Geoethics. The risk and the rite

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Abstract

The present work combines anthropological-philosophical and geoethical research on man's perception of, and reaction to, natural catastrophes such as earthquakes. The study offers an articulate and cohesive picture of the defense mechanisms man has deployed, since ancient cultures, against this risk, these are identified with mythical-ritualistic repetition. At critical moments, man develops a series of practical strategies resting on ritual action. Since the dawn of civilisation, in every instant of everyday life from birth to death and in all cultures, man is exposed to the risk of not being-there, that is, to the risk of catastrophe hitting him or the world around him. This may occur in connection to economic and social mutations, for example in times of war, or to the unpredictability of natural catastrophes which are out of human control, for example seaquakes. Taking this as our starting point, we will analyse the crucial matter of the crisis or loss of presence, that is, the risk of not being-there in critical moments of historical existence, limiting ourselves to consideration of forms of defense from risk represented by natural catastrophe (for example, seaquakes and volcanic eruptions) amongst so-called primitive people, from an anthropological-physical point of view.

We will look at the historical-religious thought of Italian philosopher Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965) (Fig. 1) and in particular some of his critical lectures published posthumously in *La fine del mondo. Contributo alle analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (1977) (Fig. 2). We will treat philosophical concepts like anthropological evidence with the aim of identifying different mechanisms of defense from the risk of not being-there, even in cultures very distant from Western ones. We will specifically consider apocalyptic representations connected with experience of natural catastrophe in traditional cultures.

The Italian philosopher identifies in repetition the characteristic behaviour of so-called primitives faced with the risk of not being-there – i.e. the risk of the end of the world and of man. Repetition of what? Of certain critical episodes (the first catastrophe, the first hunt, the first fishing, the first giving birth) or of certain critical passages, such as that from chaos to cosmos. This series of acts or episodes have the value of archetypes, of models, exemplary acts – not necessarily linked with religion – that are repeated for survival in light of their perceived protective function. This enables a series of mechanisms of defense of presence at critical moments.

Fig. 1. The Italian philosopher Ernesto de Martino

Fig. 2. The book cover of de Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo alle analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (1977)

Methodology

The Italian philosopher de Martino identifies in *repetition* (Fig. 3-4) the characteristic behaviour of so-called primitives faced with the risk of not being-there – i.e. the risk of *the end of the world* and of man. Repetition of what? Of certain critical episodes (the first catastrophe, the first hunt, the first fishing, the first giving birth) or of certain critical passages, such as that from chaos to cosmos. This series of acts or episodes have the value of *archetypes*, of models, exemplary acts – not necessarily linked with religion – that are repeated for survival in light of their perceived protective function. This enables a series of mechanisms of defense of presence at critical moments:

«ritual repetition operates a function of reenactement and reintegration relative to possible critical episodes and the darkness of current or future existence; ritual repetition operates a function of concealment or abatement of the historicity of becoming, in order to experience possible critical moments as if they had already been experienced with the desired outcome: where we are in history "as if" we were not there» (de Martino, 1995).

All this implies a process that de Martino defines *mythical-ritual dehistorification.* By this technique the Italian thinker refers to the suspension, the abolition of history, through the mythical-ritualistic symbol or mechanism:

«The dehistorification of a critical moment of existence is, first of all, the "myth" of such a moment. Secondly, it is the possibility of repeating the myth every time that a certain critical moment comes about; it is thus ritual» (de Martino, 1995).

In *La fine del mondo*, de Martino defines the use of this mechanism on the part of the primitives as a «behaviour that always re-conduces the historical "now" to a metahistorical "then", which is also "then and never again"» (de Martino 1977). The *now* is the contingent event, the *hic et nunc* represented by the critical moment (for example, the flood, the seaquake or the volcanic eruption) which is reconduced to the *then and never again*, that is to the origins of that event which was for the first time founded and resolved, not by man but by gods, reabsorbing the proliferation of critical moments into the course of an always selfsame metahistorical reality. On this subject, de Martino draws upon Helmut Preti's description of the belief in Ungud, the myth of the rainbow-serpent, amongst some native Australian tribes of the Kimberley:

«Ungud, the mythical rainbow-serpent, has its *camp* in the earth or in the depths of water caves. Creator of the world, origin of all living and growing things on earth, unitary divine essence that in the beginning of time made the world emerge from chaos, extracted living beings from the earth, or with rain sent them on earth. […] In the rainy season Ungud makes the water flow in river-beds and creeks. Then it rises to the sky as colourful rainbow-serpent to devour the rains, that is to stop them» (de Martino,1977).

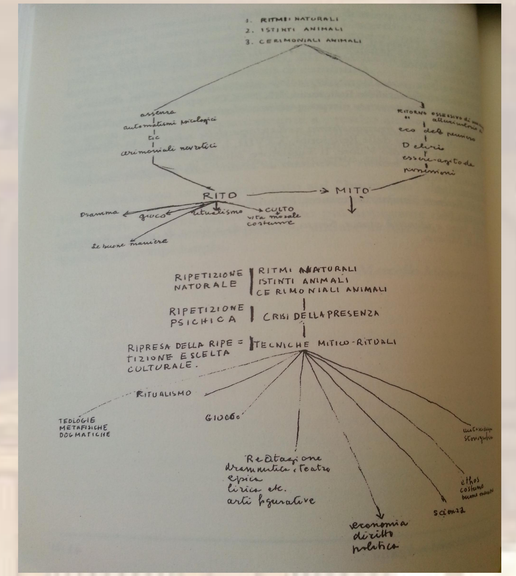

Fig. 3. Autograph scheme describing the ritual action in archaic societies. From: De Martino, 1995.

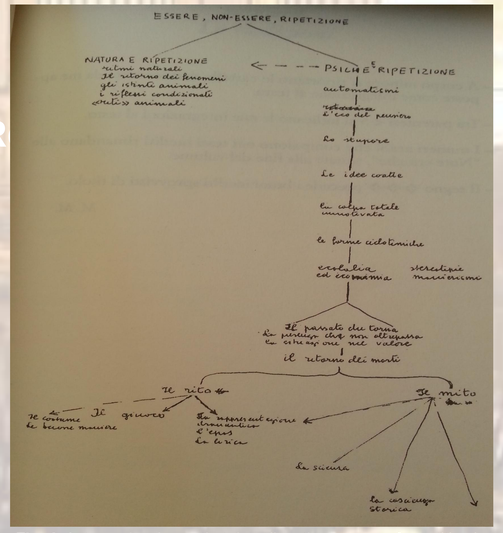

Fig. 4. Autograph scheme that describes the process of repetition in archaic societies. From: De Martino, 1995.

Results

The structure supporting repetition is the biological configuration of our species, that is, the innate and undefined nature of the human animal, of his endless childhood which goes by the name of *neoteny* and that in some way recalls the anthropology of Herder and that of Gehlen, important and valid to understand the way in which the human animal adapts to the context of existence, and to understand the way in which man reacts before certain unpredictable events such as an earthquake. This notion is important to understand the way in which the so-called primitives reacted to such events through the development of "end of the world" representations, the evocation of which was reserved to rituals. It is also important to understand how traditional mythical-ritualistic behaviors all over the world are not exclusive to primitive societies but echo today in the everyday life of contemporary societies every time they are faced with a risk, reenacting the dialectic between risk of loss of presence and its periodical reaffirmation.

Conclusions

Arguing from the text of Augusto Placanica (1985), the earthquake is a different catastrophe, totally different from all the others: it not only kills the biological existence, but, in fact, break the hinges of nature itself, breaks the axis of earth, risospinge society and history back to the time of the Flood. The signs of the earthquake, then, not only become but are already, in itself, the signs of the end of the world. Of course as the life resumes its normal course, this recovery is felt as a rebirth, which also has its signs: rebirth of the world, man's rebirth, revival of the company. Everything rises but everything is called into question. We have shown how this belief in the periodic destruction and regeneration of the cosmos, defined by de Martino as "one of the human attitudes phylogenetically oldest", is connected to the configuration of our biological species, being devoid of specialized instincts, has to contend with a context vital partially undetermined, the world, in fact, not a predictable environment in every detail. Thanks to technological innovations we can, in a very effective and fast way, inform on seismic risk, also following the assumptions of neogeography (Goodchild, 2007; Turner, 2006). The neogeography focuses on participation in the map production to ensure the awareness of every community in the use of cultural devices that characterize them. The breakthrough is possible thanks to the technological innovations.

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