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## **Nature De-Naturalised: Modes of Relation with the Environment among the Drung of Northwest Yunnan (China)**

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C.N.R.S.

**Abstract:** This article is about the ways the Drung (Dulong), a minority inhabiting a remote mountainous valley of Northwest Yunnan province (China), view the 'natural world' as part of a cosmological order in which human society is integrated. The article explores the principles of differentiation that preside over the modes of relation between the diverse components of this world, by paying close attention to subsistence activities. Until recently, the Drung people practiced swidden agriculture, and hunting and collecting remained important secondary sources of food. These activities imply specific relationships with natural forces, deities and spirits, which constitute a socio-cultural means of accessing natural resources and obtaining prosperity, or 'good fortune.' Four mutually non-exclusive modalities of transaction with these entities are identified, which capture the variability of peoples' attitudes toward natural resources and ideas of social reproduction. Recent socio-economic reforms that have brought traditional cultivation to an end, threatening Drung people's livelihood and culture, seem to influence the dominance of a certain modality of economic transaction.

**Keywords:** Dulong (Drung, Trung, T'rung); Nature; Cosmology; Species; Ritual; Good fortune.

## The Road to Development

In July 1995, building work started on a dirt road that would link Gongshan county seat in the Nujiang river valley to the remote Dulong valley, which remained the last district to be inaccessible by road in Northwest Yunnan province, China.<sup>1</sup> This dangerous road across the Gaoligong mountain range was completed in 1999 and put an end to the use of horse caravans for the transportation of goods and supplies. It has since been central to various exogenous development plans aimed at improving the livelihood of the Drung (Dulong) people, one of China's smallest 'minority nationalities'; and a lower elevation seven km-long tunnel was opened in 2014 to enable the use of the road in winter.<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary China, as Flower (2004, 649) has emphasised, priority is given to the building of roads in an effort to build 'material civilization' (Ch. *wuzhi wenming*). It also implies a reference to a boundary, both physical and conceptual, between backward regions and cosmopolitan China, since the link between road building and development relies on a 'moral geography' (see Caplan 1997). The challenge involved in building roads in remote areas seemingly disconnected from the global economy lies not only in bringing material development (seen as the manifestation of modernity and progress), but also in bringing the 'spiritual civilization' (Ch. *jingshen wenming*) to which the road would finally provide access.

However, the building of the road raised an issue other than that of the potential economic benefit for the Drung people. The chosen route through the Gaoligong Mountain range meant that some construction work would take place not far from the highest mountain, the Gyangmu Kwakarpu; this is the mountain of origin for the Drung people, the residence of a spirit they propitiate to ensure their own well-being.

The local authorities organised a folklore demonstration to celebrate the beginning of the roadwork, and each local 'minority nationality'—Lisu, Nu (Nung), Dulong (Drung), Tibetan—took part in a series of dances and songs. Similarly, a ritual took place to appease the mountain and to prevent any negative reaction. Though the road was to be built as a means of later contributing to the economic growth, in the eyes of the local inhabitants, the mountain was also an agent of future wealth.

This event and the diverse characters involved—the State and its agents, the local communities, the mountain and its spirit—remind us of similar stories of encounters between different cosmologies. Among the Naxi, C. McKhann (2001, and this issue) has for example

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been written within the framework of the European-Research-Council-funded project "Territories, Communities, and Exchanges in the Kham Sino-Tibetan Borderlands" (Starting Grant No. 283870). Various earlier drafts have benefited from critical comments by Joëlle Smadja, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, and Andreas Wilkes. In its most recent iteration, this article has greatly benefited from comments by two anonymous reviewers, as well as Giovanni da Col, which were extremely helpful for clarifying the arguments. I am also thankful to Bernadette Sellers for her help in revising the language. Fieldwork on which this article is based was mainly conducted at different periods between 1998 and 2003 for a total of nearly eighteen months, with an additional three-month field trip in autumn 2010. ). This article cannot do justice to the magnitude of the transformations that are taking place in the Dulong valley, which I have partly addressed in a companion article (Gros 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Drung are officially recognized as one of the fifty-five 'minority nationalities' (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*) of the People's Republic of China under the Chinese name of Dulong. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language, and amount to roughly 7,000 members (4,000 living in the Dulong valley itself).

discussed how Saddo (Ssân-ddô), the tutelary mountain-divinity of Lijiang basin is said to have caused a violent earthquake in 1996 in reaction to the numerous disturbances linked to the development of tourism on the mountain itself.<sup>3</sup> In such examples, not only do the State and its policies but also the mountain spirits appear to influence the course of the human world of local communities. Beyond any cultural or ethnic units, in the Drung as in the Naxi cases, mountain spirits appear as very ambivalent figures that people have to face. Their beneficial actions depend on the inhabitants' attitude: they can ensure prosperity and fertility, but if neglected, the territory and its inhabitants are exposed to their wrath. They are among the forces—energies, spirits—that contribute to the (re)production of the world in which people live. They are among the contentious 'earth-beings' that, as Marisol de la Cadena (2010) or David Sneath (2014) have described in other contexts, are starting to make their way into the political arena.

The building of the road to the Drung valley also exemplifies how economic development and environmental protection have often proved to be conflicting driving forces behind change in Northwest Yunnan province. The Gaoligong Mountain Nature Reserve, which includes the entire Dulong valley, has been designated a provincial-level (1983) and national-level (1986) nature reserve, a section of which received the label World Heritage Site (UNESCO 2003; Chaplin 2005). The Nujiang (Salween) valley itself has been at the centre of increasing concern regarding environmental and biodiversity protection problems, and it recently became the subject of a heated public debate about potential threats caused by large dam-building projects (McDonald 2007; Tilt 2014).

At the same time, the marketing of local minority cultures and of mountainous landscapes of Northwest Yunnan has turned it into a major destination for both domestic and international tourists, with a colossal impact on local economies and cultural production.<sup>4</sup> With the emergence of what Hathaway (2010) has called an 'indigenous space', local cultures have been depicted as being respectful of a sometimes 'sacralised' nature, and have inspired growing concern for indigenous knowledge in its relation to biodiversity and cultural rights (see Xu *et al.* 2005).

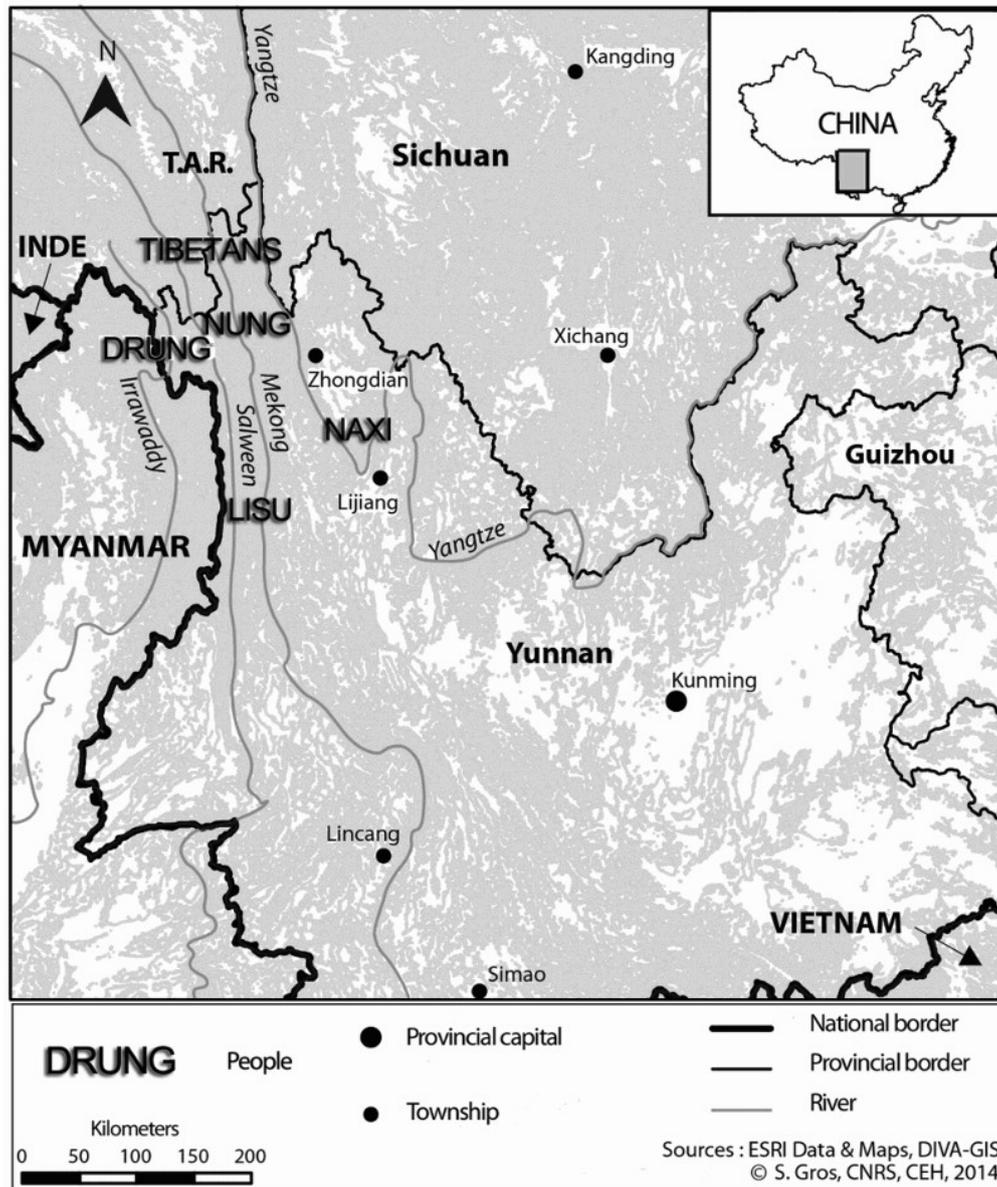
These ongoing transformations combine a search for economic growth and initiatives aimed at preserving nature and culture, and both are—sometimes contradictorily—supported by a series of state policies to 'alleviate poverty' often implemented in conjunction with programs about environmental rehabilitation, or 'ecological construction' (Economy 2002; see also Yeh 2005; Harwood 2014). The Sloping Land Conversion Program (Ch. *tuigeng huanlin huancao gongcheng*, 'return farmland to forest or grassland program') is one such program that involves the conversion of agricultural land into forests or grassland, and has particularly impacted Drung people's livelihood. In Gongshan Nu and Dulong Autonomous County, the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) was launched in 2003. In the Dulong valley, its implementation meant that the Drung were no longer allowed to cultivate mountain fields by

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<sup>3</sup> Also recalled by McKhann (this issue), another well-known case is that of the sacred mountain Khawa Karpo (Tib. Kha-ba dkar-po, Ch. *Meili Xueshan*), situated at the border between Yunnan and the Tibet Autonomous Region, in Dechen county (Ch. *Deqin xian*).

<sup>4</sup> There has been growing literature on the subject; see among many others, Hillman (2003), Kolås (2008), Litzinger (2004), McKhann (2001), Oakes (2007).

swidden cultivation. As a result, almost all cultivated land in the Dulong valley has now been reforested, and locals rely on government help in the form of rice for daily sustenance (see Gros 2005, 2010, 2014; Li 2008). The SLCP was also an opportunity to use funding from central government for grain supplies in order to bring Drung villagers' grain consumption levels above the poverty threshold (Wilkes and Shen 2007, 78).<sup>5</sup>



Map 1: The Drung and their immediate neighbours in Northwest Yunnan (China)

<sup>5</sup> As one of the world's largest funds for ecosystem services SLCP is now well documented at both macro- and micro-level through case studies. I do not review all this literature here, which is referenced and discussed in another article; see Gros (2014).

Over the last decade, massive investment in infrastructure, a newly completed road and tunnel, social engineering under the ‘new socialist countryside’ policy that has led to the relocation of the entire population to brick houses, the mushrooming of hotels in the hope of attracting tourism have all brought about radical transformations for the Drung—and made these ‘isolated people’ worthy of attention as far as the *New York Times* is concerned (Wong 2016). My goal here, however, is not to make a critical assessment or to discuss issues regarding developmental politics, environmental governance or resource management (see Agrawal 2005; Goldman 2004) or their social consequences which I have touched upon elsewhere (Gros 2014). This article does not seek to further examine these policies and ideologies; instead, it discusses indigenous knowledge and practices that are affected by the changes triggered by these policies that together with many series of development plans supposed to bring ‘progress’ since the 1950s have forced the Drung to experience novel ways of understanding their human condition. This article sets out to explore aspects of human-environment relatedness within a broader consideration of the modes of identification and relations described by Descola (2013 [2005], 112–115) as well as what, in another Himalayan context, Campbell (2010) calls ‘environmental subjectivities,’ which link aspects of native conceptions of human-environment relatedness to the ways the environment is perceived and made an explicit category, especially in the context of the influence of conservationism.

In Gongshan County, Wilkes (2000, 41–42) has discussed the dominant ‘environmental ideologies’ that were prevalent among the various parties involved in biodiversity conservation projects at the turn of the new millennium and showed that indigenous models of human-environment interaction were generally ignored. Paving the way for the exploration of other ‘environmental subjectivities’, Wilkes (2000, 47) also mentions a ‘reciprocal relations’ ideology held by villagers in Gongshan, according to which non-human entities are key players in social reproduction.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I aim to take this further and to explore diverse modalities of interaction with the environment that are held by the Drung people.

In this sense, beyond the various ways of talking about the environment or nature, and of making it an explicit category, ‘environmental subjectivities’ also include the different ways of talking about and interacting with non-humans. Such an approach builds on recent reassessments of the dichotomy between the concepts of nature and culture, and the theoretical advances made in the field of social anthropology mainly through the works of Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2012) and Descola (1986; 2013 [2005]).

If the opposition of nature and culture implies an anthropology in which humans, revealed only through the achievement of culture, would be ‘de-natured’, it also implies a conception of nature set apart from this latter realm of culture. Concurrent environmental subjectivities are in turn likely to produce several natures: there is a general problem of translatability of the category of ‘nature’. The ‘de-naturalisation’ process referred to in the title of this article is two-fold. On the one hand, it can be argued that modernity has naturalised nature, making it a universal category, and that to challenge this understanding of the world as one socio-natural formation, nature needs to be de-naturalised. On the other hand, if we are to use ‘nature’ as a

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<sup>6</sup> In other parts of the world, many studies have discussed how diverse approaches to environmental protection are problematically blind to taking into account other conceptions of reality; see for instance Turner (2000), Blaser (2009).

short-hand translation of a diversity of local conceptions (of what can otherwise be referred to as the ‘environment’), then the dominant scientific discourse, by ignoring ‘animist’ or ‘analogue’ ontologies (Descola 2013 [2005], 129–143, 201–231), can be said to have finally ‘de-natured’ the cosmos of peoples.

In order to restore this diversity of natures, focusing on the case of the Drung people, this article explores the specific categories and principles of differentiation that preside over the modes of relation between the diverse components of the world. I look at Drung cosmology, mythology, and other ways they convey their understanding of the world they live in and the basic principles that order it. By considering the particularities of the concepts of ‘species’ (Dr. *nyv-reuq*), ‘vital principle’ (Dr. *pvlà*) and ‘good fortune’ (Dr. *kār-jī*), I show how non-human entities are experienced and dealt with, and how they relate to people’s understanding of wealth and the ways of acquiring it.<sup>7</sup> Since humans are involved in different kinds of relationships with non-human entities, I examine several subsistence activities as well as ritual practices in order to shed light on the characteristics of these relationships. I identify four non-exclusive mode of transaction, characterised respectively by demand-sharing, exchange, predation, or debt. The identification and different modes of relations is not an end in itself but a means of highlighting the reality of their uncertainty and instability.

### **Drung Cosmology**

In traditional stories recounted orally by Drung people, we find descriptions of the diverse components of the world as well as the basic principles that order it. They often tell of processes of becoming or of transformations that make these descriptions take the form of a cosmogony.<sup>8</sup> In a story such as that of the ‘great flood’, in particular, we are told of the state of the world prior to this disaster, and how the world came to be organised the way it is now.<sup>9</sup> Such stories provide an understanding of the nature of things and, as ways of making sense of the world, form a general matrix for intelligibility.

In Drung stories, we find a pre-flood world characterised by the relative absence of any differentiation: animals (*shā*), spirits (*pvlàng*) and humans (*ātsàng*) all lived together and could freely communicate through words and could see each other. They all shared the same terrestrial abode, practicing shifting cultivation, and there was a ladder that linked the earth to the sky where people also lived. Humans, spirits, and animals sometimes worked together in the fields, helping one another. Spirits often looked after human babies when their parents were busy during the day, and humans in turn babysat for the spirits.

These ancient times should not be viewed as a world of perfect harmony. On the contrary, the absence of any differentiation led to a state of chaos. Spirits ‘ate’ (*kāi*) the babies committed to their care, and consequently endangered human survival by reducing their population.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent contribution to the anthropology of fortune-like concepts among Tibetans in Northwest Yunnan, see da Col (2012a, 2012b).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Drung myths (as authoritative narrations that legitimize order), see Gros (2012a, 85–87, 233–235); and for an approach to diverse forms of historicity, see Gros (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Flood stories are a very common mythical motif throughout southwest China and Southeast Asia more generally, and the prohibition of incest is one of their key components; see for instance Đăng Nghiêm (1993).

Violent conflicts opposed spirits and humans, and this inextricable discord led to the ‘great flood’. In this manner, a new world order came to be, where humans and spirits were separate. It is said that a celestial omniscient deity, named Gvmeū, is the one who decided to reset the world order.

The cosmic space in which people now find themselves is the result of these transformations. The terrestrial abode (*sv-tāng mv-li*) was then to be separated from the underworld (*shì-jàp*) and the sky (*nàm*), which became disjoined realms. In this tripartite organisation of the cosmos, the terrestrial abode, where all humans live, constitutes the visible world. Relationships can still be established between these worlds, but indirectly through the means of rituals and incantations. Spirits are now invisible to common people, and only those who have the ability to ‘see’, such as the shamans (*nàm-sa*), can address the spirits directly.

This cosmic organisation that is made up of separate worlds where spirits, humans, animals and plants find their place, forms the basis for the construction of meaning about humanity, self and otherness, in a set of contrasted positions. However, to understand the relationships between these categories, it is necessary to look at the Drung people’s conceptualisation of these categories, i.e. their understanding of ‘species’ (*nyv-reūq*), which is fundamental to their cosmology.

The word they employ for ‘species’ does not portray the notion of clear and delimited groups such as a series of named species in a hierarchical taxonomic classification. It is used to refer to different categories built on the principle of shared similarities. For example, though humans make up a ‘species’, they are also divided into different ‘species’—what we call clans or lineages in anthropological parlance (see Gros 2004, 289). Moreover, in other situations, the same word could be translated as ‘kind’, or ‘type’.

Drung people do not use an evaluative categorisation between humans, spirits, animals or plants, and regardless of one’s outer shape (or similarities), they all possess a ‘vital principle’ (*pvlà*). The vital principle manifests itself in the form of a shadow (*bāng-gū*) and is usually attached to the body, but also wanders around especially at night; this is the source of our dreams. The vital principle can be captured by a malevolent spirit, causing illness, and potentially death.

The vital principle is conceived by Drung people as an element that distinguishes them from dead things, and which implies a degree of consciousness. Various kinds (species) of beings, similar to humans, share a faculty that potentially makes them conscious subjects, capable of intentional acts, emotions, etc., a form of ‘interiority’ as defined by Descola (2013 [2005], 116), which in this context is understood as being dependent on the presence of the *pvlà*. Therefore, what we often see as an exclusive human quality is in this case also attributed to a wide range of other beings situated in the environment with which people have relationships, chiefly spirits, animals, and plants. While this characteristic might be called a sense of ‘personhood’, and though beings that fall into this class can, in some ways, interact with one another (see Howell 1996; Bird-David 1999; Stringer 2000), there is no single term in Drung language (such as ‘person’) that could be applied to different beings simply on the basis that they have a *pvlà*.

The difference between humans, plants, and animals lies in a given degree, as these beings do not have the same level of agency, but also in their physical appearance or, in other words, in their corporeality. While most spirits also differ from humans in their appearance, some may, however, resemble human beings but will generally present some specific features: they wear particular clothing or show exceptional abilities (like flying for example).<sup>10</sup>

For all beings that have a vital principle, death means the disappearance of the vital principle (*pvlà*) and is followed by the appearance of—or more accurately the transformation into—another entity, the ‘dead’ (*āshi*), which is not eternal. The vital principle is constitutive of the Drung’s ‘nutritional cosmology’: spirits can eat human *pvlà*, and the *pvlà* of what people eat is what provides sustenance. As I will show below, the way one species sees another is largely dependent on what constitutes their food.<sup>11</sup>

Although Drung people’s subsistence has long relied on shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering remained vital activities in daily life until the implementation of the recent policies on wildlife protection and the ban on slope cultivation. Their cosmology and social practices draw heavily on reference to hunting which is also present in a great variety of rituals. As we will see below, though predation plays an important role in the Drung’s ‘nutritional food web’, hunting is not the only cosmological operator as in Amazonian cosmologies (see Costa and Fausto 2010, 97–98). Nearer to home, however, are correspondences in regional ethnography, and among the Nishi (Dafla) of Arunachal Pradesh (India) for example, it is said that humans hunt wild animals and spirits hunt humans (Shukla 1959, 95). Ramirez (2005 [1989]) has shown that within the political cosmology prevalent among several people of the Eastern Himalayas, humans and spirits are economic rivals, and competing forms of consumption lead to forms of rivalry but also to exchanges and possibly to collaboration and alliances.

In this respect, events that occurred in mythical times are very evocative. As we have seen, relationships of trust between humans and spirits ended when humans discovered that spirits were eating (the vital principle of) their children, or drinking their blood, a key element of vitality. In Drung mythology, the figure of Nisham exemplifies the opposition between humans and spirits. Nisham has male human features but is decked out with a long tail, and displays extremely anti-social behaviour: stealing food, capturing and raping women. Moreover, he once gave parents the flesh of their own baby to eat, which ended with him being murdered by the humans.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, some spirits have a human origin: this dates back to pre-flood times, and several stories relate how a human being became attached to a particular realm (mountain, sky) and therefore separated from other humans, and turned into a spirit.

<sup>11</sup> I owe the ‘nutritional cosmology’ formulation to Giovanni da Col. This seems at first glance quite similar to the ‘cosmic food web’ described by Arhem (1996), but it is important to note the difference regarding the level of reciprocity; here, predation is not an exchange that accounts for the regeneration of life and renewal at the level of the category (animal, or plant). See also Descola’s (2013 [2005], 285ff, 336ff) discussion of the dilemma of eating non-human ‘persons’ and what he calls the ‘traffic of souls.’

<sup>12</sup> Here I have simplified this otherwise rather long story based on versions collected in the field. Different versions of this story have also been published in their Chinese translations; see for example Zou Yutang *et al.* (1994).

Violence, murder, cannibalism, and incest all appear to be the result of these undifferentiated times. The act of involuntary cannibalism is essential, just as primordial incest, as it gave birth to human society.<sup>13</sup> Both cannibalism and incest can be understood as founding acts for the re-creation of human society, establishing as a rule the impossibility of ‘cumulating the identical’ (see Hérítier 1979): the danger of this accumulation becomes socially positive as the prohibition to ‘consummate’ one’s fellow leads to a recognised and acceptable type of relationship.

However, this latter reordering of the cosmos and differentiation between ‘species’ is not a reversal of its founding principle: the primordial union of the first and only being on earth with the daughter of Gvmeū, the celestial deity. In the myth, Gvmeū, the celestial stepfather, is first and foremost a wife-giver, but also the provider of grain and domestic animals to humans in the form of a dowry. There is no better way of saying that wealth comes with women, or better yet, through the necessary relationship with an exteriority: the notion that a source of power and vitality lies outside of society itself. Moreover, since the alliance is at first infertile, the ability to give birth to humans ultimately requires assistance from the bride’s parents—the celestial deities.<sup>14</sup> There is an intrinsic link between conceptions of species, similarity and otherness, and kinship as an articulation between what these conceptions set apart.

### Relationships Between Species

The Drung see the landscape as being full of signs: some present since mythical times or memories of past human occupation, others left by animals or indications of the presence of spirits who are conjoined with physical phenomenon. As has been argued for other animist societies, the whole environment in which people find themselves, the forests and mountains in their entirety as a material and spiritual world are a social not natural space.<sup>15</sup> They are not just objects of cultural representations: they constitute a social environment, and people interact with the surrounding world in terms of social-like relationships with other beings. The environment is not an entity we act upon but a set of entities we deal with.

There is a general dichotomy between spirits and deities, which was briefly alluded to above. On the one hand, are spirits (*pvlāng*) of different kinds, outlook, and preferred living domain: most, but not all, are localised and evolve in a specific natural environment (trees, rivers, mountains, air, underground, etc.). On the other hand, there exists a limited number of omnipresent and omniscient entities, which can be qualified as deities. They are characterised by their stability and mastery over a particular domain (animals, plants, or sources of prosperity), and are propitiated on specific occasions to ensure protection and ‘good fortune’ (*kār-jī*). They are, as I have argued elsewhere, the providers of fertility (Gros 2012b). For

<sup>13</sup> It would take too long to quote extensively the myth here. Incest took place after the great flood that allowed for the reordering of the world, between a young man and his sister, the sole survivors. All human beings are the descendants of this incestuous couple.

<sup>14</sup> Gvmeū is generally viewed as either a single male figure, or a male/female pair.

<sup>15</sup> There is extensive anthropological evidence that can hardly be summed up in a short list of references; see for example Descola (2013 [2005]); Dwyer (1996); Ingold (2000, 2011: Chap. 10). See also Lecomte-Tilouine (2010) for the Himalayas.

example, humans can prey on animals, but consent to hunt a wild animal must be obtained from the spirit called ‘master of game’ (*shā āqkāng*). Similarly, humans depend on the celestial deity Gvmeū for the well-being of their vital principle. Controlling human destiny, Gvmeū is depicted as a breeder, who keeps humans’ vital principle just as humans keep domestic animals and the figure of the ‘master’ refers to a relationship of domestication.

In essence, spirits and deities are neither intrinsically malevolent nor benevolent, but rather ambivalent figures. Although spirits generally manifest themselves by causing illnesses or misfortune, they can at times also provide assistance and protection. And while deities are overall neutral or beneficial, they will heavily sanction any misbehaviour toward them, as alluded to in the case of mountain deities at the beginning of this article.

As opposed to mythical times when all species lived together, the new era succeeding the flood established another framework for their relationships and a discontinuity involving variations in the modes of communication between them. That is precisely what the cosmogonic story sets out to narrate: the production of differences and positing of discontinuities. People are not able to see the spirits and communicate visually with them, while animals, still visible, are not socialised as they appear in myths and no longer speak the same language as humans.

Humans can only solicit and exercise influence through means of incantations (*sv-mōt*) that accompany diverse forms of ritual offerings and contain a special vocabulary that is not used in daily life. This magical verbal communication may be typified as ‘wishes’, on the understanding that it is a performative speech and can be used in different situations such as planting, harvesting, hunting, and all activities that involve relationships with other beings, plants and animals alike, or their spirit representatives.

Whether the Drung people address a variety of interlocutors directly or whether they indirectly address those who exercise control over other beings, their goal is to provoke favourable dispositions by means of a social relationship, always involving incantations. The success of the task at hand depends on this relationship. Everyone has the capacity for such incantations, even if it is often the duty of the more knowledgeable elders to perform them. This principle of relatedness regulating interactions between humans and their environment includes relationships linked to actions of sharing, as well as interactions better characterised as purely predatory, meaning that there is no direct compensation for what is taken. In other words, various modes of interaction are contextually mobilised depending on the actors.<sup>16</sup>

Hunting and farming are activities that can help illustrate the different kinds of relationships the Drung people forge with non-human entities. As previously mentioned, the way members of one species perceive others depends on what constitutes food for them. Quite explicitly, the same word is used for ‘meat’ and ‘wild animals’ (*shā*), and the latter are considered as the ‘meat of the place’ (*mv-lì shā*).<sup>17</sup> Hunting for big game, using crossbows or traps always

<sup>16</sup> While forms of sociality may well be characterized by egalitarianism at an intracultural level, it does not exclude asymmetrical exchange during intercultural interaction. Fortier (2000) has observed among the Raute, hunter-gatherers living in Nepal, that sharing is a dominant ideology and often deployed as an intracommunity mode of interaction, but several forms of exchange nevertheless coexist.

<sup>17</sup> The Drung term for ‘place’ can also include the notion of ‘wilderness’.

necessitates a ritual. The basic principle of this ritual is to obtain from the ‘master of game’ an agreement about a transaction involving the vital principles of the animals. The master-spirit is asked to release the animals from the enclosure where they are kept and to set them free. If the vital principles of the animals are not obtained beforehand, no game will be captured or killed. The ritual at first calls for a fumigation (*sāng*) to establish contact with the spirit, then the offerings of ritual flags (*lv-dār*) as well as small dough effigies (*gyōng-gū*) representing the animals the hunters wish to catch. As in all relationships of exchange, there is a certain degree of give and take, and the ritual flags are, according to a local saying, equivalent to a currency and needed to ‘buy’ (*wēn*) the animals’ vital principles. The spirit is in this case acting like the master-owner of the animal, a quality that is conveyed by the generic name *jvm-daq* bestowed to these spirits, derived from the Tibetan *gzhi-bdag* ‘lord of the earth-base’.<sup>18</sup>

This type of relationship is different from the one people have with spirits living in the soil, in the vicinity of houses or near fields. Contrary to hunting, farming does not require systematic offerings, and no request should be formulated. There are only a few places where earth spirits reside. Because people may harm these spirits when working in the fields, the latter may in return provoke illnesses, and will therefore be propitiated with small offerings.

As mentioned above, plants also have a ‘vital principle’. This is of particular importance when we consider the plants people eat. The vital principle of the plant is an integral part of the plant itself and vital principles of cultivated plants are the object of the harvest. Since the 1950s, Drung people have learned new agricultural techniques that have certainly influenced their practices. Furthermore, they have been cultivating only a very limited number of permanent fields since the implementation of the Sloping Land Conversion Program. They are now left with almost no swidden fields on which they used to grow buckwheat, millet, maize, or taro. Before these changes, rotational agriculture on swidden fields, often planted with alders (*alnus nepalensis*) to increase soil nutrients, was the main subsistence activity; I will describe it here using the ethnographic present tense (see also Gros 2014, 85–87).

After a fallow period of up to five years, when a plot is to be grubbed, the person in charge of giving the first strokes with the machete makes a brief incantation. He asks that no harm be done to the people working on this plot and that the crops grow healthily. Another incantation must be said when setting fire to dried vegetation, in which the fire is asked to follow its ‘master’s’ (the person who kindles the fire and makes the incantation) instructions, and not to spread beyond the limits of the plot.

Usually, when all planting activities begin, the first day is given over to making incantations. The entire day is spent drinking alcohol, eating (especially meat), and planting: this is to bring the ‘warm hand’ (*eūr leūm*) to guarantee prosperity. The sharing process, among the people who partake of food and alcohol and with entities who receive small offerings and libations, is generative of good fortune.

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<sup>18</sup> As I will make clear below, masters of game are nevertheless within the territorial domain of higher mountain deities (*lā*) that are considered as the master-owners of all the natural resources. Similarities with Tibetan religious practices extend to ritual vocabulary, with terms such as fumigation (*sāng*) (Tib. *bsang*) or ritual flags (*lv-dār*) (Tib. *lha-dar*), among many others. For a comparative perspective on the notion of master-ownership, see Fausto (2008).

Harvesting must be done in the opposite direction to the flow of river. Otherwise, it is believed that as people harvest, the water will carry away the vital principles contained inside the grain. As harvesting lasts several days on a same plot, to avoid spirits eating the vital principles of the crops when people are away, small barricades are built by making knots with the stalks of plants growing on the edge of the field. This will keep the vital principles of the cereals in the field and prevent spirits from feeding on them.

Finally, mountain deities are of particular significance regarding people's livelihood. They are considered to be in charge of the community's territory and its resources and consequently can guarantee people's prosperity in terms of an abundance of game and grain. Mountain deities therefore play a crucial role in community life, as I will now describe further by emphasising their intimate link with the notion of fertility.

### **Fertility and the Principles of Reproduction**

The brief descriptions above go to show that what is sought in subsistence activities when relating to other beings such as spirits, are the vital principles (*pvlà*) of animals or plants. More generally speaking, however, these activities and relationships show a concern for what Drung people call 'good fortune' (*kār-jī*). Good fortune intersects a series of complementary and overlapping concepts similar to the idea of prosperity, vitality, or even luck, which can be subsumed under the generic term of fertility.<sup>19</sup> I use fertility as an abstract and generic notion that should not cloud the nuances found in the Drung vocabulary; yet it condensates a series of interrelated concepts, a combination of, most importantly, the 'vital principle' (*pvlà*) and 'breath' (*āksà*), the 'prosperity' (*gyāng*) of the household, and the 'good fortune' (*kār-jī*) of the individual.

At a first glance, good fortune seems to be accessible to everyone, and in incantations people invoke it so as to possibly make it manifest. Good fortune is also linked to the eternal snows of the highest mountains where the 'essence of wealth' (*zv-bāng*), a great concentration of vitality and prosperity, is to be found. These high mountains are also the residence of deities who consequently maintain a very intimate relationship with the people for they are seen as the dispensers of wealth. They are specific to a locality, and each village and its inhabitants are related to one particular mountain deity responsible for the well-being and prosperity of all beings living on its territory. There are several occasions on which a relationship with the mountain deity is established in order to secure the wealth of the household.

One such occasion is during the ritual performed once a new house has been built. Prosperity is then 'fixed' (*blān*) in the house by throwing flour on the four walls of the house and on the hearth while performing an incantation addressed to the mountain deity and accompanied by the sound of the gong (ritual called *gyāng blān*, 'fixing prosperity').<sup>20</sup> Or again, when

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<sup>19</sup> Luck is to be understood here as a form of generative property that enables one to obtain (as opposed to produce) something; it is dependent on a relational process similar to the one described by Hamayon (1990, 2012) in her work among Siberian Buryat and Evenk hunters. For comparative insight on luck and fortune, see da Col (2012c).

<sup>20</sup> Ritual terminology refers to *gyāng* (prosperity) as a cognate to *kār-jī* (good fortune), which obviously comes from the Tibetan *gyang*. The whole ritual, as briefly described here, is very similar to the one performed by

someone passes away, the mourning family runs the risk of the ‘dead’ (*āshi*) carrying off the wealth of the household to the ‘Land of the dead’, and therefore during funerals a collective dance (called *gyāng tēn*, ‘holding prosperity’) is performed to exhort the ‘dead’ to leave taking only their offerings, leaving the remaining wealth to the living beings. During the dance, people keep a firm hold of the dough figurines representing wild animals, and corn ears and cobs representing a wealth of grain. Similar to the ritual performed after building a house, the prosperity is also fixed in the house by means of ritual aspersions of flour.

In these two examples, it is worth noting the equal importance of wild animals and grain as expressions of wealth and prosperity. Masters of game and mountain deities are closely related, both located in their respective landscape and categorised hierarchically—the vertical dimension is linked to increased power and fertility-bestowing ability. The first are found in many different places, each assuming responsibility for the wild animals of the small mountains in which they reside. Higher up the hierarchic (and vertical) scale rank the deities of the snow-capped mountains who dominate large areas where several masters of game are to be found. The two are often associated, and during rituals both are represented by a dough figurine of conical shape, a figuration of the mountain, placed at the centre of the previously mentioned animal figurines; and ritual flags are the typical offerings for both.

Mountain deities—such as Gyangmu Kvwakarpu—are also protective divinities and may be asked to look after people and defend them against other beings that may cause all kinds of calamities. The New Year ritual (*kraltshang*) used to be the most exemplary event with regards people’s relationship with these deities who would be asked to provide wealth and an abundance of cereals and game for the coming year. But since the ban on it during the Cultural Revolution, and after a short-lived revitalisation during the 1990s, it has now been abandoned. The accepted dereliction of the New Year ritual, although triggered by a political decision, seems to indicate a change in the way Drung people consider their subsistence activities and the means of accessing prosperity that are at their disposal.

Notwithstanding these recent changes, the benefits that everyone strives to achieve in their interactions with their environment, and the forces and entities that inhabit it, are related to good fortune (*kār-jī*) which provides an abundance of food needed for subsistence. Fertility, as I call it, is a key notion in the pragmatic orientation of many societies in this region (see Samuel 1993; McKhann, this issue), which ‘immanent economy of fortune and luck’ show strong concern for ‘the collection and safeguarding of volatile sources of prosperity’ (da Col 2012b, 75). Similarly, Wilkes (2010, 288–289) has shown that, among a mixed Nung and Tibetan community of the Upper Salween valley, livelihood activities are directly linked to concern about increasing the household’s ‘base’ or ‘wealth’, which overall refer to the ‘gradual accumulation of assets’ that ‘can be transformed into other forms of wealth’ (2010, 289). Interestingly, these activities that contribute to the household’s wealth are differentiated from cash-income generating activities, such as digging and selling caterpillar fungus (*cordyceps sinensis*), which is not a reliable ‘base’, nor a permanent household resource.

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Tibetans in Northwest Yunnan. For a stimulating discussion about *gyang* and other Tibetan fortune-related concepts, see da Col (2012b).

Fertility, as a generic concept, can be conceived of as a generative principle of the multiplication of goods, crops, animals, and children. Its distribution within the social and cosmic body refers to the cycle of life, alliance, and (re-)production. Fertility ultimately results from a generalised exchange of energetic principles involving a series of conversions that provide a gain in vitality that is necessary for the perpetuation of social life. All these principles of vitality and fertility are therefore among the reasons why people keep interacting with non-human beings that are either a threat to their fertility, or a means of increasing it. The efficacy of this ‘cosmopraxis’ (Schlemmer 2009, 106) depends largely on activating, through rituals and incantations, the unstable presence of these interlocutors. In this sense, Drung people not only (used to) subsist by hunting and cultivating in an environment they would accordingly objectify and perceive for utilitarian purposes; they engage with their environment which is inhabited by beings one can relate to, knowing that what happens to them can affect and be affected by what happens to people. Fertility, as a reality and a symbolic expression of the success of activities which aim to produce, or more accurately to extract or procure, consumable commodities, is not an easy thing to achieve, nor an inexhaustible gift of nature.

### **Relatedness and Indebtedness**

The above description of the Drung’s livelihood and mode of relating to non-human entities has only alluded to the last decades of political and social transformation that have undoubtedly greatly affected their lives. As I will attempt to show briefly, this changing social and economic environment brings to the fore the fact that people’s practices are not in keeping with a unique and exclusive scheme. In other words, Drung people seem to hold plural modes of relationship in their repertoire of transactions with non-human entities.

Since the Drung people have been integrated in the People’s Republic of China (1949), like every Chinese citizen, they have experienced the major changes introduced by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. During these periods, the political discourse on promoting economic development dominated, and to a large extent ‘superstitions’ (Ch. *mixin*) have been repressed. The new air of liberalisation has provided freedom to renew older beliefs and practices, yet in this very deprived area, development is still seen as a great necessity and the subject of much attention as well as important investments on the part of the provincial and local government. This is in addition to the fact that because the Dulong valley is part of a nature reserve, specific restriction policies concerning swidden cultivation, hunting, collecting, the use of wood and other natural resources have been implemented. All of this constitutes a sociological and economic environment in which the Drung people have to situate themselves, act and adapt.

The first priority has long been to resolve the ‘warm and full problem’ (Ch. *wen bao wenti*), so that regulations relating to environmental and biodiversity protection were only of the second order. Indeed, it is hard to convince locals to restrict certain kinds of activity such as hunting or collecting when they rely on them to a large extent for subsistence. There is

nowadays—especially since the Sloping Land Conversion Program—an increasing need to find a rational use for resources in order to diversify the economy and to develop a means of generating income from subsidiary activities. . Thus, the reason for often illegal use of natural resources such as extraction of natural resources like medicinal plants collected at high altitude in the mountains is definitely linked to the lack of economic opportunities, and can be seen as a form of silent protest.

Both the recent historical context and education have likely played an important role in a switch to pragmatic and interest-led practices of resource exploitation, so to speak. As a worldwide claim to be ‘children of Nature’, indigenous people appear to be the prime defenders of their natural environment as if they should be indiscriminately seen as the last guardians of the wisdom of nature protection. There is in fact evidence that people’s attitudes are more complex, ambivalent, and often more pragmatic, but also that value is not inscribed in ‘nature’ itself but in the relationships involved. The context where such kinds of relationships operate can differ, and people can alternatively dismiss so-called ‘superstitions’; they do not respect ‘nature’ in itself, the destruction of natural entities being acceptable when it serves human interests. The various modes of relationships with the environment that I have described should not be seen as mutually exclusive. For the purpose of analysis, however, I propose to describe the relationships more synthetically as being of four modes.

People often interact with spirits and other entities by valorising sharing or partaking, a basic value of social life in Drung society. This first kind of relationship could be called a ‘demand-share’ type. Under other circumstances, when engaging with spirits from whom one requests something in particular (e.g. wild animals), offerings need to be made to initiate the transaction. This second kind of relationship is thus characterised by exchange. However, other activities are not linked to the idea that humans should give something in return, and they constitute a third mode, typified by ‘predatory’ attitudes. In other words, practices reveal that several kinds of relationship and forms of transaction exist concurrently, comparable to those among humans, and that they differ greatly according to who we deal with: some spirits are to be kept at a distance; some are in a position of social proximity. As I mentioned above, this does not exclude practical choice behaviour that implies that nature and its resources are ‘out there’ to be either exploited or protected.

There is a fourth mode of relationships that relies on a different logic (and morality). It is well represented by the figure of a spirit (Tsheu-pvlàng): the story goes that he did not receive his share of meat during a sacrificial feast and ever since requires his due and preys on people’s good fortune. He appears as an everlasting dissatisfied figure, a spirit with whom any relationship is one of debt, a perfect example of a logic of precedent as opposed to one of reciprocity (Gros 2012b). Here debt appears as a prototypical form of relationship that prevails in both relations between individuals and groups, and between people and some non-human entities (see Gros 2007, 2010). We have previously seen another figure of debt, Gvmeū, the deity who is the original wife-giver, but also the source of vital principles and wealth. The vital principle is therefore a component that comes from an (affinal) exteriority constitutive of the dynamic of social reproduction: it has to be given and cannot be produced.

Along with good fortune, it is expressed as a relationship with the lack of something, what I have called the ‘missing share’ (Gros 2007, 2012a).

## **Conclusion**

Policies on environmental protection face an obstacle in terms of their own limited understanding of what the environment is made of, that is the epistemological problem of knowledge about nature which remains informed by our own cultural framework. The nature conservation rationale may have a tendency to ‘de-nature’ the natures of other people for whom there is no ‘nature’ to preserve or protect, but diverse entities with which to relate, fight or share. All these relationships are inseparable from moral values.

The four modalities of relating to the environment and non-human entities (demand-sharing, exchange, predation, and debt) are together co-constitutive of the socio-cosmic order and as such directly linked with the pragmatic considerations relevant to people’s subsistence and well-being. Under current circumstances environmental conservation policies and their impact on Drung people’s culture and livelihood can be seen as a threat to their right to pursue sustainable livelihoods, to maintain cultural continuity, and preserve their biocultural heritage (Wilkes and Shen 2007). However, such an approach creates two abstractions—‘culture’ and ‘right’ (see Strathern 2004, 94)—which do not fully translate the specificity of human-environment relatedness as a form of embeddedness, a way of living within the environment. I have shown that Drung people presuppose the existence of relationships between humans and non-humans that brings a relational significance to the landscape.

The four modes of relationships described in this article confront us with modalities of transactions that operate according to different logics and are therefore distinct from Sahlins’ (1972, 191ff) model of spheres of reciprocity. Graeber (2010, 67) has warned us about the rhetoric of reciprocity in interpreting forms of transactions, and has shown that several transactional logics and moral possibilities can be present at the same time in any society. The logic of nature conservation in the Dulong valley entails a decline in relations and an increase in predation: as ‘nature’ is further disconnected from people’s lives and subsistence, they do not interact with non-humans entities around them to the same extent they used to, given the decline of certain subsistence practices. This means that among the existing modalities of transaction and associated economic moralities, there is a change in which one becomes dominant under the current everyday circumstances.

The poverty of the Drung is officially and objectively defined according to national standards, and as they are looked upon as poor and needy, their livelihood is evaluated against an economic scale, which imposes a univocal understanding of their relationships to their environment. If modernity naturalises nature (naturalises the natural and generates a single nature), multiplicity progressively disappears. Nature becomes a heterotopia, a context that juxtaposes several incompatible spaces. Drung people, and they are probably not alone, seem to articulate different worlds.

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