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Rhythm as Form of Power in Archaic and Ancient Societies (part 3)

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

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Sommaire

- [From Society to State Rhythms](#)
- [Rhythmic Monarchy in Ancient China \(Granet - 1934\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

From Society to State Rhythms

Mauss and Evans-Pritchard provided also a few hints concerning the transition from societies in which politics was immanent in trade and conflict rhythms to more complex ones in which an embryo of state power had already emerged. During this intermediary stage, the latter still partly followed the rhythms of society.

Mauss noted that when, in archaic societies, authority was embodied in the form of chieftaincy or kingship, it was not always continuous in time, nor valid everywhere in space, but was most often modeled on social rhythms. He cites, in this regard, the institution of "the war chief and peace chief" or "in Porto-Novo, the king of the day and the king of the night, according to a definition that is inconceivable only to us (the king must always keep watching)" (M. Mauss, "Social Cohesion...", 1932, p. 22). While already embodied in a distinct bearer, the power performed in an essentially discontinuous and alternating manner modeled on the morphological alternations of society. Mauss also pointed out that in these societies, dancing was an important manifestation of power, as if it the body movements of the king were both reflecting and commanding those of the social body. He cited in this respect the Davidic Hebrew monarchy (1006-966): "King David danced before the ark, followed by Judah, the family of Aaron, the Levites, and even all Israel. Likewise, the chief's dance is often the beginning of the people's dance." (M. Mauss, "Social Cohesion...", 1932, p. 25)

Some evidence collected by Evans-Pritchard goes in the same direction. Most probably in relation with wars with neighbors and new invaders, the Nuer have experienced during the end of the 19th century, an embryo of political unification, which shed some light on the differentiation process of the political function. This process was realized through new social figures called *guk* "prophets," who claimed to be sons of the Sky-god or possessed by one of his spirits or by the Sky-god himself, practiced prolonged fasting, cured diseases and sterility, and used to prophesy. In very particular moments in the social life, these characters enjoyed a certain power of command. However, their authority remained entirely personal and their sons generally could not maintain it for their own benefit. Evans-Pritchard interpreted the recent emergence of "prophets" in Nuerland (for about sixty years apparently by the time of writing) as the very beginning of a de-segmentation of the social system, which owed nothing to economy and resulted rather from the increase of conflicts with external peoples.

The only activities of prophets which can truly be called tribal were their initiation of raids against the Dinka and their rallying of opposition to Arab and European aggression, and it is in these actions that we see their structural significance and account for their emergence and the growth of their influence. All the important prophets about whom we have information gained their prestige by directing successful raids on the Dinka [...]. No extensive raids were undertaken without the permission and guidance of prophets, who received instructions from the Sky-gods in dreams and trances about the time and objective of attack, and often they accompanied them in person and performed sacrifices before battle. They took for themselves part of the spoil and to some extent supervised the division of the rest of it. [...] For the first time a single person symbolized, if only to a moderate degree and in a mainly spiritual and uninstitutionalized form, the unity of a tribe, for prophets are tribal figures. But they have a further significance, for their influence extended over tribal boundaries. [...] Some of the Western Nuer prophets had a reputation among a number of neighbouring tribes which united for raids at the direction of their spirits. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 188-189)

Evans-Pritchard's description showed that the authority that had emerged among the Nuer did not develop sufficiently to constantly dominate and unite the society. It was limited to the raids against the Dinka or the wars against the Arab and English invaders. It was not guaranteed to endure after the demise of the bearer of power. As in West Africa where from Mauss had drawn his example, it was still matching very closely the rhythms of society.

Granet's sociological-historical study brought further evidence concerning politics during the transition from segmentary to more complex societies. In ancient China, he noticed, the power had also experienced an intermediary form between the archaic, undifferentiated and immanent operation of society, and a new one which appeared with the differentiation of the state function. This intermediate form was already centralized but it was simultaneously divided in time, remaining therefore very close to the systemic and rhythmic immanence of power proper to segmentary societies. In the most remote antiquity (at the beginning of the second millennium?), the succession of phases of scattering and concentration had apparently been accompanied by a periodic alternation of chiefs.

The inauguration feast for a new era consisted in a ritual fight opposing two chiefs each helped by a second. They represented two complementary groups, two halves of society, which, by rotation, shared the authority. [...] A ritual battle brought the representatives of the two complementary groups to power. A two-beat rhythm, based on simple opposition and simple alternation, then controlled the social organization. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 106)

Given the length of the period involved and the extreme scarcity of extant documentation, this reconstruction was obviously fragile. However, it was not absurd and deserved to be taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, it converged not only with Mauss' but also with Evans-Pritchard's previous remarks.

This short series of evidence was naturally not sufficient to be fully significant, not including the fact that each piece could not prove anything clearly without being reinserted in complete monographs. It nonetheless strongly suggested how power, after having been for ages immanent in the operation of the social body, began to separate from it, without entirely opposing it. Since it kept following the rhythms of society, it remained, at least for a certain period of time, varying and discontinuous in time. Only in a second phase, the power freed itself from its old rhythmic match with society and ensured its own temporal and spatial permanence, opening up one of the major issues that have been raised ever since: what relationship should a state maintain with the rhythms of the society it tries to rule? And conversely, what kind of rhythms should a society expect from the state which dominates her?

Rhythmic Monarchy in Ancient China (Granet - 1934)

Admittedly, Granet's reconstruction of the seasonal morphological variations of the societies in the very ancient Chinese antiquity remained, as we saw, quite hypothetical, but it was a different matter with the social forms of the feudal period, which despite its remoteness were much better known. Ancient Chinese societies experienced, from the middle of the second millennium BC and perhaps even before, radical transformations. In the lower valley of the Huang He - Yellow River, a relatively centralized state appeared, led by a king with priestly functions residing in a walled city-palace (legendary Xia dynasty and Shang dynasty). After that archaic time succeeded between the 10th and 5th century BC, a period during which the monarchy had to count more and more with noble, allied or rival principalities (Zhou dynasty which formally lasted until 256 BC). This state was transformed into a feudal state whose constitution is known to us, at least in general terms: the royal territories were situated in the center and surrounded by the domains of the vassals. But after 771, the Zhou were driven from their capital and moved east to Lo Yang.

Rhythm as Form of Power in Archaic and Ancient Societies (part 3)

Several great vassals became completely independent, some cities gained importance as new kingdoms appeared all around the Chinese kingdom. The incessant wars between these different political units disorganized the Chinese society and impoverished the nobility. However, as early as the 6th century BC, there was a general tendency to recreate monarchical institutions: written law, taxes in kind, division into administrative districts. In the second half of the 5th century BC, China was divided into several kingdoms, leaving only a very small area to the Zhou. The period witnessed the formation of centralized military states, more urbanized and administered by civil servants (Warring States period). The greatest among these kingdoms absorbed piece by piece the smaller ones. Towards the end of the 3rd century, the most powerful of them finally unified the whole of the Chinese country and founded the first Empire (Qin then Han dynasties in 221 BC and 206 BC).

Granet suggested an interesting hypothesis concerning the various powers during the period of the priestly kings and that of the feudal lords that followed it. These powers, traditionally regarded as simply based on religion (sacrifices to the spirits of nature, oracles, family cults) and matrimonial alliances, patron-client relationship, homage links or even on strength, would also have taken advantage of, and substituted for, the old form of rhythmic cohesion specific to archaic social groups. Their emergence would testify to the differentiation and institutionalization of a political principle hitherto immanent to society. The evolution of categories of thought, as it could be reconstructed from extant documents, suggested that kings and vassals had erected their powers by transforming into a *center* the axis which, in the equinoctial festivals, separated the two social groups identified by the sets of emblems Yin and Yang, which constituted the principle of order and authority, the rhythmic basis of archaic Chinese societies.

There is no order, indeed, whether liturgical or geographical, temporal or spatial, without assuming that it has, so to speak, as guarantor, an eminent power whose place, seen in Space, seems central. This conception reflects a progress in the social organization which is now oriented towards an ideal of hierarchy and relative stability. The notion of center whose importance is relative to this progress is far from being primitive: it has replaced the notion of axis. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 104, my trans.)

The prehistoric origin of the state power (whether priestly monarchic or feudal) could account for its specific rhythmic nature and finally reveal a dimension of politics mostly ignored by political philosophy, as well as political and social science.

Granet supported this rhythmic redefinition of power by a number of empirical evidence. The first, of which we have already spoken, was that calendars and myths dating back to the feudal period retained the memory of the transition from one type of organization to another. They mix two heterogeneous ways of comprehending reality.

The role played by the latter [the notion of axis] remains perceptible in the calendars of the feudal age in which we see that the days surrounding the two solstices deserve a particular respect. This role is even more noticeable in the various archaic myths. In them is remembered a time when the conception of a hierarchical order of Space and Time tended to replace a representation of the universe and society simply based on the ideas of opposition and alternation. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 104, my trans.)

On the other hand, the texts from the feudal period through which we discerned the symbolic organization of political rituals also showed a multiplication of ancient classifications (four directions, four seasons, four colors, red, green, white, black) and their association with a totally new emblem, which was perhaps itself the cause of their multiplying: the center, represented by the numbers one or five and the yellow color. So quaternary and quinary rhythms may

have been superimposed upon the old dual rhythm.

The king was therefore perceived as the one who not only organized Time and Space, by distributing and prioritizing regions and periods, but above all who, thanks to his rhythmic power, made them what they were and allowed them to unfold around him, before and after him. Royal power was, in a way, the *I-here-now* from which social space-time could rhythmically form.

The political space was conceived as a set of four sectors touching each other by the spikes and generated by their center, or even as a hierarchical space formed of five nested squares.

In the center is the royal domain; on the borders, the barbarian marches. In the three median squares live the vassals, called to the court more or less frequently according to the distance of their domain. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 94, my trans.)

During the enthronement ceremonies,

the vassals of the five nested squares which make up the Empire come back to the capital, where the entire space must be recreated for a time. The King then opens the doors of his square city and, expelling the wicked to the four borders of the world, he receives the guests of the four Directions. Even in the far reaches of the universe, he qualifies the different spaces. In the same way, he distinguishes them by distributing emblems conforming to the different sites, he hierarchizes them by conferring the insignia which reveal the unequal dignities. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 95, my trans.)

Similarly, during public cults

the faithful were formed into a square. The Altar of the Earth, around which large gatherings were usually made, was a square mound; its summit was covered with yellow earth (color of the center); its sides (turned towards the four directions), covered with green, red, white or black earth. *This sacred square represents the totality of the Empire.* (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 91, my trans.)

The ritual journeys of the king in his Empire followed the same pattern.

The King spends four years receiving the visit of the vassals; after which, he renders the visits and goes through the fiefs. He cannot fail to tour the Empire every *five* years. He sets his course so as to be in the East at the Spring Equinox, in the South at the Summer solstice, in the West in the heart of the Autumn, in the North at the height of Winter. At each of these cardinal stations, the suzerain gives audience to the feudatories of one of the four directions. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 94, my trans.)

Rhythm as Form of Power in Archaic and Ancient Societies (part 3)

Through these rituals the king rhythmically instituted and organized around him a hierarchical spatial order.

The dignity of spaces results from a kind of *rhythmic creation* [...] The Chief carefully arranges the space by adapting the scopes to the durations [*les étendues aux durées*], but the reason for its sovereign circulation is first of all in the necessity of a rhythmic reconstitution of the Extension [*l'Étendue*]. The five-year reconstitution revives the cohesion it inaugurated by taking power [...] By classifying and distributing in regulated time the groups that make up human society, the Chief manages to *institute and prolong* a certain order in Space. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 94-95, my trans.)

Similarly, time seemed to be set up by the rhythmic power of the King. The old cyclical arrangement in four seasons was still significant but it was now included within the politico-liturgical order of the year and, even more broadly, within the whole history, around the *centers* constituted by the royal enthronement and its subsequent anniversaries. During these ceremonies, the king not only organized the space, it also distinguished the different periods of history by promulgating a new calendar which divided it into dynasties, reigns, portions of reign. But this ritual, like any other inaugural ritual, created less a beginning than a middle of time that allowed to rhythmize the duration not, as a matter of fact, in the sense that it divided it into equal periods but in the sense of *an organizing movement emanating from the middle*.

Although it seems initial, the inaugural rites of birth, marriage, death, have the value of central rites. The power they release seems to expand like a wave. Forward and backward, and marking, so to speak, the peaks of a series of concentric undulations, ceremonies, which separate times of rest, contribute to the same result as the central rite. This kind of rhythmic propagation, which commands the organization of a liturgical ensemble, is indicated by the use of certain numbers. In order to emphasize the wholeness of any liturgy, the number one is the starting point, because it is the emblem of the total. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 97, my trans.)

History itself was experienced as rhythmic.

The termination of the ceremonies distributed around the central gesture are most often indicated by the number 3 (= 30), 5 (= 50) and 7 (= 70) which serve to rhythmize Time. The liturgical periods are not the only ones that are felt as rhythmic and total. *Historical time* does not appear otherwise. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 98, my trans.)

The sovereign, as it were, did not inaugurate new times but set up a center of Time itself and thus, by rhythmically producing it forwards and backwards, the whole Duration. Consequently, the rituals that were regularly performed by the ruler in the House of the Calendar, the *Ming t'ang*, had for essential purpose to ensure the center from which the Time developed in both future and past directions.

Built on a square base, because the Earth is square, this house must be covered with a thatched roof, round in the manner of Heaven. Every year and throughout the year, the sovereign circulates under this roof. By placing himself in the proper direction, he successively inaugurates the seasons and the months. [...] But the chief cannot continue indefinitely with its peripheral circulation, under the risk of never wearing the insignia that correspond to the Center and are the prerogatives of the suzerain. Hence, when the third month of the Summer ends, he interrupts the work which enables him to single out the various durations. He then dresses in yellow, and, ceasing to imitate the march of the sun, goes to the center of the *Ming t'ang*. If he wants to animate Space, he must occupy this royal place and, as soon as he stops there, it is from there that he seems to animate Time: he has provided the year with a center. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 103, my trans.)

Rhythm as Form of Power in Archaic and Ancient Societies (part 3)

Granet's analyses were quite remarkable and opened new paths for political theory. Mauss and Evans-Pritchard had shown that social cohesion and power in archaic societies resulted from the very rhythms of society. They were in a way immanent in them. Thanks to the work of Granet, this phenomenon appeared more general than expected and concerning, in one way or another, any form of power. Through the ancient Chinese monarchy and feudalism, a constitutive phenomenon of politics emerged. *Political power had been able to "dissociate" itself from society and ensure its own "continuity" only by concentrating and perpetuating, while making them more complex, the rhythms with which society had been (re)produced until then. The rhythmic nature of the Chinese royal power showed that it had been established by differentiation and institutionalization of the immanent rhythmic functioning of the old segmentary societies.*

The Chief or King, who was now considered as the center rhythmically originating Space, Time and the People itself, was in fact the result of a process of social distinction and institutionalization of the axis around which the two series of Yin and Yang emblems formerly interacted in their rhythmic production of the Universe.

Duration and extension seemed to fully exist only where they were socialized: subject to a necessary periodic creation, they seemed to emanate of a kind of center. This allowed the spatial representations to influence the representation of Time which, first, had informed them. The idea that durations as extensions were of varied nature was superimposed on that that they were of unequal value. This progress occurred as soon as the representation of Space was no longer commanded by the sight of two camps lined by bands confronting each other face to face, but by that of a formation in square, the axial line separating the parties having resorbed in a center occupied by a Chief. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 112, my trans.)

With the center appeared a new social organization.

This last distribution implies an increase in the complication of the social structure. The latter is no longer based on a division into two complementary groups that dominate in turns. It is based on a federal organization. Placed in a point of convergence, the suzerain whose virtue governs the confederation seems mainly to be busy unifying the multifariousness. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 112, my trans.)

This sociological interpretation enabled Granet to shed some light on the relationship between Yin, Yang and Tao categories. The latter was probably posterior to the former and could date, in all likelihood, from the period of constitution of the royal power from the 17th or the 15th century BC. The infinite games between Yin and Yang did not need any center. They were organized, just like the archaic societies whose functioning they represented, around an immanent axis. The Tao, however, as the King, was the central power which established and made rhythmically unfold the Universe.

If Yin and Yang form a *couple* and seem jointly to preside over the rhythm that founded the Universal Order, it is because their conception dates from an age of history in which the principle of rotation was sufficient to regulate the social activity distributed between two complementary groups. The Tao's conception goes back to a less archaic era; it could only become explicit at a time when the structure of society was more complicated and in those circles where the authority of chiefs, who legitimately presented themselves as the only authors of the order in the world, was revered: then and only there, the idea of a *unique and central* power of animation could be imagined. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 262, my trans.)

To be followed