

**Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen
Masters Spiritualiteit**

**Course: Spirituality in Predominantly Oral Cultures
Lecturer: Dr. Martin Ramstedt**

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO KNOWLEDGE SYTEMS OF THE DENE THA
(CANADA) - A CRITICAL REFLECTION**

**final essay
2002**



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*"When only two people are left on earth,
one to sing and another to dance for him,
this song will not become old
but will remain fresh"*

Nogha, Dene Tha Dreamer

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Acknowledgements

I have followed this course including working on this essay with great pleasure. In spite of a rather chaotic start the sessions turned out to be highly instructive, inspiring, sometimes surprising, and certainly spiritually enriching. This I owe in the first place to the encouragement and guidance by the course lecturer, Dr. Ramstedt; secondly, to the dedicated participation of my group peers, Nienke Jellema-Fortuin, Joost Klep, and Miep Turken and thirdly, to the other students of the KUN Masters course on Spirituality. They are all thankfully remembered.

1 Introduction

This essay is based on a presentation given in a session on Tuesday 27 November 2001 within the framework of the course "Spirituality in Predominantly Oral Cultures" at the Nijmegen Catholic University imparted by Dr. Martin Ramstedt. The session was jointly prepared by a group of four students, i.e. Nienke Jellema-Fortuin, Joost Klep, Miep Turken, and myself. Together we presented Jean-Guy Goulet's publication about his anthropological research into the knowledge systems of the Dene Tha, a First Nation group in Canada who were christianised about a century ago but at the same time have retained their indigenous belief system (Goulet, 1998).

This essay reflects my part of the session, which deals with afterlife, reincarnation, and the interaction between the indigenous and the christian belief practices among the Dene Tha. While summarizing the chapters (Part 2), I highlight Goulet's frequent reflections on his own approach and methodology. I then go on to answer the two main questions for the course (Part 3):

- How does the author represent the spiritual culture (s)he describes? Are there any implicit or explicit value judgements discernable? If yes, what are they?
- Do you consider the terms of our own tradition adequate for the description of the foreign religious ideas, values and practices, which you are reading about?

In Part 4 I will discuss some common themes which arose from this session as well as from the other four sessions. Finally I will try to reach some conclusions.

2 Afterlife, reincarnation, and the interaction between the indigenous and the christian belief practices among the Dene Tha: Goulet's report

2.1 General

This part deals with Chapters 6-8 of Goulet (1998), which represent my share in the session. In order to understand the context, here are a few words about the book as a whole.

Goulet carried out his research since 1979 and spent 12 years living with the Dene Tha on a 6-monthly basis. His main research question was 'How can I learn about the Dene Tha?' This question is important for us, too, when we meet Other people and want to learn about them. It also links in with the two general course questions above: Does the author apply any value judgements - implicit or explicit - to the culture he describes; and to what extent are our terms and definitions adequate to describe the religious values and practices of the Dene Tha? In his introduction, Goulet already answers the latter question in the negative. He is very aware of his own 'Euro-centred agenda' which might contort his perspective on the people he describes, and he deliberately seeks a methodology to avoid such bias: Not only he participates for many years in the Dene Tha life and makes great efforts to learn the language well, but also he follows them in their ideas about *experiential learning* and *true knowledge*. Throughout his research he reflects on this methodology, which results in a multi-layered report, namely on 1) his observations, experiences and direct research results; 2) the process and the difficulties he encounters in obtaining the information and applying his methodology; and 3) analyses, comparison with other studies in the same area, reflections and conclusions.

A few terms which are elaborated in the first chapters need explanation:

- *experiential learning*: Not learning by instruction or textbooks, but by observation and experience - physically or by dreams and visions. The latter are just as real to the Dene Tha as physical learning. The medium of story-telling is used to guide one's thinking about a certain matter and to inform one's relationship with fellow Dene and animals.
- *true knowledge*: knowledge obtained by experiential learning as opposed to knowledge from books, sermons and such ('second-hand information', they say).
- *the 'other land'*: is where the soul travels away from the body in dreams, visions, or after death while *'our land'* is the place where our body lives. Both lands are equally real to the Dene Tha.
- *mind*: the seat of one's will, intellect and memory, an essential part of one's individuality which endures beyond one's particular incarnation. The mind resides transiently in one's *body*, and permanently in one's *soul* (or *spirit*).
- *religion*: is not a concept known to the Dene Tha. See further 2.4

2.2 Journeys of the soul¹

2.2.1. Dreams

The Dene Tha all believe (*'know'*) that dreams are journeys of the soul in which it communicates with inhabitants of the other land and/or sees things unfolding in our land. They believe white men are 'illiterate' in this respect. Some people develop special qualities in dreaming; they are sometimes perplexed at the messages they get in dreams, but they know them for true. By dreaming they know where to find game etc., they are foretold things, and so dreams are a source of power, not only for 'dreamers' but also for ordinary individuals. When someone has a bad dream about a close family member it is usually meant for somebody else. So once, when somebody dreamt about a death in the school playground, everybody quickly took his/her children away.

2.2.2. Visits to the other land (*'Near-death experiences'*)

Across cultures there is a widespread association between depression and soul loss, particularly following the death of a close relative. There are many accounts of visits by relatives to their deceased in the other land. They are often told to go back to their own body and live on. One story is about Rose, a Kaska woman who had died but had come back to life after three days. She had seen her uncle in a fire when a voice told her to go back to earth and "tell the people to pray". Goulet met her briefly in 1984 at a large Tea Dance party in Fort Simpson. She had come as a last-minute replacement for Pope Paul John II whose plane could not land there because of fog, and a steady stream of Dene from all over the Northwest Territories and Alaska came to pay her respect.

2.2.3. Good and bad spirits: an example of "high-context - low context" cultural interaction

Some Dene Tha distinguish between someone's 'bad spirit' which is always to do with death or warning and a 'good spirit' which is accompanied by light colour, pink, yellow or white, and always smiles. The distinction between good or bad seems to depend on the way people see things. Goulet's informer on this point gave him an example about John who was haunting his brother Henry, who saw John as a bad spirit. But the informer himself thought that John only wanted Henry to change his life. He ended: "It is very plain to see".

At this point Goulet offers a bit of meta-communication: ". . . very plain to see, because the work of interpretation is completed and unaccounted for. The resulting constellation of details is set in a precise gestalt. It is taken for granted". What the speaker assumes the researcher knows is that John had been frozen to death after drinking, and that Henry was hard on his way too. This is a typical example of "high-context" versus "low-context" cultural interaction: to the informer the story is clear in a few words, while the rest is assumed to be known to the researcher. A similar example was given in the 3rd session of our course on Aborigines.

2.2.4. Visits by dead relatives

There are similar stories about visits by dead relatives. If an Elder or a dreamer gets such a visit he puts out a flag at his house. Some dreams can be especially instructive and predictive. A dreamer was once told by his father in a dream to go to a heavy drinker and card player, talk three times to him, because he would then turn into a seer "who knows a lot". He did so and the guy indeed stopped drinking and became a seer. Dreamers and singers are not allowed to drink because as we saw, their 'minds would go away'. Some ordinary people also quit drinking after dreaming of warnings.

2.2.5. The prophetic or revelatory character of dreams

In the last part of this chapter, Goulet analyses how dreams are constructed by the Dene Tha narrator: they are interpreted retrospectively as being revelatory or prophetic, and that interpretation is the result of a skilful social process. Accounts of dreams and visions are selectively constructed in a number of commonplace but crucial ways:

- They are given in intelligible language (in Dene Dháh). The dream teller often describes a voice instructing him/her to do this or that;
- They are often composed of images, themes and concepts that are familiar to the Dene;
- The themes are not at random but constitute a recognizable genre, frequently dealing with travelling to the other land or with encountering the dead, dying and soon to be reborn;

¹ Goulet 1998: 155-166 (Chapter 6 part 2)

- The word 'perhaps' is typical of narration of dreams that appear to predict events to come. Predictions are not about the inevitable but about the probable. They can be read retrospectively in various ways. The same holds for healing ceremonies: they are considered effective because accounts of them are formulated retrospectively, not prospectively. (*the same was said in our lecture on Buddhism about forecasting in Asian countries last week*)

2.3 Searching for a womb: souls being born again.²

Following death, people seek a woman's womb to be born again. This view is central to the Dene apprehension of themselves. However, views on reincarnation differ considerably from one Dene community to another: according to some, only people who did bad things would be born again; according to others, only those who could not find the path to heaven or who had not wanted to die in the first place would reincarnate. Ghosts of deceased people were commonly sighted. The Dene Tha do not use the word "reincarnation" but rather: "he or she was done (to us) again", or "made again".

2.3.1. Indications for rebirth

Dene Tha recognise five possible indications that someone is being made again:

- annunciatory dreams: deceased persons telling the dreamer that he/she requests rebirth. Among the Dene Tha the request is made - if at all - before the woman is pregnant. The dreamer can be male or female.
- Visions of a deceased person, i.e. apparitions of deceased persons in broad daylight;
- Personality similarity: the reborn child is expected to manifest personality traits of the deceased person, e.g., stubbornness, quietness, etc.
- Waking recollections from past lives: the reborn child is expected to remember events from his/her past life;
- Birthmarks referring to the past life, especially to the accident leading to its death.

2.3.2. Metonymic pattern of thought

In discussing how the Dene Tha use these indications the author introduces the term *metonymic pattern of thought*: "The habit of seeing a simple happening as an aspect of a whole that caused it, even when that whole is but tacitly known" (Karla Poewe, 1994). Poewe distinguishes 3 aspects of metonymy: 1) *sign* (A stands for B as part of the whole); 2) *index* (A indicates B); 3) *signal*: (A triggers or causes B). So when the Dene Tha see A (a birthmark or psychological characteristic of a child, say, grey hair at birth) they see it as a signal (caused by) B, reincarnation. The grey hair also serves as an index (A), since it indicates B, which triggered A in the first place. Metonym, therefore, is "[a] vehicle that makes known personally a reality that is otherwise invisible and independent" (Poewe, 1994³).

2.3.3. Selection of mothers

The Dene Tha say that deceased "come back to girls or women who are ready to have children" (before pregnancy). One can imagine that this view influences opinions on birth control. In the past 20 years a significant number of women have been sterilized, some of them without informed consent⁴. Other women use contraceptives. This has made a profound impact on the lives of the Dene. In two cases Goulet found opinions that the decreasing availability of adult women to have many children caused teenagers to become pregnant sooner. Parents would already be permissive to sexual activity of their youngsters, but perhaps their wish to allow relatives to be reborn gives it an added meaning.

2.3.4. Process of identification

Identification of someone as a reincarnated person is usually a gradual process. First some signs may occur, then suspicion arises and sometimes tests are made to confirm the suspicion. A crying baby was once given an onion; she ate it and was happy again. She turned out to be one of her father's deceased hunting partners who used to love onions. The reborn baby can be of the same or the opposite sex as the deceased. Once the previous identity of the child is known, he or she (the word for it is neutral in Dene Dháh) is addressed in the kinship terms of the previous personality. By so addressing the child and speaking to it about past events, adults teach a child a knowledge that is culturally defined as recollections of a past life. The child's construction of his or her social identity is

² Goulet, 1998: 167-192 (Chapter 7)

³ reference absent from my photocopies of Goulet's book.

⁴ a big issue in many native communities in North America (my comment)

then based on someone else's *true knowledge*, and the statements the child will eventually make concerning a previous life are based on information he or she has learned from people in his/her environment.

The author here turns psychological, apparently not readily accepting the fact that those recollections may indeed be 'real'. Yet earlier in this chapter, he reports a vision he himself has experienced of Nancy, a girl who had been accidentally shot to death on a hunting party. He was not even in the reservation when it happened but in a congress in Ottawa. When he told about his vision after he had returned to the reservation he became aware of an emerging process of reciprocity. Dene Tha adults would offer him accounts of visions and interpretations of them in exchange.

2.3.5. Self-identity and cross-sexual rebirth

Although the reborn child is addressed in his/her previous kinship terms and is teased with reminiscences of past lives, (s)he is expected to behave and lead the life of her/his present sex. That means to eventually marry with an opposite-sex partner and have children. In a rare case when a reincarnate wanted to retain his perceived previous (female) sex, social pressure was applied to trigger his transformation into a heterosexual male with a complete personal identity.

2.3.6. Double presence of a reincarnated soul

According to the Dene Tha, the soul of a child raised by parents as a reincarnated relative can at the same time be present in the child's body and in heaven, e.g. as an angel to whom they can pray. It took the author's informers a lot of difficulty to explain that concept to him. His persistent questioning was understood as being rude and unjustifiably mistrusting. It finally dawned on him that the Dene Tha believe that a deceased person can be at two places at the same time. "Things we cannot see we can believe to be true" they say.

Goulet says: "...the task of communicating Dene Tha views can proceed only with the tacit acceptance of specific notions of personhood, agency, and powerfulness, which the Dene Tha leave unexamined when adopting the natural attitude, as they must if they are to carry on with their lives responsibly and effectively". We have to follow other people in their own experience world and thinking. He discards the suggestion of a reviewer of his manuscript to question the Dene Tha deeper on all these concepts in order to retrieve a more solid body of knowledge. He argues that that would not only take the knowledge out of its context but also do injustice to their concepts of learning (by experience, not by asking too much, that would be rude) and the requirement that one keeps for oneself certain things one learns. "The Dene (...) share a consistent body of attitude that leads each and every individual to careful consideration of life experience in the light of a long-standing oral tradition and of other stories by relatives and friends.

2.4 When the drum and the rosary meet: how do indigenous and christian spiritual values go together among the Dene Tha?⁵

Nearly all Dene are Christians of one denomination or another, mostly Roman Catholic or Anglican. Christianisation started about a century ago. The Dene of today also live in a social context with numerous Western institutions: schools, hospitals, church etc. The question is: Were the missionaries able to change Dene moral concepts and abolish Dene spiritual values? The author reports various findings to set up his argument.

First he records the story of the oldest head dreamer, Alexis Seniantha, on how he became a dreamer (on the dreamer's request). Alexis describes visions in which he found himself standing on a wooden cross. Many things happened to him, all coming from the Dene tradition. At one point he was taught where to find a moose to hunt. He was thereby told: "by this sign you will know", meaning a crucifix that Alexis always carried in his pocket. In other words, two roots: christian symbols transformed into an over-all Dene Tha context. The fact that Alexis experienced the cross himself in a vision - true knowledge - sharply distinguishes him from a priest who gets his knowledge from the Bible. "Alexis is a dreamer for whom Christ is real in a sense that missionaries never anticipated".

⁵ Goulet, 1998: 193-222 (Chapter 8)

2.4.1. A historical prophetic tradition

Secondly, Goulet examines the history of prophets and dreamers. When he first arrived in Chateh, people identified 5 dreamers in their community (including Alexis). They were all men; there were also women 'who had songs and dreams but no drums'; however, in the early 1980s such a woman 'prophet' had started training 12 girls as drummers which had not been done before. There was a current prophecy that in future there would be only female prophets. Prophets in the past are clearly remembered in Dene Tha oral tradition, as well as their songs, visions, prophesies and teachings, although apparently little of them has been recorded by white foreigners. In the 1930s, the dreamer Nogha (Alexis' predecessor) foresaw that the land of the Dene Tha would be overtaken by whites in search of oil, that they would have to live on a reservation, that parents would consider their children as 'numbers and not as children': eschatological themes. He also said that "This Earth is large but we pray for the whole Earth. When we go to the Tea Dance circle then we pray, just like the priest offers communion. This message is not just for this one place but for the whole world. I hope it will help all" (*I like this especially, and also the following beautiful quotation*): "When only two people are left on earth, one to sing and another to dance for him, this song will not become old but will remain fresh". Nogha was also integrating christian elements in his teachings. He recommended to use the rosary alongside with offering tobacco to the fire. Other researchers have observed that the Dene Tha while integrating christian symbols, did not always use or interpret them in the same way as the priests. They would place a rosary on the upwind side of a gathering to part and clear away approaching rain clouds. In their contacts with missionaries Dene Tha prophets clearly took advantage of what they saw as new sources of power which complemented rather than supplanted their own practices.

2.4.2. The prayer of priests and prophets

Thirdly, Goulet examines the way in which the Dene Tha compare the two religious domains of dreamers and priests with each other. He reports a dream in which Nogha and a well-respected Father typically stand side by side in heaven. The Dene Tha make a sharp distinction between dreamers who learn - and know God - through dreams and visions, and priests who learn by books. They however do not antagonise them. Today, both the dreamer and the priest officiate at public ceremonies in which they pray, either in the church or at the Tea Dance circle. The Dene Tha refer to three types of prayer:

- 'prayer in the way of the Dene' (at the Tea Dance);
- 'prayer in the way of the priest' (Mass in church);and
- 'prayer in the way of the white man' (by missionaries from other denominations).

According to Helm (1994)⁶, the Roman Catholic tradition has apparently integrated much more with the Dene Tha way of life than protestant traditions. Only one protestant missionary group, the Oblates, had learnt the Dene languages and spent their lives in daily interaction with the Dene, other white residents including government agents had only superficial interaction with the Dene peoples.

Symbols have been exchanged in two ways: The cross, crucifix and the rosary are prominently present in the Tea Dance while Dene art (with animal pelts, beadwork, wood and stone carvings) was used for christian symbols. A large painting of the Tea Dance adorns the wall behind the church altar in Chateh.

2.4.3. Prayers to God

Dreamers and priests both pray to God, but in the author's view the meaning of these terms differs greatly although the Dene Tha and missionaries may not actually be aware of these differences. The Dene Tha know of a heroic figure named "He went around the edge", who made human life possible in ancient times by killing the animal monsters who preyed on humans. "He put things straight on earth" and that's why they call him God. They link the beads of the rosary with the Son of God: "Each large bead represents a place where [he] came to earth. He walked along the earth and then went back to heaven. He did this many times. The small beads represent his tracks on earth".

Do the Dene Tha interpret prayers in the same way as the missionaries? This is still an open question. Various dreams are reported in which it is either prophesied that the Dene way of prayer (around the fire, with prophets, flags, and tobacco) will endure, or that it will vanish and be replaced by the missionaries' way of praying. As there are less and less priests among the Northern native communities these days, the former prophecy gives better hope.

⁶ reference absent from my photocopies of Goulet's book.

2.4.4. Religious dualism?

In this section Goulet tries to describe and analyse how the relationship between the two traditions, the indigenous and the Roman Catholic, is constituted in the lives of the Dene Tha of Chateh today. He had earlier argued that the two distinct traditions were socially available and meaningful to the Dene Tha, much in the line of Jacques Rousseau's hypothesis of 'religious dualism' (Rousseau 1953 in Goulet, 1998⁷): "the two religions walk in parallel direction in the same individual, without the one penetrating the other". After a review of accounts from elsewhere which supporting or criticized Rousseau's view, he concludes that the hypothesis does not hold ground if seen in a too simplified way. Madeleine and Jacques Rousseau supported their thesis by describing the burial given to Joseph Gunner, an old Cree catechist: his grave was surrounded by a fence carrying a cross while Cree symbols were placed outside the fence. They concluded that inside the enclosure a Christian burial took place, and outside, a pagan one. But Goulet does not agree as long as this is not confirmed by a Cree interpretation of the burial site. In Chateh, crosses at burial sites are placed there so that the dead person can seize their arms and pull himself or herself up, the initial step onto the path to heaven or to a woman to be 'made again'.

So Goulet considers the Native interpretation indispensable for our understanding of how the two believe systems interact. We must ask what makes so many Native populations so impervious to the key tenets of Christian doctrine; how Jesus and heaven have been 'indigenised' and made consistent with their own world view. We must identify what exactly it is that individuals embrace of the Christian doctrine and practices. The Dene could never be convinced that they were sinful by nature and that they could only be saved by professing their faith in Christ. Other groups would not accept hell and judgement and punishment in the hereafter. They cannot be easily convinced either, because the missionaries only have the Bible and the church's tradition at hand, while individuals from the Dene and other Native groups can say that they have talked with Jesus himself, e.g. about a reincarnated daughter. Goulet therefore came back on his earlier view of religious dualism as two independent streams within one Dene individual: the Dene Tha have deeply reinterpreted Christian symbols and practices and apply them within a single aboriginal worldview and ethos, which has not changed much from before although it is modified by their exposure to Christianity.

The challenge is - Goulet concludes - to depict and comprehend a local-global historical encounter, one in which local actors (Dene Tha) and newcomers (missionaries) seek to engage each other in each other's worlds. It is not to grasp and understand a discrete and primordial Dene Tha religion without considering the christian influence on it (as is sometimes done); but rather to examine the outcome of 'processes of invention and transformation' - or the lack thereof - "arising from exogenous cultural transfers and the politico-economic contexts in which they were and are embedded" (Brightman, 1995:522 in Goulet, 1998⁸).

In our 3rd session on Aborigines we discussed the 'loss of nomos', i.e. worldview and connected values that gives meaning to life. Peter L. Berger argued that many indigenous societies which have been submitted to an unsuccessful process of modernization suffered from loss of nomos, resulting in increased poverty, alcoholism and violence. It was mentioned that religion can be a safeguard against this loss of nomos. Unfortunately Goulet does not discuss this subject, but loss of nomos is clearly evident in the Dena Tha society. It would be interesting to know to what degree both the indigenous and the christian tradition have contributed to hold the Dene Tha socially and morally together.

3 The two general questions

3.1 How does the author represent the spiritual culture (s)he describes?

The author describes the Dene Tha culture with great respect and what I would call 'involved detachment'. He has gone a long way to integrate himself with the Dene Tha life and follow the Dene Tha way of learning ('experiential learning') and values. He is successful in their view, experiencing visions and dreams himself, and this helps him interacting to a deeper extent with his hosts. He has also engrained himself in some of their 'power plays', e.g. when he is accused by healers that he upsets the power balance between them. In order to restore the balance, he had to visit all

⁷ reference absent from my photocopies of Goulet's book

⁸ *idem*

personalities in the community, also the less pleasant ones. This and other cases (e.g. when he thinks he is assaulted by young drunks, or when he brings a Dene girl back from the Ottawa underworld) make it clear that his courage is often challenged, but he survives (and uses the lessons for his research). He does not make this aspect explicit but in a society where experience by body and mind is so important, it must have counted. Aside from having respect for the Dene Tha, and observing their codes of conduct, he must have created a certain respect for himself as a person in return, in order to be accepted.

Goulet also goes a long way to avoid the 'Euro-Canadian bias' in describing the Dene Tha's 'religion'. In the first place he states that one cannot describe 'religion' when the Dene Tha do not know such a concept. They do have propositions and behaviour that outsiders would call religious or mystical, but he decided not to categorise them beforehand and follow as far as possible the Dene Tha in *their* constitution of social phenomena. He finds the ethnomethodological method well fit for this approach (Goulet 1998:xxxix-xl). At the end (Goulet 1998:220-221) makes a plea for the Dene Tha to consider their spiritual practices on their own merits and not as a pure merger of indigenous and christian currents. Here, too, he goes farther than most authors he discusses, in that he gives the Dene Tha an active, adult role and not that of a passive 'undergoer' of missionary or indigenous-mystic influences.

3.2 Are there any implicit or explicit value judgments discernable? If yes, what are they?

Goulet maintains a 'neutral' position and refrains from directly stating whether practices are 'good' or 'bad'. On the other hand, he remains a detached researcher and as such, I found two places in 'my' chapters where he gives implicit value judgements:

- In Chapter 7 (Goulet 1998:178, 186) he describes how a child constitutes his/her self-identification as a reincarnated soul. The child's recollection of events in the past life is one of the criteria for the Dene Tha to determine that the child is indeed the reincarnated soul of this or that person. Goulet states that the child's relatives, once they suspect that the child is a reincarnated soul, address it in its old kinship terms, and tease it with reminiscences of its past life, which the child in due course would internalise and reproduce as its own knowledge. Here the author clearly does not take for granted that the child's recollections might be 'real' and hence, that such a thing as reincarnation would exist. While not explicitly doubting or rejecting this possibility, he in any case offers a Western 'psychological' explanation without being too open on his own stand in this.
- The same holds - even less explicitly - for his explanation of retrospective interpretation of prophesies and predictions in dreams and visions in Chapter 8.

Although Goulet is certainly not a hard-core positivist anthropologist, and although he goes very far in participating in the culture he investigates, even to the point of having waking dreams and visions himself, he still remains in a way 'detached on the edge between cultures'. Which is no disaster, though).

3.3 Do you consider the terms of our own tradition adequate for the description of the foreign religious ideas, values and practices, which you are reading about?

What is 'our own tradition?'

If we understand it to be the Western-Christian framework of knowledge until, say, the last decennia of the 20th century, then it would not be adequate to describe the Dene Tha traditions without further explanation. On the other hand, only using the Dene Tha terms would make a descriptive account incomprehensible. Authors are therefore always compelled to explain and 'translate' terms and concepts in addition to their methodology. Maybe that's why introductions are always so lengthy. Goulet (1998:xxv-xxvi) explains for instance why we should not set out to describe the Dene Tha *religion* as such: it misrepresents Dene Tha ways of knowing, thinking and living. He goes on to describe how he went about to avoid the 'Euro centric agenda' and follow the Dene Tha way; see 3.1

As for specific *terms* in 'my' chapters I did not come across very unusual terms, the less so if one accepts *spirit haunting*, *reincarnation ('rebirth')*, *'dreamers'* and *'prophets'* as part of our Western body of knowledge. We too have terms for spirits or ghosts of dead persons, prophetic dreams, and being reborn (called being 'made again' or 'done again' by the Dene Tha). These terms are not completely alien to us, although we have to be careful to understand them in the Dene Tha context and not translate them too easily into our concepts. The author's use of the terms *'made again'* or *'done again'* instead of *'reincarnation'* (which the Dene Tha do not use) is therefore very appropriate to warn us that the Dene Tha idea of reincarnation is different from our ideas.

3.4 Do our terms need redefining? To what extent is this possible?

See 3.3. It is perhaps not the terms which need to be redefined but warnings about cautious interpretation of them which should not be omitted. We need to position ourselves in the Dene Tha reality of life when we hear an account about their practices, dreams, prayers, etc. For instance, when a Dene Tha 'prays' (s)he does something very different from praying in a christian sense, but in both cases it refers to a personal interaction with the supernatural. So the term can stay. When the concept is too far away from ours, e.g. *'the other land'* (a real world for the Dene Tha as opposed to our idealised 'heaven'), and when it has no appropriate equivalent in English I think it is better to use the original term.

Since I don't speak Dene Dháh I can only give an example from Nepal where I used to live. The Nepalese (& Hindi) word *'puja'* is hardly translatable ('worship' comes nearest but lacks the combined feelings of reverence and matter-of-factness of the original word). So are certain kinship terms, e.g. *'didi'* (elder sister), *'bahini'* (younger sister) etc. A *'didi'* is loved and respected for her being older and the term is also used for female non-relatives, known or unknown to the speaker (I was always called *'didi'* by my colleagues and people underway). I found that *'bahini'* was used much in the same way as *'zusje'* in Dutch with all the connotations of fondness and a tinge of soft-teasing belittlement.

3.5 What are the most difficult indigenous terms or concepts mentioned in the book that cannot be easily expressed in Western terms or concepts?

The only really confusing term I came across is *'superstition people'*, an expression the Dene Tha use for a person *'who knows an animal'* (Goulet 1998:187), i.e. someone who can help getting souls reborn through their animal helpers. The term is only cursorily used in Goulet's story and explained on the spot.

The most intriguing concept in 'my' chapters is that in the Dene worldview a soul can be at two places at one time, both as an 'angel' in the other land ('people of heaven') and a reincarnated soul on earth (Goulet 1998: 186-192). Accidentally (?) the concept appears in connection with an example which features the aforementioned *'superstition people'*.

4 Discussion and conclusions

4.1 Are there any resemblances between the Dene Tha spiritual life and other belief systems such as Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.?

It goes too far to present a broad analysis here. A few items were mentioned in the discussion:

- reincarnation of souls - also present in Hinduism and Buddhism although in a different context;
- karma, or at least the idea that one's way of living and morality reflects on one's afterlife options (heaven or rebirth)
- shamanism - came back in the session on Winti
- the concept of power or life force (not discussed above but present in other chapters): came back in the session on Subud; elsewhere widely known as prana, chi, ki, etc., but also reinterpreted by modern Western authors such as Hans Andeweg (1999) and Marco Pogačnik (1997, 2000)

4.2 Are indigenous spiritualities taken seriously in the interreligious dialogue?

In the first session it was mentioned that indigenous spiritualities are not yet fully recognized in the arena of interreligious dialogue. This may very well be true. My own experience is limited but mixed. As a tropical forester I have come across a good many cases of interaction between 'established' parts of society and 'indigenous' or 'tribal' groups, mainly in Asia. Although religion was hardly ever on the agenda (to my regret) I can confirm that in most of these cases a sense of superiority on the part of the 'established' party prevailed. However, there are tendencies to the reverse. Especially in the field of forestry and biodiversity conservation, indigenous peoples have taken an unmistakable place in research as well as at the international conference tables. One of the sub-articles of the Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity (CBD) deals exclusively with the rights of indigenous peoples. The Harvard University 'Religions of the World and Ecology' project has included Indigenous

Traditions as one of the ten world religions discussed in relation to ecology in a series of conferences from 1997 to 1999⁹. Although the reality is still far from ideal¹⁰, the voice of indigenous peoples can no longer be ignored.

4.3 How does the research method of Goulet compare with the approaches discussed at the other sessions?

Evans-Pritchard and the Azande in Central Africa (2nd session): Evans-Pritchard studied 'witchcraft, oracles and magic' among the Azande in the 1930s. He drew on Lévy-Brühl's theory about 'primitive people' and the 'law on participation' to make sense of the Azande. However, he did not describe *all* their rituals, neither did he deeply question his own basic assumptions. For instance, he applied his own Western concept of 'witchcraft' to his observations of the Azande, and jumped into interpretations before he got the whole picture. Although he did try to participate in the Azande way of life (as he did with the Nuer), he was compelled to live outside the community since they saw him as a superior (Evans-Pritchard, 1940 in Kloos, 1991).

Deborah Bird Rose and the Australian Aborigines (3rd session): Mrs. Rose stayed with the Aborigines of Yarralin for two years to do anthropological field studies. She learned the language (Kriol) and was deeply involved in the social and political concerns of the Yarralin community. Women and men had separate domains of knowledge, and her own learning followed that division. From the men she learned verbal stories and explanations, and from the women she learned 'by doing'. Whether Mrs. Rose herself questioned her own assumptions was not discussed. She gave a quite respectful picture of the Dreamtime mythology and belief system of the Aborigines, and above all, their intimate relationship with the land. We may conclude that she was very much involved in Aboriginal affairs, but still as an outsider.

Subud: Javanese Mysticism (5th session): Here we see a reversion of roles: we do not need to 'study' this movement to know its contents; they themselves reveal their message through books, websites and personal contact. The group for this session interviewed three members of Subud. However, the Subud teachings are such that one has to participate in their sessions in order to really understand them. And that is not possible without a lot of personal involvement and at least three months of preparation¹¹.

Winti (6th session): Here, too, the movement is present in the Netherlands. And moreover, one of the group members *has* participated in a winti session! It was suggested in the discussion that much more research should be dedicated to Winti. The difficulty is that we do not have sufficient concepts and terms that do justice to what Winti is (e.g. 'bezetenheid' (possession)) 'does not have the positive connotation it has for Winti practitioners).

Conclusion: *Goulet* is 'at the end of the line' of the 'classical' anthropologists: he spent 8 years on field work and participated intensively with the Dene Tha. He also reflects extensively about his methodology and his own basic assumptions - see 2 Moreover, contrary to many of his fellows, he is not afraid to admit that he himself does have dreams and visions too, and he describes them openly in his publications. On the other hand he is not a member of the Dene Tha community and there is a limit to his involvement - perhaps necessary in order to reflect professionally on his observations. In the last two sessions we encountered spiritual movements without the medium of anthropological research. The line is drawn further and the limit is passed, we relate directly to the keepers of the tradition, and in the end we participate ourselves.

References

⁹ the proceedings have just been published, see http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/education/pub/book_series/indeco.html.

¹⁰ see for instance van Leeuwen's inventory of endeavours to integrate indigenous and formal knowledge in international cooperation projects on sustainable forest management (van Leeuwen, 1998).

¹¹ Personally I have not attended a Subud 'latihan' ritual but I did participate in apparently very similar sessions: the 'Kundalini sessions' led by the English aikido teacher Terry Ezra in Birkenhead, UK (www.komyokan.aikido.co.uk). His use of the term "Kundalini" is probably not correct. Through music and guided meditation which evoke free body movement, a connection is made between the individual 'ki' energy with the 'universal energy' which I understand is quite similar to the Life Force in the Subud perception (www.subud.nl/introductie.htm).

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