

*La Foresta Ancestrale* by M. Nicoletti. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1999. ISBN 88-464-1636-8. 294pp.

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*La Foresta Ancestrale*, 'The Ancestral Forest', is a fascinating journey through the world of the Kulunge Rai, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group inhabiting the hills of eastern Nepal. A scene from a ritual hunt opens the narrative, like a revealing trailer. In fact it is in this scene that the reader first encounters the forest with its concrete and tangible aspects as well as its mysterious forces and mythic inhabitants, which are less visible to a foreign eye but are equally, or even more, present and powerful. These aspects are closely intermingled in the Kulunge way of inhabiting and conceiving their forest, as well as their community. Nicoletti, however, follows a narrative 'pathway' which allows the reader to disentangle and understand these dimensions by looking at different angles. A concise description of the community, located in its specific environment of the Hongkhu valley, and the history of its Tibeto-Burman inhabitants, a branch of the Kiranti, provides a useful starting point. The forest is here the environmental feature in which the Kulunge ancestors lived by hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation, and which they cleared to a considerable extent while they increasingly became farmers and herders. Nevertheless, the forest still conditions the life of the Kulunge, even if this occurs to a lesser extent than at the time of their ancestors, at least from a material point of view. The forest is endowed with a symbolic dimension which apparently exceeds its current concrete usage as a natural resource. And it is to this aspect that the largest part of the book is dedicated.

The forest and the deeds of the ancestors reappear in the discussion of a ritual narrative, the *mundum*. Presenting features comparable to those of an epic cycle, the *mundum* constitutes a pivot of the Kulunges' understanding of themselves and the world. As Nicoletti points out, the *mundum* of the Kulunge represents one variant of a mythical complex which is known from other Rai groups thanks to the work of scholars such as Nick Allen, Charlotte Hardman, and Martin Gaenzle. More broadly, it shares elements with other Tibeto-Burman and Tibetan traditions. The narrative of the *mundum* starts with the explanation of the origin of the world from water and leads to the ancestral serpent-spirits, to the appearance of the human beings, to the origin of the Rai and the relevant genealogies, to the manner in which the ancestors of the Kulunge created social institutions and the currently inhabited site. The explanation creates a continuum between the mythic time and the historical memory of the Kulunge and entails a normative effect in conveying the key

elements of the Kulunge social and individual ethic. This narrative is recited in a highly ritualized form in which the language reflects (or at least is considered by the Kulung to reflect) an ancient language common to all the Kiranti groups. The highly ritualised form of the narrative is known only by specialists who are similar to bards, and is used exclusively on ritual occasions. However, Nicoletti underlines how the themes of the narrative are also re-proposed in various ways and contexts in the currently used languages, both Kulunge and Nepali. It is therefore possible to understand how this mythical complex could preserve meaningfulness to the common people by emphasizing at the same time the difference between the ‘now’ and the ancestral time through its language. It is primarily on the basis of a Nepali version of the myth that Nicoletti discusses this tradition.

In the discussion of mythical narrative the forest is introduced as representing a world of its own which is opposed to the inhabited one. On the one hand this opposition is not considered to be an exclusive feature of the Kulunge tradition, and Nicoletti recalls that this has already been noted by Nick Allen in the mythology of the Thulunge Rai. On the other hand, this theme is not used according to a generalizing nature/culture or chaos/order model. In fact Nicoletti explicitly states: “...far from adhering to ahistorical or metahistorical categories...[we] try to interpret the manner in which the Kulunge Rai conceive and organise reality, taking into account the cultural peculiarities of this people and the historical moment in which the research was carried out” (p. 22).

The theme of opposition between the forest and the human world reappears in the analysis of the organization of the inhabited space, especially the house, as the Kulunge construct it, live in it, and perform the relevant rituals. Here the forest is a domain haunted by dangerous forces, and the inhabited human world has to assert itself in contrast to it. This connotation dominates the rituals inherent to the inhabited space, to the agricultural areas and to the community as a whole. It is also the background against which concepts informing social life such as the ‘head held high’ (Nep. *sir uthāune*) are discussed, recalling in some ways Sagant’s work among the Limbu.

Another, interrelated, perception of the forest lies in what this domain represents for the shamans. In fact it is there that they obtain their powers. This is the kingdom of Laladum, the deity which manifests itself as a young girl and initiates the young shamans. The clear-cut opposition between the two worlds at this point reveals itself as complementary and dialectical. It is in the forest with all its concrete and invisible inhabitants, with all its different layers of interpretation, that the narrative journey to the Hongu culminates: “Once arrived in the kingdom of Laladum our journey through the religious imagery of the Kulunge comes to an end. Following

the itinerary of the many ‘mystical journeys’ made by the ritual specialists of this ethnic group, we have also chosen to abandon the houses in the village to venture along the pathways which penetrate the thickest part of the forest—the undisputed protagonist of all these rituals aiming at obtaining invisible energies which are vital for the human community” (p. 239).

The meta-journey in which Nicoletti has engaged the reader and himself, however, leads further than the Hongu valley, to a more abstract questioning about the perception of time. In his conclusions he draws parallels between the world constructed by the Kulunge in relation to their ancestral past and Vico’s ‘corsi e ricorsi’ in human history. He observes that “the Kulunge have turned their philosophy of history towards the past” (p. 240), that “the Kulunge relation between past and present is based on a circularity” (p. 241) and “in this philosophy, which connects history to the archaic myth of the eternal return, the essential aspect of the Kulunge ‘way of thinking’ finds confirmation” (p. 241). The forest is thereby at the same time origin and destination.

However it is the very representation of a ‘mentalità Kulunge’ which, perhaps, might be challenged by the multiplicity of concrete narratives which constitute the oral tradition. The concrete process of transmission from one narrator to another is earlier described as follows: “Considering the number of histories mentioned in the *mundum* and the complexity of genealogies contained in it, it sometimes happens that the celebrating specialists, while receiving their training, perform pilgrimages from one teacher to another so that they can rely on the memory of more elders... It is therefore possible to provide an explanation for the dynamic and sometimes polymorphous character of the Kulunge mythic tradition. In its main features this preserves unmistakable and common semantic cores but allows individuals the freedom of adapting some of its elements considered as marginal...” (p. 41). Questioning if and to what an extent the multiplicity is significant and in which differing ways continuities, discontinuities or transformations might be constructed could lead to a further understanding of the complexity of the tradition and the relevant social practice. In this perspective Nicoletti’s fascinating portrait of the Kulunge raises many inspiring questions for further research in relation to the recent changes which have been affecting this community. Does this form of oral tradition reflect and react to recent political transformations? How does the mythical and ritual construction of the world of the forest relate to environmental issues such as deforestation? Or even, how is this construction affected by the implementation of a natural park which in the name of environmental conservation has taken control of the management of resources and imposed rules such as the prohibition of hunting—and thus also of ritual hunting?