

Mo: “master/sacrificial animal”
(Yi-Sani shamanistic writing, China).



Transsubstantiation between
the Masters of psalmody (*bimos*) and their sacrificial victims (*mo*)

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The notion of “*mo*” comes from the secret language and writing of Yi-Sani shamans living in Southwestern China (Yunnan). The term is used to refer to those ritualists themselves: *bi-mos* (Masters of psalmody), as well as to the animals the latter sacrifice to their gods: *mos*. I propose to address the transsubstantial (*trans-substantia*) process that occurs between these two “*mos*” during rituals. I will try to explain how such a relation is established and question to what extent it could be linked to the notion of mobility, discussed here from ritual perspectives. To do so, I will make a broad overview of the sacrificial framework of the Masters of psalmody by following every stage of the *bimo* sacrifice (my presentation will be based on ethnographic data collected in the field from 1999 to 2017).

Firstly, we will see that the writing characters the *bimos* write as disciples, then chant as masters, are considered to be the very blood (and the quintessence of power) that passes through their ritual lineage. The writings *se* are indeed considered to be consubstantial with the body of the shaman *bimo*. And these *se* (writing-blood) are connected to the breath of the shaman: *sè*. Secondly, I will stress that the phoneme *se* is ubiquitous in ritual manuscripts: pronounced with different tones, it refers to “writing-blood”, “spirit”, or else “sap/arboreal blood” used to build the altar. Tonal distinctions of the phoneme *se*, which are clearly distinguished when a text is read outside a sacrificial event, when it is not chanted, are not significant when they are psalmodied. This vocal and graphic multi-equivocity of *se* produces a form of continuity in discontinuity in the sacrificial context. It is the multi-facets *se* that enable humans to contact non humans. How does this process proceed? The aim of the third and fourth points, devoted to bloody sacrifice, will be to clarify such ritual perspectives: the Master of psalmody (*bimo*) explicitly states that through its blood, *se*, and its breath, *sè*, the sacrificial victim (*mo*) takes the message contained in the psalmody that he has to communicate to the spirits, *se*. It is precisely its essence, *la*, that “speaks” under the influence of its vital force *yi*. Yet, shamanic psalmody is based on the voicing of written characters, also named *se* and linked to the shaman’s blood. The vital substances of the animal carry what is prescribed by writings which are chanted. The altar, made of sap-blood, *se*, plays an important

role in this process. The transsubstantiation necessary for transforming the writings into paroles addressed to the spirits takes place from the body of the shaman to the body of the animal with the help of the altar's arboreal-cosmic body. In other terms, human speech, *bé*, is transmitted to the spirits through psalmody, *bi*, and this psalmody becomes speech, *bé*, thanks to the transsubstantial process allowing humans, trees, animals and spirits to interact. This whole process is based on the different forms taken by the *se*. The aim of the ritual is to make human speech flow forth, supported by the pure essence, into the world of the spirits with the help of a vocal script and sacrifice. But the sacrificial animal possesses this speech. It acquires it by being immolated on the altar made of arboreal *se* which are analogical to the body of the animal and refer to the blood of tree species. Here one thinks in terms of flux, of passing vital substances that lead to transformations as well as to interrelations between differential bodies.

Full of *yi* and of *la*, animal speech is all the more particular as it is based on a close corporeal link between the shaman and the animal which are two forms of *mo*. Indeed, as previously underlined, the immolated animal is called *mo* in the secret shaman language, a term that has to be written by using the same script as the second phoneme used to designate the shamans *bimo*. Yet if ritual texts reveal a corporeal relationship between the sacrificial animal and the altar on the one hand, between the shaman and this animal through the substance *se* (blood) linked to breath (*sè*) on the other hand, the characters of these two emblematic ritual components further underline the consubstantiality that unites them. In this sense, the animal would be the shaman minus the *bi*: the *mo* is the *bimo* minus psalmody plus sacrificial speech.

Bimo sacrifice differs from the Maussian scheme for which a connection is established between the sacrificer and the recipient thanks to the sacrificer *and* the sacrificial victim, both of them being well separated entities. It also differs from the Amazonian shamanism for which the shaman is at the same time the religious officiant and the vehicle of the sacrifice; Viveiros de Castro speaks about a "transversal shamanism" (2009). The figure of the *bimo* constitutes so to say an "in between": In him is also realized, as written by Viveiros de Castro, the "deficit of contiguity" [déficit de contiguïté] (2009: 123) capable of linking human beings and non human beings. The *bimo* sacrifice establishes a consubstantial and transsubstantial link between shamanic, animal and vegetal bodies. The sacrificial animal is the *bimo* by *trans-corporation*. The shaman does not therefore adopt the posture of the cannibalized but that of the *trans-cannibalized*. The sacrificer thus becomes the "cannibal" of the shaman – trans-sacrificed – through the *se*.