

## Romano Mastromattei (1936-2010)

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Romano Mastromattei died on 23 October 2010 in a hospital in Montevarchi, Tuscany, Italy, following injuries sustained in a traffic accident several months earlier. A fine scholar, a tireless researcher of ecstatic cults, a stimulating teacher, a supportive colleague and a warm-hearted friend, he will



be missed by an international community of anthropologists, specialists in comparative religious studies, and lovers of the arts.

Born on 2 February 1936 in Bolzano at the peak of the Fascist era, throughout his adult life Mastromattei remained sceptical of the ominous political developments in his own country and abroad, and in his last years he observed the moral and cultural decline of Italy with sadness. Privately, he was a content man, even when his academic career did not always take the turns he might have wished for. He studied philosophy at the Sapienza University in Rome and completed his thesis under Angelo Brelich, a renowned historian of religion. Early contacts with scholars such as Ernesto de Martino, Vittorio Lanternari, Elémire Zolla and Ugo Marazzi in Italy and later with Ioan Lewis in England and Vladimir Basilov in Russia confirmed his interests in both the phenomenology and politics of religion.

In the sixties, he travelled extensively in the United States and between 1963 and 1967 taught at several universities, including Cincinnati, Delaware and Pennsylvania State. His first book on the ties between military power and the university system (1976) was prompted by these experiences. His first lectureship in Italy was a post in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Urbino, which he took up in 1973. He stayed there until his transfer in 1988 to Perugia University, where he was appointed to a professorship in Ethnology in the Faculty of Political Science. His final move in academia was

to become Chair of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, the position he occupied from 1995 onwards. In Italy, although his discipline was not prominent, the various teaching posts he held in that country nevertheless brought a good number of talented students to him, particularly as he was one of the few who advocated fieldwork as the basis of anthropological experience. The attraction that the younger generation felt towards him was partly due to his untiring support, and partly to his soft, non-hierarchical nature. Easy to exploit as he was, this also brought him a few disappointments.

Romano's ethnographic interests were originally aligned with ecstatic cults in West Africa, and he paid several visits to that region before he shifted his focus towards Asia, in particular Nepal, Siberia and Mongolia. According to his testimony, this change in regional orientation was stimulated by my own three-hour film about Magar shamans, *Shamans of the Blind Country*, which he saw at a screening in Aix-en-Provence in 1983. Less than a year later, he undertook his first exploratory visit to Nepal, which was followed by many others in the decades to come. In Nepal, Mastromattei was immediately attracted by the rituals of the local faith healers, in particular those of the Tamang, Yölmö, Chetri, Dhimal and Chepang communities. With these healers, he started to produce an irreplaceable series of documentary videos, all of which consisted of valuable raw archival material. This was because Mastromattei did not plan to make artistic movies, but to produce more or less uncut life ritual sequences and interviews with local shamans. He formed especially close ties of friendship with the famous shamaness of Bodhnath, Budhi Maya Lama (Ama Bombo) and Sete Rumba of Purandi village, a well-versed Tamang healer. The lives and religious activities of both these people were documented in many hours of footage.

One characteristic of Mastromattei's work was that he enjoyed company and collaboration on his many field trips. His Greek excursions to the Anastenaria fire walkers were undertaken in the company of Marazzi and Lanternari; his earliest Tamang encounters were documented with the help of Maurizio Romano, Francesco Giannattasio, Giorgio Villa and Angelo de Vincenzo; his more extended ones with Martino Nicoletti, who later became an ethnographer of the Kulung Rai; his videos among the healers (*pande*) of the Chepang were completed mainly with Diana Riboli, who later wrote an important book on these; his visit to the Naxi of Yunnan was made with Cristina Sani; his Siberian trips to Buryatia and

Gornaya Shoria were accomplished in the company of Basilov, Valerio Calisse, Lubov Arbachakova (a Shor philologist, poetess and artist), and the Russian ethnomusicologist Galina Sytchenko, his wife and now widow; his Mongolian ones with Stefano Baggiora, ethnographer of the Saora in Orissa, Davide Torri, who studied the Lepcha of Sikkim, Buriat scholar Liubov Abaeva and Sytchenko; and the later Nepalese journeys were undertaken with Sytchenko, Torri, Françoise Farano and Sylvia Salvatore. Mastromattei's books *La terra reale* (1988) and *Tremore e potere* (1995) included contributions by some of the aforementioned travel companions. His other books include *Shamanic Cosmos* (1999) and *The Middle World* (2008). Two works have yet to be published: *La fame e la spada: la guerra civile in Nepal* and *The King's Salt*. The former is a study of the Maoist movement, on which he had been working intensively almost since the time the red flags first appeared in the Himalayan hills in 1990. With this book, Romano has returned to his beginnings as a commentator on political currents; it may come to be his magnum opus. The latter work is a novel, about which he has kept silent. We remain curious.

One of his publications is a catalogue, again a collaborative work: *Rta. Sciamani in Eurasia. Il rito che sopravvive* (2006), which came out when Mastromattei exhibited his private collection of shamanic artefacts in the Villa Mondragone, a huge estate in Tusculum used as a Papal summer residence in the late 16th century. The exhibition introduced Mastromattei to the public as a collector and connoisseur of Himalayan tribal art. This was indeed one of his secret affairs: strolling to the various dealers in the streets of Kathmandu and finding some unusual objects—small wooden sculptures made in the mountains, ritual daggers, drums, masks, feather headgear or shamanic armour—physical testimonies to the ancient practices of a religion without books. The love he felt for these objects created by unnamed artists was perhaps as strong as the aesthetic delight he felt for the ritual performances during which they were used. The eye he had for this rough art of the hills clearly indicated his aesthetic inclinations. And so it was no surprise that Romano also felt attracted to some trends in the contemporary art of the West, such as conceptual art, land art and performance art. He expressed his affinities to artists such as Jannis Kounellis, Lothar Baumgarten, Richard Long and above all to Joseph Beuys. In his vivid taste—such a rare thing among academics—he assuredly bridged art and anthropology.

Alongside visual art (Romano was a fairly good draughtsman and a superb doodler), music was also on the front page of his aesthetic agenda. Performed music and music in religious action were cultural practices that he savoured and documented in his anthropological oeuvre. For this reason it will perhaps be mainly his collection of objects and his video and acoustic archive that can best keep his memory alive by preserving some of the traditions that once were the pride of those small societies, now slowly disappearing.