shepherds give the panther the message not to approach. They delimit a life zone that belongs to humans by introducing sensory markers that only they can produce and that are supposed to dissuade the panther from approaching. This ritual relationship corresponds to what Goffman calls avoidance rituals (Winkin 2005). Daily Pudjas dedicated to the local demons, seems to be using the same process of fumigation, dropping objects in special areas, in order to keep them satisfied and, in this way, not bringing misfortune. The use of similar type of analogic communication have been shown by Stepanoff (2015).



**Figure 2** : the snow leopard in the yak pasture area

## **A short typology**

The number of rituals in place in the daily life of shepherds and herds is far too great to be able to give an exhaustive description in this chapter. However, we will attempt to develop a short typology inspired by the work of Goffman (1982). The elaboration of this typology will allow us to understand in more detail what can be the consequences of the transmission of emotions through ritualized and daily repeated interactions in the relationship with the animals and in the practice of pastoralism.

### **RITUALS OF IDENTIFICATION**

Identification rituals fit with all interactions that aim to recognize each other as individuals and even more, as a person. The few Nepalese zoologists and agronomists who have worked on yak pastoralism could not help but notice that "These animals are very sensitive to smell, they can tell if a crevasse is nearby on the path but also indicate its location" (Joshi 1982) and that "Yaks and *cauri* also have bad habits such as giving a blow to people with clean and colorful

clothes" (*ibid*). These two remarks were also made to me by the shepherds who were careful not to have soap with too much fragrance, and wear dark or brown clothes. These colors adapt to the visual and olfactory perceptions of the yaks and are worn in order not to disturb the sense of normality in the olfactory field. The uniform and the fringes are two very marked aspects of the ritual practices and they do not fail to be found in the daily life of the shepherds. These two aspects could correspond to rituals of identification and aim to make the shepherd enter the field of singularity, of the person with the yaks.

In the same way, the shepherds whistle at the approach of the herd to put it out to pasture and bring it back, this melody is unique to each shepherd. Purba taught me that, when returning to camp, it was better to stand in a place where all the *cauri* could hear the whistle, and wait patiently while whistling, rather than forcing them to move one by one. Also, the *cauri* perceive the individual nuances of whistles and other hooting and respond differently depending on the individual making it. I tried to imitate the melody of Purba and indeed, after five minutes, all the herd started to move towards the camp, slowly, group after group. In the same way as for the clothes the whistle is a means of recognition of a particular singularity repeated which by habituation and repetition make it easier to identify an individual. It also happens that the shepherds take care of a calf whose mother has died and feed it with a bottle. The feeding times can be seen as a ritual of identification and confirmation. The youngster remains thus nearly six months in the exclusive company of the shepherds and stays on the camp and follow them when they are nearby. This taming and the familiarity with the human presence make them animals of choice for milking or returning to the camp. From infancy on, the various phases of affective and positive training allow the shepherd to train assistants to initiate ritual interactions.

## **CONFIRMATORY RITUALS**

Confirmatory rituals tend to re-actualize the relationship. Each time the position is challenged, accentuated, broken, a series of stereotyped behaviors that announce an emotional state are put in place. Cattle herds have an extremely strong hierarchical structure that can be disconcertingly complex with countervailing effects (Bouissou & Boissy 2005). Ethologists refer to these interactions between individual animals as dominance and affinity relationships, which are also recognized through stereotyped behaviors. Ethologists have recognized four different types of dominance, defiance, attack, retaliation and avoidance. The *cauri* regularly display this behavior towards the shepherds and the latter must constantly redouble their efforts to maintain their place within this hierarchical structure. In this negotiation, the smallest

gesture counts, because the slightest startle at a gesture of defiance from a *cauri* makes them lose face. Shepherds must take on the role of "leader" in the herd (Fijn, 2011: 44) and enter the social hierarchy of the yaks. But all the non-agonistic interactions are also to be taken into account when setting up the herd structure and the shepherds have to play both to be able to lead the herd and to milk the *cauri*. Non-agonistic interactions include physical contact, petting, sniffing, and any affective gestures. It is common for one shepherd to assist the other in calming a stressed one during milking. He will stand next to the *cauri* and pet her flank.



**Figure 3:** Phurba and Dorze are milking a *cauri* that wouldn't cooperate. Dorze is petting her flank and calming her by whispering

### **MAINTENANCE RITUALS**

From birth, the *bacca* are kept as close as possible to the shepherds' tent. It is at this age that the *cauri* have the most contact with humans, because the mothers also stay with their young around the tent. The moment when the shepherds tie them to the rope is the first physical contact of the *bacca* with humans. Every day, they are handled when the rope is put around their leg or removed. The shepherds then begin to talk to them, to get them used to their voice, their smell and they show them that their intentions are not bad by offering them daily affection (Campbell, 2005).

When I Asked Pau Roti why it is so important to tie de calf at the same place every night he answerd two things. First, it facilitate the calf to understand were he has to go if he want to do it himself ant two, it tied not only phisically, but also socially the calf to his neighbourgh. It is when the calf is tied that much of the learning takes place. At first, mothers cooperate with shepherds in leading the calf to the tether. The shepherd places himself behind the mother and, while spreading his arms, produces softly and with a low voice the hooting dedicated to this situation: "bulubulébulé". Then, accompanied by her calf, the mother goes to the tether and waits for the shepherd to catch the calf. With time, the mother has less and less need to accompany her calf who goes to the tethering rope by himself. When she does, the shepherd rewards her with a pinch of salt, the yak's only real addiction to human possessions. The training of the young is actually carried out by the mothers who, by reacting to the shepherds' hooting, show how to act in response. They show their young how to cooperate with the shepherds.

A few days after the transhumance on the Thi *goth*, a *pohor*<sup>1</sup> was impossible to catch. The three of us, Kunga and Dorje, went out to catch it, and once again, it managed to escape us. He ran in all directions, his attention fixed on our arrival, he always maintained a considerable distance between himself and the shepherds. When he was accompanied by his mother, who cooperated, we managed to bring him close to the rope, but still without succeeding in catching him. We finally let him free and returned home exhausted to light the fire and prepare the tea. The next day, there were two of them who did not let themselves be approached. The first one had shown the way to the others. After eating, Kunga went out again in the night. All the *cauri* and the calves were already asleep. He approached without a sound and managed to catch it. On the way back, Kunga said to me, "We don't let ourselves be taken advantage of. The *cauri* must always believe that whatever they do, the shepherd will always get his own way." The autonomy of the herd is based on the sense of the *cauri* that they will not be able to escape the will of the herder. It is essential to maintain this feeling at all times. In this sense, there is indeed a basis of domination. But this is not, as Ingold thinks, a shift from trust to domination, from hunting to herding (Ingold, 2000). Rather than domination, it is « dominance relation » that is at stake (Fijn, 2011: 44) as discussed above. Although there is dominance of herders over their *cauri*, domination in Ingold's sense has no reality for Manang herders. Tying to the rope is done as we have seen by approaching the fiercest calves also using certain stereotypical

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1 a one year old calf

behavior. One example of this is to reach out with the right hand and gently approach the calf without making eye contact. This method of approaching by holding out the hand is a very human ritual interaction, but it also serves the animals by reducing the escape distance (which also happens to be the unit of measurement for ethologists to measure the degree of taming of animals).



**figure 4** : Phurba is approaching a bacca that is hard to tight. His hand is catching the young's attention

## Is there funeral circles ?

« It is often difficult to judge whether animals have any feeling towards others' sufferings. Who can say what cows feel, when they surround and stare intently on a dying or dead companion? »  
—Darwin [1, p. 73]

I was bringing the yaks back when all of a sudden, a young *cauri* stumbles and falls into a juniper bush. It gets stuck on its back and comes to a complete stop. I expect her to struggle, but not a spasm. She froze. The other *cauri* who were nearby and who saw the scene as I did, also stopped

and stared at the stricken animal. I know that if a sheep is on its back, it can be taken by paralysis and suffocate. When this happens it is a matter of minutes. Except that I am facing a yak. I approach to see its eyes when I realize that it is still alive. At this precise moment, several *cauri* encircle me and observe by approaching more and more. Some of them come to sniff the inert body. I pulled one of its paws to make it roll on the side. A spasm takes her but she is too heavy. I pull again, she falls over and rolls down the steep slope. After a few rolls, she finds herself on her four legs, stunned. She takes a few moments to regain her senses while some yaks hurry to come and smell her before leaving together. I remain speechless; the vision of this circle of *cauri* around the body looking at her, sniffing her with a worried look, comes back to me brutally.

I observed a similar scene with sheep in the scrubland of Narbonne two years ago. In order not to have to pay the slaughterhouses, the shepherd slaughters and butchers the lambs himself. To do this, he kills them in the park before taking them away. We catch them as we do when we care for them, turning them on their sides. He quickly stuck his knife in the jugular and took it out again, letting the lambs bleed to death. I was by then the shepherd of this flock and participated in the slaughter; I worried about my future relationships with the sheep. Like the yaks, the ewes (including the mother of this lamb) were watching us in a circle around us. Something they never do during care. We load the lamb in the truck and the whole flock follows us and forms what looks like a funeral procession. When I took the flock out, I thought that they would be angry with me, that they would not eat, in shock, or at least that they would behave in an unusual way, but to my greatest surprise, it was a day like any other and I returned to the hut with a strange feeling caused by the relativity of mourning that the ewes had confronted me with. Towards whom are the glances turned, why this curiosity, tinged with worry ? Why this indifference a few moments later? Is it a gesture of communication towards humans, or an empathy for the animal that is close to death? We can observe the mourning behavior of many species and an expression of suffering faced with loss, as with the elephant or the behavior of the cattle confronted with the death of their congener. But this is not the case in all species. Is this a sign of a perceptive relationship to time that is too immeasurable?

## **Conclusion**

Stepanoff already provided part of the answer to the question we were asking. Indeed two types of communication are possible for humans. "Digital communication is only possible within a community that shares many conventions, linguistic and otherwise (between humans).

Analogue communication, on the other hand, lends itself to cross-linguistic exchanges (people who do not speak the same languages use iconic or indexical gestures) and interspecific exchanges (we understand the signals of terrestrial mammals quite easily)» (2015). As he also explains, common features of zoosemiotics and ritual communication include redundancy of identical formulas or vocalisations repeated multiple times and in various forms; multimodality where the same message is communicated through different sensory channels: sound, visual, olfactory; and, finally, stereotypy, so these interactions are non-idiosyncratic, non-spontaneous and non-flexible (Stepanoff 2015).

In order to share representations, desires and experiences with yak the shepherds have adapted to them and communicate messages inspired by their own communication system. However, the shepherds do not give up their humanity by maintaining their linguistic modes of communication in some way. Rather, they make adaptations, introduce borrowings, constituting a "hybrid code" (ibid). "Thus, all ritual language is a conversation between worlds including human and non-human properties » (ibid).

We have just explored a multitude of bio-semiotic behaviors that are shared between humans and yaks in Nepal. We have seen that these behaviors aim to exacerbate an emotion and make it intelligible by daily repetition. These interaction rituals are at the basis of an inter-species semiotics and thus of the geopolitics of relations that allow domestication and herding. These can as well be subdivided according to the same typology that Goffman applied to humans and their social life as that of stereotyped behaviors in ethology. It seems important to me to speak today not only of pastoralism in an encompassing way in the cultural relationship that herders have with their animals, but to focus on the exchanges between individuals in order to understand how these are shaped and make possible a bio-social phenomenon as complex as that of domestication. The aim of this chapter was not to formulate a complete theory of the role of ritual interactions in the emergence of domestication but to propose a hypothesis and to question the existence of interaction rituals between several species on the basis of empirical observations made during my stays with Nepalese herders and my work as a shepherd in France.

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