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The Bronze Sandal, or a Defense of Cosmic Refusal

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According to a popular legend, the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles ended his life by hurling himself into the volcano of Mount Etna. Story goes, the motive behind this ostentatious suicide was to achieve a disappearing trick of sorts – viz., his corpse having merged with lava, without witness or body to be found, Empedocles would prove himself a god. Such was consistent with his cosmography, wherein there can never be anything new issued in a universe where all elements are bound to be composed, decomposed, and recomposed from each other. So, everything that was once fire to fire returned. Except, strangely, for one of Empedocles' bronze sandals, which the volcano spat out. The biographer Diogenes Laërtius – whose book *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* seems to be the first entextualization of this myth – provides a hint for why a bronze sandal, of all things, might betray Empedocles' hubris:

[F]rom abundant means [Empedocles] bestowed dowries upon many of the maidens of the city who had no dowry. No doubt it was the same means that enabled him to don a purple robe and over it a golden girdle ... and again slippers of bronze and a Delphic laurel-wreath ... In such sort would he appear in public; when the citizens met him, they recognized in this demeanor the stamp, as it were, of royalty.¹

In other words, the volcano – being a god – could have refused Empedocles' hubris and attempted deception on any grounds (including a natural law that might compete with or encompass Empedocles' cosmologies), but the sign it ultimately rejected was nothing more than an aristocratic appurtenance. The spat-out sandal – perhaps in sardonic irony, perhaps as a warning – serves, at minimum, to convey what Bernard Bate has designated elsewhere as “the limits of apotheosis.”² The volcano seems to be communicating something about *refusing* enactments of sovereignty. For me, this begs a serious question for political theology: what say do the gods or other metahuman (superhuman? nonhuman?) agents actually have in human pretenses to sovereign authority?

Empedocles' sandal illuminates allegorically a gesture very much at play among the religion-politics continuum in contemporary South and Southeast Asia: that of *cosmic refusal*. The idea, which is archaic, is basically that the cosmos, or the world if you like, has agencies that have no motive or reason to conform to human attempts to

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¹Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, Bk. VIII.73.

²Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*, 136–44.

represent, transcend, control, or even pragmatically maneuver them. Indeed, sometimes they outright *reject* any such attempts. Recently, Amitav Ghosh has located forms of cosmic refusal in Asian (notably subaltern) countercurrents to the deranged suppression of the “agency of nonhumans” over the last two centuries of global modernity.³ Ghosh’s fish to fry is our contemporary crisis of global climate change and the dead zones in the bourgeois literary imagination that have failed to adequately address it. In generosity to Ghosh’s argument, I think we can transfer this dilemma of cosmic derangement to the fishy climes of European political theory. And this might help us specify why a heuristic of “cosmic refusal” is very much needed if we are to find any use for thinking about political theology in Asian contexts today.

Take Carl Schmitt. Among the many things that Nazi could not see, one rather anti-ethnographic premise that he shares with thinkers much more palatable to the Left, is that there is nothing *above or beyond* the fiat of the sovereign that can ground its authority. For example, Jacques Lacan’s position of *Il n’y pas l’Autre de l’Autre* (“There is no Other of the Other”) – for which we might find resonances in Walter Benjamin, Max Weber, and Jacques Derrida – concedes that there can never be any *guarantee* of the Law that could justify its *raison d’être*, except its own arbitrary force or violence.⁴ Similarly, for Schmitt, while secular sovereignty might conceal its theological origins, it reveals its theological power in moments of fiat. That is to say, it *becomes real* only when it makes a miraculous exception to convention, beneath which is not a grounding but a threat: *jus belli*. As I see it, the derangement here – a kind of “unbridled authoritarianism” in Lacan’s terms – is in the assumption that humans cannot adequately challenge the Law or the violent fiat of the Sovereign (whether human, divine, or both) on principles of cosmic encompassment *beyond sovereignty*. For there are indeed cosmic Others to the Other, exceptions to the sovereign exception. We can cite no better authority here than the *Rig Veda*:

You deep thinkers, ask yourselves in your own hearts, what base did [the All-Maker] stand on when he set up the worlds? ... That which is beyond the sky and beyond this earth, beyond the gods and the Asuras – what was that first embryo that the waters received, where all the gods together saw it?⁵

My question for political theology is thus: when an agency “beyond sovereignty” (however relatively conceived) is recognized, what difference does its “No!” make?

Cosmic refusal, as I have defined it here, plays a major role in the spaces where religion and politics are fused in South and Southeast Asian lifeworlds. The gesture often stands in opposition to human pretenses to sovereignty and its states of exception or ideological concealment. One can find it in historical ethnographies of state systems where political power services the re-presentation of higher cosmic orders,⁶ in prophetic/millenarian anti-colonial movements and rebel religions,⁷ in tensions between ideal cosmological

³Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 65.

⁴Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Book VI*, 353.

⁵Doniger, *The Rig Veda*, 40–1.

⁶Geertz, *Negara*, 13.

⁷Banerjee, *The Mortal God*, Chapters 4 and 5; Longkumer, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging*; Wouters, *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency*.

models and the structure of contemporary polities,⁸ in spaces of justice where jinns are witness to “the veracity of other times, of other modes of beings ... against the magical amnesia of the state,”⁹ and in contexts where – the ethnographer’s disavowal notwithstanding – metahuman agents play a major role in subverting chiefly or aristocratic modes of political organization.¹⁰ Cosmic refusal is not a particularly Asian phenomenon, but it does have an ongoing stickiness in Asian lifeworlds where, for example, the identification of kings (or other puny humans) with gods or other metahumans becomes stretched “to a snapping point.”¹¹ It thus figures especially into subaltern politics. When reading Ranajit Guha on the peasant insurrections in colonial India, it is crystal clear that the Santal *hool*, for example, was way more than a religiously soaked uprising of credulous bumpkins. Rather, the ethos and eidos of peasant insurgents were subordinated to not only divine but also super-divine or *cosmic* wills and forces that, in theory, impinge equally on the deities.¹² Even failures in the insurrection are understood to be a result of ritual failures and incon- tinences, refused by a force Other to the colonial Other.¹³

The subaltern element is crucial here, for bearing witness to a cosmic refusal is an excellent weapon of the weak. (Is “weapon” even the correct term? Perhaps the metaphor confirms an ideological compulsion to think of resistance to sovereignty in terms of *jus belli*.) By appealing to higher agencies and encompassing orders in the cosmic hierarchy, a sort of perspectival shift ensues. This shift is not merely a matter of what Marshall Sahlins,¹⁴ in his reworking of a concept by Gregory Bateson, once called “transcendent schismogenesis” – i.e., the “one-upmanship” of appealing to a shared higher power in order to outclass an oppressive rival. Rather it is that in adopting the superordinate perspective of an agency that outranks all other ranking systems, the proximal power (say, of a king or a state ... or even some gods/deities) now appears equal to the lowest ranks of society before the highest of powers (or laws). In other words, something like radical equality becomes conceivable and serviceable the more distal the cosmic deixis.¹⁵

All this has the air of theoretical abstraction, so allow me to conclude with an ethnographic example to bring the point home. In the early days of my ethnographic research in Mayong – a minor polity in Central Assam – I became gravely ill. It was flooding season, so I had no easy access to medical facilities. Although I tried to conceal my sickness and wait it out, the subterfuge was to no avail. Children in the compound where I lived became similarly ill in due course, as did other family members and neighbors. As an anomalous (and unrestricted) agent in their ordinary way of life, villagers began to become suspicious. I was eyeballed every time I walked out of my compound – and this was *after* they became used to having a White man in their midst. As I later came to find out, there was an uptick in sightings of jungle cats (*bagh*, most likely leopards) in the village; and there was at least one sighting of a rare black panther (*kola bagh*),

⁸Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, Chapter 20.

⁹Taneja, *Jinnealogy*, 54.

¹⁰Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 172–3, 200.

¹¹Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 182; Banerjee, *The Mortal God*; Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*; Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 203, 212.

¹²Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” 78 *et passim*.

¹³*Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴Sahlins, “The Conflicts of the Faculty,” 1014.

¹⁵Cf. Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 12.

which was seen circling the area near my cabin at the edge of the compound. One morning, I and the family I lived with awoke to a courtyard littered with the feathers and blood of chickens and ducks. Neighbors soon became sick. More domesticated fowl were being slaughtered in the dead of night. The flooding was not subsiding. In sum, life was becoming miserable, and all eyes were on me.

Some of the villagers worried that there might be nefarious forces at play. A small *raij mel* (a people's assembly) was called to address the situation by means of popular reckoning.¹⁶ During the meeting, a big man (*dangor manuh*) claimed that I might be in cahoots with a sorcerer given that I asked such intimate questions about kinship, money, politics, and other things that might expose a family to witchcraft. [In a more relational-cosmic register: I received, but I had yet to give.] He pointed out that he had seen my field notebooks and surmised that the kinship diagrams I had drawn looked suspiciously like black magic. The ritual chief in attendance quickly rejected the accusation (to my relief) on grounds of my own stupidity (!). He ordered that the matter should be taken to the oracle (*Ai*) rather than the king's court. In Mayong, the oracle is a living receptacle for the mother goddess who lives in the forested hills and claims ownership over the entire kingdom. Everyone who lives there are "guests" in her eyes, including the senior king (*bor roja*). The oracle came to the assembly and after an hour or so of ritual preparation, she went into a trance and only uttered one sentence: "He bathed in the stream." The assembly then adjourned on the chief's request that they should meet again in a week if the situation did not improve.

In the meantime, a close friend of mine came to me and said we should visit a sorcerer to see what he might make of the situation. I agreed and, in the dead of night, we visited the sorcerer in his candlelit hut. He tossed cowrie shells on the dirt floor, picked them up and tossed them again. He retreated into meditation, trance, and mantra recitation. When he finally came to, he pointed to each of the cowries on the ground and said: "This is you, this is the stream, this is the Mother (goddess) ... you disobeyed the rule and now you must pay the penalty." Long story short, my friend took this bit of information to the chief who agreed that the diagnosis was clear: I, unwittingly, had bathed in the sacred pool of the goddess at a time that is forbidden (for it was the time when the goddess herself takes a bath). Hearing all of this I immediately conceded to guilt, for I did go to the sacred pool (a hill-born stream, or *nijora*) to bathe when no one else was around, but I had no idea that there was a taboo on the particular times of when I could do so. I defensively countered that I was unaware of any prohibition, but the chief said "It is written in stone near the pool. How could you not see it?" I later walked to the pool and looked around, and eventually my eyes caught a stamp of graffiti on a rock face that read "Forbidden from 1 pm to 2 pm." I then asked the chief: "Is this schedule the Mother's rule or yours?" He responded, "The bathing times are determined by the heavens, not by the Mother, me, or anyone else."

In the end, my punishment cost me the equivalent of \$100 USD as I had to sponsor a sacrifice to appease the goddess and, it would seem, right an error in the cosmic book-keeping. The rites of atonement were held in the goddess temple (adjacent to the sacred pool). The oracle came and went into possession. I was still sick and somewhat delirious at this point, but when it was over everyone in attendance stood up, took

¹⁶Dowdy, "What is a *Raij*?" 55–81.

their shares of the consecrated offerings, and the oracle blessed me by rubbing her hands on my face. Later that day, I asked my friend (the one who took me to the sorcerer) if the rite was successful. He said, “Yes, of course! The Mother accepted your apology. Now you are a real Mayongian.” [The implication was not that I disobeyed her rule, but that I was in the presence of her nakedness.] I didn’t know it at the time as I was so annoyed about having to deplete my cash reserves for a ritual, but this was the perspectival moment when the villagers became willing to accept me as an equal. In retrospect, it was from that day forward that I became calm and comfortable enough to live like Mayongians do. I began chewing betel nut, eating and bathing at the right times, talking in their slang, working in the paddy fields, and taking up the rhythm of their lives as a guest of the goddess ... an agent who also observes an even higher order of things. The goddess’ cosmic refusal of my hubris (for it was *not* mere inattentiveness) was doubly refused by the heavens, but it eventually brought me into sync with the people I was going to live with for the next couple years. As it turned out, a few days following my atonement ritual the floodwaters receded. The big cats returned to the forest. Villagers’ health returned. And so did mine.

On the topic of “political theology in Asia,” I write reluctantly. I am not comfortable with any signifiers in that locution. And I am reminded of Aristotle’s caution that we distinguish between arguments from principles and arguments toward principles. Anthropologically (and psychoanalytically), I treat “cosmic refusal” as an established ethnographic, intrapsychic, and historical principle to argue *from* – because if we look carefully, we can find it in any cultural, political, religious, or – dare I say – ontological situation. And I have the hunch that such empirically evident refusals also serve as repudiations of categorical notions of politics and religion and the senseless boundary drawn between both (however theorized). But when I reflect on the current moment of academic theorizing, when what is deemed political seems to be the only reification – the only ontological ground – from which we can or are supposed to argue from, I can’t help but feel like we have increasingly foreclosed “the political” as the principle we must argue *towards*. What, after all, is a projected bronze sandal but a challenge to our sense that “the political” could ever be so seamlessly and arrogantly defined outright?

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