

## The Sarna: a case study in natural religion

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Whatever one might have against the Christian missionaries, one cannot deny their enormous energy in mapping the world's religious landscape, not just by processing secondhand data in their armchairs, but by collecting facts first-hand at the price of great discomfort and sometimes at the risk of their lives. At a later stage, during the implementation of their plans for conversion, the data are sometimes twisted for propaganda purposes (e.g. by labelling the Indian tribals as "monotheist" to distance them from the Hindus and bring them closer to Christianity), but by and large, Christian fact-finding literature about tribal religions is a treasure-trove of authentic information.

Let us consider, for example, the excellent introduction to the religion of the Munda tribals in Chotanagpur by Y. Philip Barjo: "The religious life of the Sarna tribes", *Indian Missiological Review*, June 1997. The Mundas, along with the Santals, are what is left of an originally much larger and more widely spread Austro-Asiatic population in the Ganga basin. In the plains, they got assimilated into the Indo-Aryan speech community, but in the isolation of the hills of Chotanagpur (southern Bihar, western Orissa, northeastern Madhya Pradesh) they retained their linguistic and cultural identities. The visible mark of their religious identity is the *Sarna*, the sacred grove where rituals for the gods are performed.

### **Ethnocentrism and endogamy**

Like most tribes worldwide, the Mundas are quite ethnocentric: "The Mundas call themselves Horoko, which means 'men'." (p.43) Just as *Ba-ntu* means "men", and likewise many other ethnonyms.

The Mundas maintain their tribal identity by prohibiting intermarriage with other tribes: "The tribals of Chotanagpur are an endogamous tribe. They usually do not marry outside the tribal community, because to them the tribe is sacred. The way to salvation is the tribe." (p.43)

Among literate religions, there is one clear parallel, viz. Judaism, which frowns upon intermarriage and has no notion of salvation outside the prospering of the Chosen People. In fact, far from being a unique case, Judaic ethnocentrism, like Munda ethnocentrism, is but the preservation of an attitude which was near-universal at the tribal stage of human development. That is why Christians with their universalism tend to see Jewish ethnocentrism as a "Pagan" element in Judaism (along with Jewish ritualism as opposed to the Christian emphasis on the "spirit"). Conversely, it is also why ethnicist neo-Pagans, of whom some are avowedly racist, tend to show no inclination to anti-Semitism, for they see Judaism as a fellow ethnic religion.

Tribal endogamy explains the Hindu caste system. As Vedic society, an advanced and differentiated society characterized by class (*varna*) hierarchy, expanded from the Northwest into India's interior, it absorbed ever more tribes but allowed them their

distinctive traditions and first of all their defining tradition, viz. their endogamy. This way, endogamous self-contained units or tribes became endogamous segments of Hindu society, or castes.

### **The supreme God**

Christian apologists in India have invested heavily in the proposition that tribals, unlike Hindus, are monotheists, almost-Christians who only need to learn of Jesus: "Sarna spirituality is marked by a strong belief in one God. A careful study of their religious beliefs and ceremonies shows that they believe in a Supreme Being whom they call Singbonga which literally means Sun God." (p.46)

To be sure, "sun god" hardly exonerates the Mundas from the suspicion of Paganism and idolatry. The Inca Athahualpa was killed precisely because he refused to trade in his Sun God for the Christian God and Saviour. The Roman Empire's dominant religion which was replaced and annihilated by Christianity was devoted to the Sun God, *Sol Invictus*. But modern Christians can explain the anomaly: they will say (like the iconodoulic party in Byzantine said of their icons) that the sun is merely a symbol, an icon which should not be confused with the immaterial divine reality which it represents. And so, Munda Sun worship gets incorporated into the monotheist tradition.

Singbonga looks a bit like the Biblical Creator-God: "Tribal religions generally believe in one God, in a Supreme Being who goes by such names as the Great Spirit, the Great One, the Creator, the Mighty Spirit (...), etc. Although at times God is identified with the rain, light, dawn, fire, water, hills, the Supreme Being of the tribal people is usually independent of the material or astral world. (...) He has dominion over the entire universe." (p.44)

In character, Singbonga seems to have more in common with the charitable God of the New Testament than with the vindictive one of the Old: "Singbonga is eternal. (...) He is also omniscient and omnipresent. (...) Singbonga of Sarna religion is a gentle god, not a malignant deity. He is an all-pervading benevolent power, ever intent on doing good to humanity." (p.46)

### **An ethnocentric God**

Though all-pervading and benevolent, Singbonga is also an ethnocentric God, like Jahweh: "However, Singbonga's relation with the tribe is not one of individual love, but of an all-embracing tribal love. The tribe is the apple of his eye and yet he keeps himself a little aloof from it. He has no favorites; the *pahan* [= priest] is no more privileged in his eye than the ordinary villager. The Sarna peoples' allegiance to Singbonga is therefore also tribal, an allegiance to the visible and invisible tribe." (p.47)

The apple of His eye, that is how He sees his favourite people, and this justifies the law of endogamy: "The tribe is the temple of Singbonga and he wants it undefiled. The basic belief that Singbonga created the tribe and that therefore it must be preserved in its integrity justifies in the eyes of the Mundas all the regulations and taboos that bind them in this regard. (...) These include exogamy [between families], endogamy [within

the tribe], and monogamy in marriage and conjugal fidelity. Not only the offenders themselves but the entire community is appropriately punished by Singbonga for the non-observance of these great ethical values. This almost exclusively tribe-oriented moral code with little personal conscience to enlighten and guide puts the Munda tribe in a world of its own, self-contained, self-sufficient and turned in upon itself, whose whole existence was tied to traditions with little change in the course of time."

(p.47) "The Sarna people do not have a written code of moral law. Their idea of right and wrong comes from their tradition. Tradition is their measure of truth. Their way to salvation is the tribe.

Hence they must see that they remain in the tribe. For them evil is essentially any offense that would break up their tribal status. There are two kinds of offenses: ethical and tribal. Ethical offenses include all aberrations committed consciously and which harm not so much the individual but others. Singbonga may punish such offenses by causing illness or misfortune to the tribe. (...) The offense against the tribe is the most tragic offense for the Sarna people, because their way to salvation is the tribe and this offense usually excludes them from the tribe." (p.52-53)

So, Singbonga punishes His people if they lapse into disloyalty by breaking the taboo of tribal endogamy, just as Jahweh punished His people for mixing with the Midianites, Amorites and other Pagan nations. It is possible that the depiction of Munda religion by our Christian informer is distorted by his Christian upbringing and Biblical schooling; but it is equally possible that we are faced with a genuine parallel between tribal and Biblical (Old-Testamentic) religion, again concerning their ethnocentrism.

As for the nature of the punishment, it must be entirely this-worldly. This is closer to Old-Testamentic beliefs in God's punishing intervention than to Christian claims of an unverifiable punishment in an unseen afterlife,-- or to Puranic-Hindu beliefs in a punishment in future incarnations: "The punishment is not carried over to the life beyond the grave. The idea of repeated rebirth is borrowed from the Hindu religion." (p.53) When a Christian tries to create distance between Hinduism and Indian tribal religions, we must be on our guard, as this is just what his apologetic and strategic interests require, but it may be true nonetheless. My guess is that the idea of reincarnation is entirely native to the Sarna tribes (as it is to numerous tribal cultures around the world), but that it doesn't have the moralistic dimension so typical of the most popular Hindu variant of the reincarnation doctrine, so that the content of the next life is not seen as determined by a tally of merit and guilt.

## **Monotheism?**

Though Singbonga is the Great God of His Munda people, He is not a jealous God but freely allows the worship of other celestial beings: "The domain of tribal belief also extends to the other supernatural beings which are above mankind but are less than the Supreme Being. They are usually called spirits but at times they are also invoked as 'deities' or 'gods'. Belief in spirits is one of the most important characteristics of tribal religions. In fact the tribal world is a world of spirits." (p.44)

There is a whole hierarchy between the supreme God and ordinary spirits: "Besides the Singbonga the Mundas generally worship a host of other spirits including their own ancestors. But Singbonga occupies the highest position in the hierarchical order of spirits." (p.46) This reminds us of the heavenly hosts filling the heaven between the supreme God and the atmosphere in many religions, such as Catholic theology's hierarchy of angels (archangels, powers, principalities etc.) and the choir of angels and saints forever singing God's praise; or, earlier, of Ahura Mazda's six Immortal Spirits and the numerous Helper-Spirits in Zoroastrianism.

Like in the actual practice of popular Roman Catholicism, where people pray to the Virgin Mary or to a particular saint, Munda worship is less directed to the supreme God than to the host of intermediate beings: "Cult or worship is mostly directed to the spirits and the ancestors." (p.44-45) This was the done thing in many polytheistic religions, e.g. the Pagan Arabs made idols of lesser deities for purposes of worship, but never depicted the supreme God, Allah. The existence of a "supreme God" is not proof of monotheism, but is on the contrary entirely typical of most polytheistic pantheons, just as the existence of one Pole Star does not nullify the concomitant existence of a heavenly host of numerous other stars.

### **Munda polytheism**

For a first introduction to the Munda pantheon: "The spirits of the Mundas are hierarchically ordered. The first in order of dignity comes the Burubonga, Marang Buru or Pat Sarna. This spirit is a mountain-god or the highest hill or rock in the neighbourhood. He is represented by no visible object." (p.48) Like the sun, the mountain is an immediately visible presence and needs no representation. So-called idolatry is a relatively recent development in religious history, e.g. most ancient Indo-European peoples did not use idols or icons in their religious practice.

After the mountain god, "Next in order come the Hatu Bongako or the Village spirits. (...) They are worshipped by the Pahan on behalf of the whole village at specific times in the sacred grove or the Sarna of each village." (p.48)

Then, like in most premodern cultures, comes ancestor-worship: "The third group of spirits in the Munda pantheon are the *Ora Bongako* or the House-spirits. These are the spirits of the deceased ancestors of each family. They are worshipped in the house-sanctuary called *Ading*, by the head of every family. Sometimes they are referred to as *Hapromko* (the ancestral spirits). Ancestor worship finds an important place in the religious belief of the Mundas. They believe that after the death of a person his spirit/shade (*roa/umbul*) has no house to live in. As an outcast it roams about in the neighborhood of the grave. After an odd number of days, the *Umbul-ader* (homebringing of the shade) ceremony is performed by which the 'shade' of the deceased is brought into the *ading* of the house and enshrined there. Henceforth the man's spirit is called no longer *umbul* but *Ora Bonga* (House Spirit). This important ceremony is a way of re-introducing the deceased member into the tribe. It is believed that they in turn are the real benefactors of the family or the tribe to which they belong." (p.48; the *Umbul-ader* ceremony is held on the 7th or 9th day for adults, on the 3rd or 5th for children, p.56)

The Christian reporter will be satisfied at noticing that the ancestors are not strictly worshipped but rather (like the Catholic saints) venerated and asked for their intercession with higher celestial authorities: "They keep in touch with other bongas and pray to Singbonga for the welfare of their household and the tribe. They are remembered and offered their due worship and sacrifice at all important occasions of life." (p.48) More explicitly: "The sacrifice they offer is mostly intercessory" (p.49), and their feasts "all refer to Singbonga as provider and creator of the tribe". (p.49)

Worship of lesser gods is not always devotion, it may be apotropeic rituals to appease malevolent beings: "Besides Singbonga, the Munda pantheon includes a number of other deities and spirits whom they call Bongas. (...) There are both benevolent spirits (Manitabongas) and malevolent spirits (Banitabongas). (...) Accordingly the benevolent spirits are worshipped and the malevolent spirits are only appeased or propitiated." (p.47-48)

The worship of Singbonga is of a different order from that of ancestral and other spirits: "Singbonga, unlike spirits, is worshipped for his own sake. His purity demands that he be offered sacrifices only of things that are white. Hence he is given sacrifices of white goats, white fowls, white gulainchi flowers, white cloth, sugar, milk, etc." (p.47) White is the sacred colour of most Indian tribals, not only of the Mundas but also of the Bhils in the western provinces, and of many others.

### **Tribal environmentalism**

In this account, the Munda tribals are presented as confirming the impression that tribals are ecologists by nature: "The world of any tribal group is stamped with sacredness, religiosity and reverence for nature. (...) This is the view of the Sarna tribal people as well. They are totally involved in the world, they communicate with the spirituality that surrounds them. They love nature, they communicate with it and are attached to it. Nature is their way to the supernatural."

(p.51)

Recently the notion of the environmentalist "noble savage" has taken a battering. It is now known that both the North-American Indians and the Australian Aboriginals have exterminated most large mammalian species in their continent. They had no consciousness of the limitations of nature, so they hunted the mammoth or the two-toed American horse or the giant wombat until the seemingly unlimited supply suddenly dried up. Some Western ecologists glorify the life of hunter-gatherers, but in fact, the hunting-gathering lifestyle is by definition plunder. It is because people in India shifted from hunting-gathering to agriculture early on, thus becoming self-reliant instead of dependent on plunder, that India has preserved most of its large species. Only some of the so-called tribals have not taken this step, but most have; the Mundas practise agriculture.

Otherwise, it is obvious that natural religions not based on books and exclusive revelations are much more immersed in nature. Some Christians have developed this religious feeling for nature as well, e.g. the 19th-century Flemish priest-poet Guido Gezelle, required reading in the schools attended by the Flemish Jesuits active in

Chotanagpur. But it will again be obvious that this eco-spirituality came from their hearts rather than from their Biblical studies.

## **Conclusion**

This brief little exercise in comparative religion has necessarily been limited by our choice of source material, viz. a fairly sympathizing account marked by a Christian perspective. Therefore, we have tried to avoid basing our impressions on observations which really provoke questions of whether the observer has been projecting his Christian notions onto his topic, or whether the tribals described may not have recently interiorized notions imparted to them by Christians or by Sanskritic Hindus.

Thus, this story about the punishment of the Asuras (Indo-Iranian term for "lords" or "gods", but from late-Vedic onwards a term for "demons") resembles both the Christian theme of the revolting angels and the Old-Testamentic theme of God punishing his people, and perhaps also the Hindu account of Parashuram killing all the male members of the warrior caste: "The Asurs were like the bad angels who revolted against God. They were greedy iron smelters, who even after repeated warning from Singbonga kept on smelting day and night. Because of their disobedience Singbonga destroyed all the male members of the tribe." (p.55) Has this been borrowed, or does it show that all religions address common themes and consequently develop parallel stories? One hesitates to make the choice.

No such hesitation need stop us from appreciating certain deep and undeniably hoary traits of Sarna religion as discussed in this account: its hierarchically conceived polytheistic pantheon centred around an apex god, Singbonga, so typical of Pagan religions in general though possibly usable as a "preparation" for the Christian variety of monotheism, with its Triune God surrounded by a hierarchy of angels; its cult of the ancestors who get associated with the gods, again following a widespread Pagan pattern, though comparable with how the saints are included in the heavenly sphere by Christian theology; and its ethnic dimension, rather different from Christianity but reminiscent of Judaism along with many Pagan tribal religions.