

What force moves migrations of multitudes across the vastness of deserts and the highest of mountains? What have those who bang their foreheads against the ground and those who lift their gaze skywards in common? Why some shaved-bald as peeled almonds, others hirsute, with hair and long beards rolled into exorbitant turbans? Who inhabits the limbs of flagellants, who beneath the skin covered in ashes or intricate tattoos, who beneath the masks, who behind the veil? Do ecstasy, trance, contemplation, or meditation, reveal the unutterable perception of death, or the core of a physical experience?

For eight years, through raw, direct experience, without encyclopaedic intentions, I followed the course of a photographic project based on a personal quest: "The Gift".

At the Origins of Belief, in the earliest Sacred Texts, as in the pagan ancestral oral tradition, a pattern of resonances emerges: suspended in universal space-time, a labyrinth of paths, in a relentless quest for unison between individual outer identity and the subconscious inner-self.

Like language, Belief marks the history of humankind: language and writing recount the outer history, related to knowledge and exchange between human beings. Beliefs trace the innermost history of individuals in their personal relation to the unknown: Mystery, the Sacred, the ancestral past, the intangible future, the cycles of Nature, the Elements, the notion of Time, the dimension of Space, ultimately, the very meaning of existence.

Footprints of different paths overlay the wake of the word *gift*. In its multiple semantic declinations, *gift* is one of the earliest words of human language. In its transitive quality, it embodies two meanings: *to offer/give* and *to receive*, or even *to take*. Yet the eternal question is: to give or to receive "what"? Physical finiteness seems inextricably entwined with the manifestation of Mystery. Human life received as *gift*, as *grace* and offered as *tribute*, *sacrifice*, or *consecration*... These two visions, have endorsed multiple interpretations from one civilisation to another, over the course of time. Inevitably, at the heart of all questioning, every ritual is marked by the corporeal dimension of the human condition. Codified in the gesture, disciplined, repressed, hidden, mortified, purified, honoured, stripped, decorated, possessed, liberated... the body – specifically "flesh" as substance and the human "figure", as paradigm and representation of the individual – is the outer evidence, the "carrier" of the spiritual dimension, the messenger between life and death. Perhaps indeed, *if the soul is shadow, the body is shadow's shadow*.

Life is the Gift and inseparable from it, is death. Promised hope of a life beyond life, of other lives after one's own, it comes full circle: life received, grace which gives, regenerating life anew, as soon returned.

THE GIFT SUBJECTS

2000 Ethiopia: Lalibela, *Timkat*, the Orthodox-Coptic celebrations of the annual collective baptism; Poland: The Monastic communities and Catholic Seminars in Krakow; Philippines: Pampanga San Pedro Cutud, Easter rituals of purification through bodily mortification; Haiti: Saut d'Eau and Plaine du Nord, Voodoo rituals.

2001 India: Source of river Ganges, Gomukh Garwal Himalayas; Sagar Island, the celebration of *Sagar Mela* - the annual pilgrimage to the Ganges Delta, Gulf of Bengal; the holy city of Varanasi, the cult of the dead and the holy Indian wrestle, *Kusti*; Allahabad, the Hindu pilgrimage, *Maha Kumbh Mela*.

- 2002 Himalayas: Tibet, Mount Kailash pilgrimage, Darchen, the *Saga Dawa Festival* (day of the Buddha) celebration; Zanskar and Ladakh, monastic life in Big Vehicle - *Mahayana* - Buddhism.

- 2003 Myanmar. The "Small Vehicle", *Theravada*, Buddhism: *Kiaik-hti-yo*, the Golden Rock; the *Shin-Byu* initiation of children; the Lotus Position *Padmāsana* meditation. Thailand. The "Tiger Temple" *Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yannasampanno*; the "Golden Horse" monastery, *Wat Maa Tong*; and the "Tattoo Temple" *Wat Maa Tong*. Cambodia. Angkor Wat: the Temple of the City and the Temple of Ta Prohm.

2004 Africa and Oceania: initiation and fertility rituals: Southern Sudan; Northern Kenya, Turkana; Southern Ethiopia, South Omo river valley tribes and *Surma* tribe, harvest and fertility rituals; Southern Pacific, Vanuatu, Pentecost Island the *Nangol* rituals and rituals of fertility and Ambrym Island. Turkey: the *Sema* ritual, of Sufi whirling dervishes *Mevlevi*. Japan. The Shinto ritual in the practices of Sumo wrestling.

2005 Africa: The Holy town of Harar; in North Ethiopia, Axum; Geech Abyss; Tigray women traditional tattooing rituals. Easter Island, the *Moai* and the "Birdman Cult". Southern Thailand: the *Jja Chai*, the extreme piercing "Purification Chinese Festival"-. Indonesia. *Istiqlal* Mosque in Jakarta: *Junma*, Friday Midday Pray. Buddhist Sanctuary of Borobudur.

2006 Peru. *Qoyllour-Ritti* annual pilgrimage Ausangate range. Shamanic rituals at the sacred *Huarinas* lakes. Brazil, Salvador Bay of all Saints, *Candomblé* rituals in the Afro-Brazilian cult of the *Orixas* and the celebration dedicated to *Yemanjá*. Japan: Yamagata sacred mountains *Haguro San*, *Yuduno San*, *Gas San*; Yamabushi celebration *Tagkii Ghioō* ritual in the Shintoist *Shugendo* tradition. Kyoto: the *Kare Sansui* holy Zen gardens.

2007 Israel: Jerusalem: Jewish Cemetery - Mount of Olives; the Western Wall; *Purim* in Mea Sharim; Holy Sepulchre; the Mosques Esplanade - *Al Haram al-Qudsi al-Sharif* (the Noble Sanctuary) and Russian Orthodox Monastery *Am Karen-Gorny*. Meron: -*Lag Baomer* celebration at Shimon Bar Yochai Holy Tomb. The Judean desert of Jericho. Jordan: the Nabatean Necropolis of Petra. Brazil - Mato Grosso, Alto Xingu, Aldeia Kuikuro: *N'dourè* ritual of sacred dances and body painting - *Jenipap* and *Uruku*, scarifications rituals and intra-tribal ritual of sacred flutes *Taqwara*.

2008 Spain: Navarra, Catholic Cross-bearers annual pilgrimage and ritual in commemoration of the Trinity. Uzbekistan: rituals of Islamic funeral: Qoq'om Firgana Valley; circumcisions and celebrations of Holy Friday prayer *Djhuma* and the Medrassas of the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

Russia: Orthodox monastery of Tikhvine and celebration of Saint Anthony Dimsky's pilgrimage at Dimskoe lake.

China: mandala ritual - *Tong Chong* at the Buddhist monastery of Langmusi, Sichuan/Gansu province;
of Holy Friday prayer *Djhuma* at the mosque - Dong Dasi Qingzhensi - Tongxin, Wuzhong province;
Kung Fu and *Thai Qi/Chi* practices in the Wudang mountains, Hubei province.