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► **To cite this version:**

Stéphane Gros, Grégoire Schlemmer. Philippe Sagant (1936-2015). Thoughts on Disappearing Worlds. Himalaya : the journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan studies, Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies., Dept. of Geography, Portland State University, 2016. hal-01375818

HAL Id: hal-01375818

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Submitted on 24 Oct 2016

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January 2016

Obituary: Philippe Sagant (1936-2015)

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Recommended Citation

Gros, Stéphane and Schlemmer, Grégoire (2016) "Obituary: Philippe Sagant (1936-2015)," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 35: No. 2, Article 23.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol35/iss2/23>

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Obituary | Philippe Sagant (1936-2015)

Thoughts on Disappearing Worlds

Stéphane Gros
Grégoire Schlemmer

The ethnologist Philippe Sagant, a specialist of the Himalayas, passed away on January 10, 2015, following a long illness which brought his career to an early end in 1996. A researcher at CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France) since 1966, he leaves behind a substantial yet little-known body of scientific work, despite the English translation of a large series of articles, published under the title *The Dozing Shaman* (1996a).

The following pages pay tribute to the way Sagant practiced ethnology while endeavoring to highlight the main features of his work through the three main research themes he developed: 1) the socio-political changes that affect people living on the margins of the State, especially through processes of Hinduization and Buddhization; 2) the 'shamanic cultural background' predating the arrival of these great religions; and 3) a comparative approach

to the principles that structure a form of politico-religious organization characteristic of these societies. This description will reveal the wealth of Sagant's ethnography as well as the originality of the narrative form of his writings. The reader will therefore be able to fully appreciate the unpublished text, "The Death of a Headman or Shaman's Logic" which appears in the Perspectives section of this issue. Our only regret is that the ideas outlined in this text have not been taken any further due to the untimely death of this great research scholar.

From the University to Himalayan Villages

Having first shown an interest in literature, and then in ethnology, Sagant became a student at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE, Paris) in 1964. The courses run by Lucien Bernot, his supervisor, and more generally the intellectual milieu of the EPHE (6th section; he became a member of the affiliated *Centre d'Études Indiennes* since its founding in 1967) that was to become the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS, Paris, 1975; the centre was then renamed *Centre d'Étude de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud*), had a great influence on Sagant's vision of ethnology. Throughout his career, he cited some contemporaries but almost no theorist, yet he identified with the approach of the orientalist and ethnologists who had preceded him: Marcel Granet, Paul Mus, Evelyne Lot-Falk, Georges Condominas or Alexander W. Macdonald (he was to pay tribute to these two colleagues; see 1981b, 1997), among others. With them he shared a taste for writing, for fine-grained ethnography associated with wide-ranging views. He also shared with them both the will to think the "great civilizations" of India, China or Tibet and smaller societies all together with their oral traditions, and the concern for a diachronic, or even evolutionary, approach. This was the kind of ethnology that was very dear to him, even though he admitted that it was from quite another era.

Lucien Bernot has certainly had some influence on Sagant's interest for Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples living on the border with India, Tibet, and Burma. It was, however, Corneille Jest (under whom he had conducted his first ethnographic study on a farm in France) who suggested that Sagant work in the Himalayas. He was to devote his whole career to this region.

Between 1966 and 1971 he spent two and a half years in Nepal. This long experience of fieldwork, mainly in Limbu country (or 'Yakthumba' according to their endo-ethnonym), in the far east of the country, provided him with a wealth of ethnographic data. It was to provide the ethnographic substance for all his later work on Limbu (one book and more than 25 articles). He was never to return.

Agrarian Changes and The End of a Culture

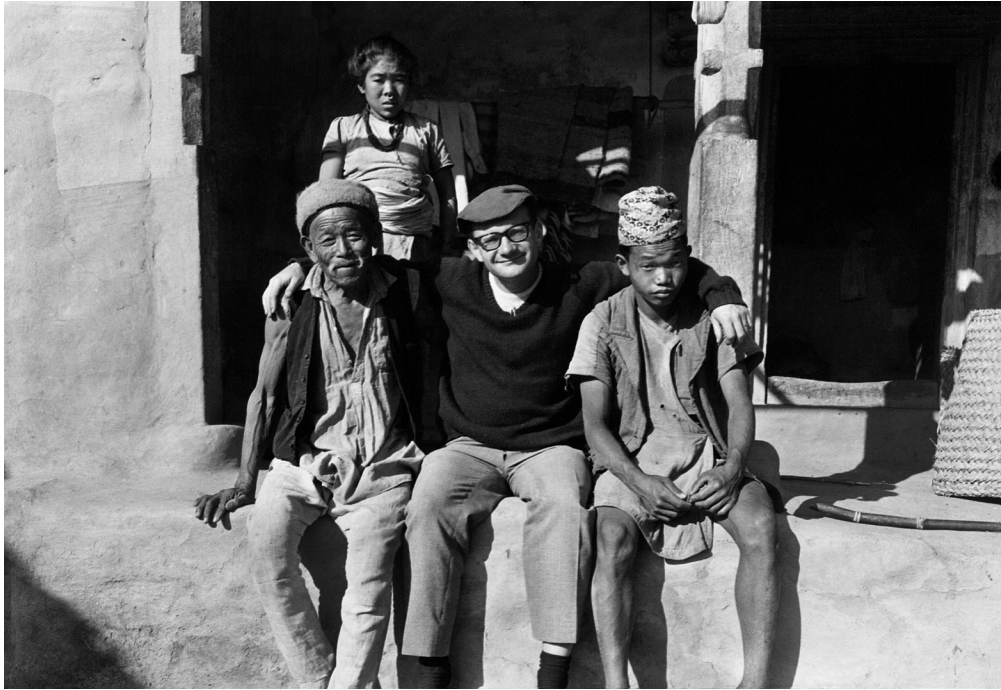
His doctoral dissertation (defended in 1973, which was the basis for his first book, 1976a) focused on the techniques and the agrarian economy of Limbu society. This interest was not an end in itself; he always situated these data in a diachronic perspective because, in his view, they revealed a slow transformation that he called the 'Hinduization process' which was not to be understood in the religious sense of the term but as a means of integrating society and the Indo-Nepalese State (1982a).

He put forward three processes of change that were subject to the Indo-Nepalese influence: the control of land-ownership by immigrants, the progressive emigration of Limbu people, and the monetization of the economy. First, he showed how members of high castes, encouraged by the Nepalese government, were able to gradually take over Limbu land (primarily through usury), and that this relationship of dependence gradually led to political and cultural integration ('The indebted tribal is almost a Hindu,' 1980: 247). Second, he argued that the money brought in by emigration—and whose beneficiaries are largely dispossessed of it for the benefit of the whole community they support—served as a kind of safety valve for these people dispossessed of their land (1978a, b, c). Third, he emphasized that the monetization of the economy subverted the relationships of mutual aid and inscribed households in a broader ethnic universe in which the Limbu no longer mastered the rules (1969a). These themes are in keeping with the tradition of Marxist anthropology which inspired Sagant at the time, providing him with the tools to address the phenomena of state integration and the emergence of a new multi-ethnic society with class differentiation in which Limbu became a minority 'nationality' (1975b).

The way these themes intersect led Sagant to assert, in the true spirit of Marcel Mauss, that a social fact is only important when articulated with other social facts. With his meticulous ethnographic presentations, he excelled in showing this interdependence of the different social registers. He sought institutions or ideas that were the keystones supporting the whole cultural edifice and thus found 'the thread to unravel the round skein like a ball of the multiple aspects' of social life (1975a: 4). And his search was to lead him to the realm of politics, in the broadest sense of the term.

Among the Limbu, he was interested in the figure of the headman and the problem of power and legitimacy (1978d). He defended the idea that the Nepalese government had offered these headmen a set of prerogatives (to raise taxes, administer justice, etc.) in order to make them 'its' local interlocutors and therefore better control them, which had contributed to maintaining the political independence of the Limbu for a long period of time (1978d). While Sagant noted that the Limbu had indeed been able 'to preserve most of their customs,' he realized that these institutions had actually been eaten away from the inside (1976b: 168). He described this process of disintegration by showing the weight of economic and demographic changes (1975a) but also how a certain form of political resistance had maintained the tradition only as a facade (1978d).

It is perhaps partly the nostalgia he felt for 'this old world now leaving us' (1996c: 422), made up of a society of free



Philippe Sagant in Libang (Taplejung District, Nepal) with Limbu friends, at end of the 1960s.

(Photographer unknown)

men (1988a), that was to prompt Sagant to focus on what he called the ‘archaic character’ of institutions of power and on ‘the survival of ancient traditions’ of the Limbu (1987a). He believed he could find traces of them in the representations associated with the life cycle and in the ideology of power (1970, 1988a, b). But it was above all in studying the political and the religious realm (and in particular, shamanism) that he fully exploited this theme.

Local Religious Categories and Their Political Aspects

Parallel to his study on social change, Sagant sought to highlight the categories of indigenous religions, whether, for example, through a pragmatic forest-spirit approach (1969b) or the mobilization of domestic categories as a guide to think the duality of religious officiants (‘priest’ versus ‘shaman’) which was preoccupying researchers at the time (1973b). His work on shamanism led him to pay special attention to the problem of the shamans’ cure and their healing power. He brought to light the importance of the role ‘laypeople’ play in influencing the divination diagnosis but also stressed the very ‘talent’ of the shaman who, with flashes of real insight, knows how to associate a natural disturbance with a social ban and a kinship issue with a religious and political idea, legitimizing the rite that would thus affect just as much sick persons as the maintenance of social order (1982b, 1987b). The body, society, and the cosmos are nested worlds and, as the sinologist Marcel Granet wrote: ‘no use acting on the outside if the inside is not in order’ (a turn of phrase that Sagant loved to quote).

In ‘With head held high: The house, ritual and politics in east Nepal’ (1981) Sagant focused on the relationship between a domestic ritual and the political power of the head of the household. Using ethnographic vignettes, he showed the political and religious salience of ‘life force,’ which is a central notion among the Limbu, and the lived implications of the ritual that allow one to hold one’s ‘head high.’ He developed this idea of a wild force linked to hunting and war and which the gods bestow on those who deserve it. Certain rituals help to obtain this, and this gained life force creates the power to act (sometimes linked to violence, which leads to alliance) and therefore structures social life. This was a founding principle of the political organization of the Limbu prior to their integration into Nepal.

This is a pivotal article in Sagant’s research because it comes as a conclusion to his work on the Limbu. It was at this time that he explicitly mentioned in his research reports that he had so far worked on the Indianization of the Limbu, and that he next wanted to reconstruct the system that predated this transformation (the ‘Asian base’ as Paul Mus called it).

Comparing Political Formations

From then on, the guiding principle of Sagant’s work became a holistic and resolutely comparative analysis of political and religious formations, and of the indigenous concepts on which they are based. For Sagant, old political ideologies, some of which were still observable when he

was in the field in the 1970-80s, were based on notions of shame and honor as socio-religious concepts associated with 'great men' and with representations of power which, in his opinion, have been present throughout the Himalayas since times of old. For this reason he read extensively about pre-Buddhist historical Tibet and ancient China, and then went on two field trips to document these topics among the Tibetan population in the regions of Manang and Nyishang (northern Nepal), and Sharwa country in Amdo (an eastern province of Tibet, China).

The research he started in 1982 with Samten Karmay on the Sharwa was largely based on discussions between the two researchers and on a short field trip in 1985. The findings were published in the book *The nine forces of man* in 1998, when Sagant had already been struck down by his illness. In this work, the 'headman elected by the gods' associated with Sharwa cult of mountains comes across as a key institution within which Sagant found constellation of notions that he grouped under the theme of shame and honor. He noted the importance of a charismatic type of power linked to a heroic moral that he believed was rooted in ancient pre-Buddhist Tibet. This power is based on the life force that the god of the mountain grants and it manifests itself especially during ritual hunts for wild animals which made up this deity's herd. A successful hunt, the transgression of a prohibition, was seen as a favor from the god. Contrary to shame that causes a person to have a 'hot face,' the charisma of the one who is thus 'elected' by the mountain god will decide the seat that will be allocated to them in local assemblies. This 'ranked position' (1988c) is therefore the expression of shifting social hierarchies based on whether a person obtains the life force. This set of institutions reveals an archaic conception of the 'religion of men' in which fame and the morality of the feat give access to political role.

In a key article on the same themes, which was written after a field trip to Nepal in the Nyishang-Manang region in 1986-1989, Sagant (1990) specifically developed the issue of political centralization, showing how the King can divert, for his own benefit, the life force using ritual manipulations, and thus legitimize his power. Then going back to his Limbu ethnographic data, he examined a conflict of legitimacy between hereditary political leaders delegated by the King and heads of households to bring out the concept of 'dual power' (1996b).

Time, Space, and Force

Forever in search of general explanatory principles, Sagant based his comparative analysis of politico-ritual forms of legitimacy and the nature of power on three elements:

time (cyclic), space (open and closed), and life force. He saw these elements as being systematically mobilized in a set of institutions and he tried to show their recurrence in different societies: the head held high and the ranked position, mountain cult and the headman elected by the gods, or else closing rituals and the law of silence and noise, ritual hunts and creative dismemberment, etc. (some of which themes had been introduced by Alexander Macdonald).

These representations of power allowed him to detect some 'kinship of thought' within the Himalayan region, and even beyond. After undertaking substantial bibliographic research, he gradually extended his field of investigation to other cultures—from Turkish-Mongolian to Amerindian populations including the Sumerian civilization—where he found the same system of representations. Very much inspired by Roberte Hamayon, Sagant considered that these time-, space- and life force-related notions appeared during the Neolithic period and persisted in some isolated societies to survive as relics. These concepts correspond to a verticalization of the world, with the emergence of mountain cult, which is typical of agro-pastoral societies. It was in this context that the shaman, whose initial function was to obtain game, became a healing specialist and sometimes served political purposes (1996c).

According to Sagant, the headman and the shaman share this life force when they receive the favor or the assistance of the gods, which makes them 'masters of the cosmos.' It is this force that renders them legitimate and enables them to ensure some control, which is temporary and subject to renewal, over causes of disorder, and which gives them the power to restore internal order, that of the body or that of the territory and community. Conversely, illness and the loss of legitimacy are two parallel expressions of supernatural sanctions. These are the ideas which, in the form of a broad diachronic cross-comparison, Sagant developed in the following unpublished exploratory essay: 'The death of a headman, or shaman's logic'.

Reading Sagant Today

The attention that Sagant devoted to indigenous logic never amounted to gratuitous efforts at theorizing. His findings about key notions at the heart of systems of thought which he analyzed enabled him, on the contrary, to identify the relationship between the elements that structure the whole social edifice. This is true of his thoughts about space, time, and force, which, regardless of any anthropological current or trend, remain just as relevant today even beyond the Himalayan region.

Sagant's concern about accounting for the radical otherness of these disappearing worlds and their underlying logics also explains his narrative choices. He attempted, based on the stories told by the main actors, to render the image that the population has of itself. Life stories, too, are both a way of inputting ethnographic data and a discursive tool. Firstly, they do not describe the institutions but show how they are lived. Then they introduce 'the cultural gap, the relativity, where the thesis, the article, the monograph, have something absolute, abstract' (1981c: 25). This is because, for Sagant, the beauty and the truth of a story are intimately related. 'What interests me,' he wrote, 'is the quality of the story. If the story is good, very good, then I am sure it is true. At least I would so much like it to be!' (1996d: 420).

This passion for telling stories characterized Sagant's choices of writing just as much as his method of teaching. Throughout his career he strived to disseminate anthropology, as evidenced by how devoted he was to his teaching at the University of Rennes and then at the *Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative* at Nanterre University. Driven by the passion that is reflected in his writing but also by the cogency of the conceptual relationships he proposed, he has managed to influence the vision and the research of those who knew him or read him and, we hope, those who will continue to read his work.

Readers are advised that Phillippe Sagant's work, "The Death of a Headman," is featured in the Perspectives section of this issue.

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The two authors have contributed equally to this article. The order of names is alphabetical. This text is based on Sagant's writings, a short but, for us, memorable personal experience and on his archives (research reports, unpublished material, bibliographical notes, etc.) which are housed at the library of the CNRS research unit, *Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative*: <<http://www.mae.u-paris10.fr/dbtw-wpd/arch/ar.aspx?archive=lesc&reference=fps>>. We are grateful to Vanina Bouté, Pascale Dollfus, Marc Gaborieau, and Guillaume Rozenberg for their comments on previous versions of this text; and last but not least, our thanks go to Bernadette Sellers for her help in turning this text into proper English.

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