

CHICKENSHIT & ASH - A VISIT TO PARADISE¹

A Film about the encounter of Two Tamang Men with "the Western World"

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Synopsis

Chayarsaba is a remote Tamang village in the middle hills of Nepal. It can be reached only by a two day walk, has no electricity, no machines and no modern means of communication. It is a village in which for centuries an archaic tradition influenced by the great traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism has lived on, and where changes resulting from the impact of western civilization are very recent. To live in this village means undertaking hard physical work in order to have enough to eat and to serve the ancestors and the gods who guarantee life and protection from illness and natural disaster. The people of this Himalayan village have recently started to long to be in another world, where in their imagination money brings happiness and machines relief from work.

The shaman and the headman of Chayarsaba visit the other world in Vienna, where they encounter this other world. For them this Austrian village seems like a kind of paradise, a place where sky and earth have no ending, where everything is shining as in a mirror, where they can watch people eat in abundance, sit or stroll around and where all work is done by machines. But they are also puzzled by where the food comes from, since they see no fields.

They are intrigued by the god hanging on a cross, and confused by the perfectly reproduced statues of humans in the shop windows which wear clothes but do not breath. They are surprised by the overweight people who use machines to try to get rid of their fat. They are shattered to find that many elderly parents are abandoned and entrusted to the care of others.

Through the words of the people of Chayarsaba we get to know part of their life in the mountains of Nepal, and through the eyes of the shaman and the headman we experience our western industrialized world from a new perspective - a Tamang perspective.

Documentation Process

Michael Oppitz in the foreword of his book *Kunst der Genauigkeit*² regarding his work on the film *Schamanen im Blinden Land* noted the difficulty of bringing together a foreign world and a familiar one, or communicating experiences made by one side to the other. During my lengthy stay as anthropologist in the village Chayarsaba, where I had gone to study Tamang social structure and religious tradition³, I also had the experience of the encounter with a foreign world very different from my own. I was confronted with the limits of comprehension - for example when dealing with supernatural phenomena which for the Tamang are real and essential - and with the difficulty of expressing in words my observations or my experience of their world. I also realized that I often compared 'them' to 'us', and they, through my presence, showed a great curiosity about 'us'. So I thought that reversing the situation might provide an interesting experience for both sides which might also yield new information concerning their *Weltbild*. In practice my idea was to arrange an encounter for some Tamang with our industrialized world to let them try to understand and explain 'us'. This would be an experimental attempt to bridge two different worlds - and the film could be an adequate



means in which to attempt this.

Together with the cameraman Peter Freiss I developed a concept for a documentary film on the confrontation of the archaic world of the Tamang with the world of the industrialized west, as seen from the perspective of the Tamang.

In the film the (mainly western) audience should first be introduced to the culture and way of life of the Tamang of Chayarsaba. We did not want to create a romantic picture of a life close to nature in a beautiful natural environment, nor did we intend to explain their culture through an anthropological approach. Our aim was to show a realistic picture of the arduous life of the people of Chayarsaba, how they view and experience it and how they explain their own historical and religious background. Afterwards two Tamang were to visit Vienna and experience the life of a central European city. We wanted to show how they perceived and explained what they encountered.

From a methodological viewpoint this film comes close to using what David Macdougall described as the guidelines of "participatory cinema" and which lies beyond the mere observational in ethnographic filmmaking. "Here the filmmaker acknowledges his entry upon the world of his subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film their own culture. (...) By entering actively into the world of his subjects, he can provoke a greater flow of information about them. By giving them access to the film, he makes possible the correction, additions, and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit. Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which the subjects perceive the world."⁴

We had planned a shooting time of eight weeks in Nepal and four weeks in Austria. We had to remain flexible and to collect together with the people of Chayarsaba as much material as possible to choose from for the editing. The shooting schedule was kept fairly open to allow for spontaneous reactions to unforeseen situations. The main outline was kept simple and mainly concerned a framework which would illustrate the themes dealt with in the film. A large part of the film material consisted of detailed interviews in front of the camera with people in Chayarsaba and with the two protagonists during their journey in the west. Every interview, every discussion, and all remarks were translated word by word. We tried to stay as close as possible to their way of expressing themselves. The original idea was to have subtitles in the film so as not to impose a foreign voice on people, but in the final editing we realized that the translations for the subtitles had to be short and could only be basic. Thus, in order not to lose their language we chose to use narration.

The themes chosen for this film were those which prevail in everyday life of all people in all cultures, such as how to get food to eat, how to deal with age and illness, what religion is based on, and what the significance of birth and death is. The two Tamang who traveled to Austria were intended to have the opportunity to

locate their new experiences in relation to their lives in Nepal.

In the film we see the people in Chayarsaba make their living as farmers using traditional agricultural techniques. Different men and women of the village talk about their personal fears and dreams, and about their own life histories. The Buddhist priest explains a ritual, a sick woman speaks about the reason for her illness and the shaman gives an account of his own history and function as a healer. One of the main characteristics of the situation of the people of Chayarsaba is the absence of many of the men. They do not possess enough fields for their subsistence and many of the men have to work as labourers in India. This means for most of the women that they have to cope alone with the bringing up of the children and with the agricultural work. The men coming back from India have brought back descriptions of an ideal 'developed' world with an easier life. The beginnings of a rupture with the traditional life can be observed, mainly among the young men and women who, for example, no longer wish to continue with the traditional marriage system of bilateral cross-cousin marriage, where the parents choose the marriage partners to maintain old marriage alliances. Young mothers wish for their own children a different future than their own and at the same time fear that their husbands will not return home from India.

Finally two Tamang visit the idealized world, in this case the city of Vienna.

In Vienna many sites were chosen beforehand for filming in accordance with the themes and to allow a wide spectrum of views of the industrialized way of life (and also due to the difficulties in obtaining the necessary film permits). But we intended to stay flexible and to adjust to the spontaneous wishes of the two Tamang visitors. However the two men from Chayarsaba in Austria never expressed any wish or preference as to what they would like to see. And they never openly expressed any criticism of us or of the intense program we had prepared. In fact they remained very passive and behaved as Tamang guests should behave: doing what they are requested to do and adjusting to the life of their host. They took the work on the film very seriously and showed great patience during hours of discussions in front of the camera when they tried to explain and to answer to our many questions.

The two protagonists selected for the travel to Austria were the two official representatives of the village: the shaman (bonpo) who also is the priest of the fertility-cults (dhami) and the headman (adakche) of the village. According to our main criterion of selection they had to be deeply rooted in their village life. The shaman (62 years old) represented the elder generation rooted in the old tradition, worried about the maintenance of the old structures and the preservation of the orally transmitted knowledge. The headman, fifteen years younger, had worked for many years in India and had great respect for western education and technical development. Even though he was well acquainted with the ancient tradi-

tions, he considered them to be "backward".

In Austria the shaman proved to be a natural actor, who loved to perform in front of the camera. The headman sometimes felt ashamed about the behavior of his companion which was not always appropriate, such as spitting openly or squatting in the street. The shaman as a result of his free and easy behaviour was often the centre of attention; the headman could not understand the special sympathy this evoked in us and sometimes became slightly jealous.

Their statements given during their trip to Austria clearly reflected their way of thinking and often expressed confusion. The mayor endeavoured to give good explanations, the shaman more often expressed emotions and sometimes with his humour made fun of us.

Before filming, we thought we would have to be very cautious not to transform the two Tamang who travelled to Austria into something exotic and ridiculous. The practice showed that even though they were constantly being filmed they never lost their self-esteem and stayed surprisingly self-confident. The presence of the camera seemed as if it was very natural to them. The statements they made looked genuine, and at times their comments were extremely accurate. At the end of the stay in Vienna we asked them their opinion of our constant practice of questioning and interviewing them during the entire film process. Their answer was clear and simple: "It is good to ask, there are many questions. You want to know what we think about the things which you have not understood, therefore you have to ask. I too don't understand everything, I also have to ask."

Notes :

1 The present film was financed by the Austrian Film Fund, the Austrian Television (ORF) and Abteilung Kultur Niederösterreich. The shooting took place from January to April 1997, the editing of the film was completed in April 1998. The German title of the film is: "Huehnerdreck & Asche - ein Besuch im Paradies."

2 M. Oppitz (1989), *Kunst der Genauigkeit*. Trickster Verlag, München, p. 7.

3 The field research to write the PhD Thesis was undertaken in Chayarsaba, district Dolakha (Nepal), from 1986-87: "Meme Khor - Kreis der Ahnen. Gesellschaft und soziale Reproduktion der Tamang von Chayarsaba", Unpublished thesis, 1992, Vienna.

4 See D. Macdougall, 1975, "Beyond Observational Cinema", in Paul Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, Mouton, The Hague, Paris, pp. 109 - 124.