

**Wadgalaji, Healing Thru Waste, Curative Heteropraxies in Uttara Kannada**, is part of a wider project on **The quest for healing and the ritual solutions** an exploratory project on emic epistemologies. Some problems, hypothesis and general questions outline the **conceptual scenario** from which the research takes off.

1. Is it possible to construct a coherent and comprehensive intelligible model of the mechanisms acting in the healing, effecting cure and immunisation or prevention?
2. Is it necessary another physics than the one which governs the materially dense macroscopic regions of everyday experience, a kind of microphysics of fluids where image would be the element serving as a release mechanism of the desired change, a kind of an "unknown attractor»?
3. Would the healing experience be possible because the sphere of belonging of the person is not closed, is not strictly restricted, taking place in an iconic space with imprecise and vague contours, half-open, eminently fluid and plastic, the permeability of which would favor the healing act?
4. Is the healing supposed to be a transfer of *karman*? Would there thus be a collective *karman* determining the epidemics, for example?

Infra a conceptual outline of the overall project where Wadgalaji fits in.

### 1. The subject: healing rituals

This research intends to study a state of things in which the borderline between the so-called medical practices and religious rituals with therapeutic function is not clearly drawn as yet- a state of things always observable in India today, whereas its Western equivalent has progressively disappeared since around the sixteenth century onwards.

Notwithstanding the nature of problems opened up by the healing in the Indian milieu is not radically different from those faced in Western milieu today. They bring to the fore the apparent contradiction between rationality and non-rationality of its mechanisms, because everything takes place in a world that is not within the reach of the tools with which we would like to dissect it.

Thus, the subject of this study, the healing ritual, is tainted with the greatest subjectivity as the inventory, classification and the description of what is called the internal conditions of «therapeutical» and «religious »experience» - for want of anything better- are to be tackled. Discredited outside religious circles, marked with irrationality, or tainted with subjectivity, they remain obscure, erratic, confused impressions, more or less uncontrollable and inaccessible to the verification and proof systems within the dominant epistemological frame. They resist the desire of making them becoming independent and autonomous beings - cut off from the milieu from where they emerge - reproducible at will *in vitro*. They still defy the cognitive ambition of the most audacious modern knowledges, by escaping their grip. Very likely, for their comprehension, they claim new anthropological and epistemological, regional, local, personal categories, for want of which they will always remain stamped with an impenetrable oddness enveloping and conserving them as lost, strayed, untransposable, in fact impossible objects to the extent in which they go beyond the limits drawn by a frame alien to them.

But the "somatopsychological" experience, which in the Indian context is an "eco-somatopsychological" experience, constitutes a privileged place where normally disjointed elements come to join. Being a vast place of remanence, confluence and reflux, it is in and through this global experience that the everyday intrapsychological and intersubjective capacities summoned for ailing and healing are

amplified and transmuted. Therefore, this research proposes to deal with those domains where is possible to act in an effective manner on certain phenomena without we knowing the reasons for this efficiency, nor understanding the mechanism at work.

## 2. The Domain

### 2.1. The ritual

Ceremony, individual or collective, sometimes solemn, sometimes ordinary, organised and accomplished by varied actors as per a set of rules in a determined context, having one or several specific goals, the ritual is a modifying gesture with varying efficacy.

Ritual is a word used to indicate relatively differentiated realities in time and in social groups. Today, the *puja* is the most spread practice of homage, deep acceptance and veneration - of hospitality (in the double meaning of *hospes*). But **ritual it is not a religion, and it may not even be religious**, in the sense as this term is usually understood.. It is a *mise-en-scène*, a practice, where come to converge astrology, ecology or moral, in the same way that anatomy, pharmacology, botany, drama, physiology (and these are only names we appose to things, when seen them from the outside, from the place where we are). By going beyond, and cutting across, varied knowledges, by making overlap even divergent series, by multiplying the entries and passages, the ritual represents itself in a linking effort for the manipulation of the whole set of that form the living human system in its moving milieu.

It conceals a knowledge for managing the visible life on its interaction with manifold invisible one, non-humans, gods, nature, objects, stars and planets, entities with which the exchange –actual or virtual- is permanent. The ritual, and its imagery, is the privileged domain where come to articulate worldly and transworldly networks, communicating actively and without constraints - even if not always, if not necessarily.

Now - beyond and along the ritual objects - the terrain of this study is a “I, me, self” plunged in a milieu, or flanked by a “binding structure”, with adhesions everywhere, experienced from within.

### 2.2. The Image

These practices and experiences are likely to show further that a world in itself does not exist, that a world is a world of explanations or a world of experience – which may or may not coincide. What makes them coincide is the image on the subtle level, and the object on the gross one, with which is constructed the meaning that determines an experience, bestowing it with a particular intensity or density.

In this way, as the image of the world is often the world itself (i. e., as it is perceived) the objects of the person are often the person herself or even her world. Also in the same way each image of the world is “worlding” (as Bachelard says – “mondificatrice”, worldmaker, creating it is working a cosmos), the objects of the person are “peopling” they ..... This double dimension is magnificently rendered by the notion of *māyā*.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the image of the world is a make believe, as some objects can be.

Here we arrive at the core where rituals and therapies, find their efficacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Concept well articulated by Indian philosophers, it has solved once for all the problem of what does or does not exist, of what is true or false, cause for strong ontological and hazardous epistemological concern in the West.

Producing effects, both corporal and transcorporal the imagination often triggers off interactions which have an almost iconic genesis, as is the case for example with mimesis, gift, suggestion or magic.<sup>2</sup>

**The healing experience is possible because the sphere of belonging of a person is neither strictly limited nor closed.** It is rather an iconic space – apparently solid- , with imprecise and blurred contours, which «soaks» in a fluid and plastic medium, whose permeability favours the interpenetration with other fields of individuation.

We call this structural framework "image", for the time being. We also call as "imagination" the capacity which differentiates itself sometimes as an instrument for shaping the world, sometimes as a means for experience of the world.

The iconicity of the experience of the world and the body appears to be entirely shouldered by the *pujari*, as much for the therapeutical act as for the ritual act, even playing the role of a key which permits them to circulate between the worlds that they have to cross.

### 2.3. The offerings: transitional objects

There are overlapping ontologies and layers of transitional bric-à-brac, as beings are what they are, but they are also something else, elsewhere in time and space. They can too be endowed with other beingness. As, for instance, the object of the ritual: generally all the participants (active or passive) they are what they are, innocent and flat, bare - a crow, a basket, a dog, etc. - and they are also, as well something else, they bring another world (of meaning?) with them, they are what Winnicott once called transitional objects. As images can be extremely powerful mental entities, in the same way objects can be, or become, extremely powerful material entities.

#### 3. Objectives :

1. To identify the images and objects - private and shared – conveyed for healing.
1. To identify actors and delineate their profiles
2. To place the role of image in the concerned knowledge and practices
3. To determine the elements of exposure to contamination - causes, places, instruments, procedures.
5. To make an inventory of the factors that provide the healing
  - a) To describe the mode of action of these factors – in network and isolation
6. To understand the role of the *karman* in the immunizing and preventing practices

#### 4. Topics to Elaborate

1. The world, the body, the *karman* and the person.
2. The theory of *karman* and the conditions for medical action: the transfer
3. The practices for prevention and the therapeutical course: the manipulation of images and objects
4. The devices and protocols for prevention and cure.
5. The negotiations with the invisible and the "nexus" of casualty
6. The negotiations with the goddess for therapeutical actions.
7. The arrangements of images: influence, suggestion, imagination, faith.

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<sup>2</sup> As the mimesis, often found in this research, seems to assume a different physics, a kind of "tele-physics" that would welcome all these phenomena where a *pathos* is conveyed, able to operate transfers of psychic energy from the imagined mental creations towards the objects (hence suggestion, *diksha*, *rasa*...)

8. The profile of the healing, the curable and the healer.

#### **4. Methodology**

For the intelligibility of the systems to be studied, this research is at the crossroads of philosophical and anthropological knowledges and it hopes to integrate their different approaches. Consequently, we are not in possession of a readymade method to be used straightaway – it is entirely to be composed, defined, and the strategies mentioned are only provisional tools which shall be specified in accordance with the unknown unforeseen factors of the field work and the part of the actors themselves.

This study leans on the multiplication of video-audio recording of ritual sessions and on the actors' oral, corporal, kinetic, proxemic language.

**The Observation**, being an important method of ethnographical work, is subjected here to the constraints imposed by the nature of a part of the subject on the one hand (experience) and on the other, by the calendar and the specificity of environment, the randomness of ritual itself, the access of an external observer to these practices that are operations on the world – worldings.

**And the language** (iconic or verbal) is thus the element on which all the research will lean as it is a commonly shared instrument for presenting an absence, being a kind of double of the objects. Verbal and iconic language can be the key giving access to the operations. They can be a *simile* placed at the interface of experience and language.

## RESUME

Wadgalaji, also known as Wadgalama, Mariware, Maili, is, up to now, an unknown goddess in the worldwide academic scholarship.

The goddess is thought to protect the villages from “infectious” diseases such as smallpox, and also seems invested with some other functions not entirely identified yet.

To request her intervention, people from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes make offerings with old, used, and extremely varied objects (that look like a pile of junk on first glance when seen from a distance), placed at the side of the road adjoining the border of the village. But, on taking a closer look, it is possible to see a rough *murti* that depicts the goddess

Periodically these objects are moved to the border of another village where they stay for an unknown period. This happens for every subsequent shift as well, where a special *puja* is done on the occasion of their movement across to the border of the next village. The *puja* is called “bidding farewell to Maili” (the contaminant), in Shimoga district.

The current research focuses on the temporality and geography of how Wadgalaji is relocated and repositioned vis-à-vis boundaries, periodicity, carriers, procession, puja, arrangements. On her overall functions and their range (with special incidence on the therapeutic ones), on the typology of the offers, of the worship, and of those making these offerings, on her “genealogy” and on the environment that provides her emergence.

The ethnographic data collected will put forward one of the numerous modes of endogeneous healing practice, highlighting the waning of (our fixed) religious, spiritual, psychological, therapeutical borders

To unveil the full amplitude and grounding of the Wadgalaji occurrence is bound to need an exceptionally long-term fieldwork, not only because of the scarcity and obscurity of direct available information, but also because of the haphazard periodicity of the displacements, where crucial moments of interaction between her and the devotees, are then “charged” with her *shakti*.

## WORK PLAN

This research will evolve through alternated **thin (descriptions)** and **thick (elaborations)** layers, departing from the question: if we explore the endogenous and exogenous mechanisms for cure, uncover the role of the image, ascertain the part of faith, suggestion, conviction, adhesion, devotion, reverence and compassion, would it be possible then to construct a model of coherent and comprehensive intelligibility of the healing ritual mechanisms?

### 1. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES :

1. To identify the milieus where Wadgalaji emerges (ecological, social, religious)
2. To follow offerers accompanying treatments during +/- 3 months.
3. To make the inventory of the events supposed to bestow the healing.
4. To map W's **trajectory** (between eventual starting point and arrival point) on Bhatkal, Honnavar, Kumta, Ankola, Karwar, Joida, Haliyal, Yellapura, Mungod, Sirsi and Siddapur

### 2. METHODOLOGY :

- a) Observation of ritual sessions (taken as live sources)

- b) Interviews to all the actors (patients, *pujaris*, devotees, pilgrims, etc.)
- c) Study of the environment of the ritual activities: ecological, social, religious audio and video material (photos, films and interviews) to be treated as epistemological units in order to back and build a visual narrative capable to prompt a kaleidoscope of the Wadgalaji world.

**NB:** Because imagery it's not a disembodied set of forms and shapes, it's embedded in language, the vernacular words will be kept, as far as possible, avoiding the homogenization of making them fit into our semantic universe.

## INCEPTIONS

On **representation** - Because things are probably not what they seem to be, we don't see them always as they are, frequently appearing in various manners and offering to our perception in divergent forms, to know them is, still today, and still more, to shape a mental construction. Then, because the facts of experience are not given, they are made, people chose knowingly to make them, or neutralize their conditioning.

On the **medium** - The medium in which these facts take place is made of matter but also of forces, forms and qualities, all involved in the fluidic exchange between several entities, environment, bodies and objects. The body, not being limited by the skin, extends further and elsewhere, finds adherences to everything surrounding it, continues in the darkness, shadow, dream, messengers, friends, animals, surrounding objects, gods, exposing the same recurrent model of Indian corporal transcorporality. These interactions, irrespective of their taking place with humans, gods, other beings (*bhûta*), stars, nature, food, objects, can be optimized, fixed, diverted. That is why the ritual, demonology, astrology, dietetics and many other knowledges converging for the healing, give a special attention to the points of contact and passage of all the substances in the presence of which the person risks getting affected on account of it, i.e., contaminated

## THICK LAYER – (healing afflictions)

Here we will face a state of things in which the borderline between therapeutic practices and religious rituals with therapeutic function is not clear (if it exists at all). Additionally, because some areas of knowledge are off limits, standing outside scientific knowledge as understood of now, it happens that therapeutic (ritual) knowledge is not always endowed with epistemological credentials, for untreatably not conforming with the supposed causal structure that binds a presumed cause with a presumed effect. Thus in India, the first basic assumption is that a disease (be it illness or ill) is a local catastrophe in the whole of the systemic structure of the body, of the world, of the person and of their interaction, triggered by the act (*karman*). It involves an extremely wide range of features, some of which on the apparent borders of ailing/healing mechanics through which the system is liable to be as disrupted as restored.

Ritual's *raison d'être*, providing a wide range of actions "dramatically" enacted, is to re-balance the system, to re-create well-being. It has nothing of transcendent, it deals and relates with the divine entities as with humans, just with increased respect, concern, veneration, but the pattern is the same. Deities are entities subject to the same moods and urges. They are dependent on the nourishment that humans bring to to grow them in power, and to share it. In the same way is possible to empower people it is possible to empower other entities, gods, trees, animals, objects. Offerings are one of the many strategies perfected In India for that.