

Ossendowski's Sources

by

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If older readers, whose memories go back to the end of the First World War, are intrigued to come across the name of Ferdinand Ossendowski in these pages they will assuredly be even more astonished to learn the circumstances that brought this about. In fact, two rather extraordinary coincidences are involved: firstly, I discovered that two Polish friends of my sister, living in the upper storey of her house in London, had known Ossendowski in Warsaw and, needless to say, I put several questions to them about him; and secondly, in following up what they had told me, I discovered something even more astonishing, namely, that the *Tilopa Hutukhtu*,¹ a Mongolian Lama who is venerated throughout the Lamaist world and whom I had known for years, had been resident in that very monastery of *Narobanchin* where Ossendowski had stayed on two occasions during his trip through Mongolia in 1920; had I only known that the *Hutukhtu* had been there at that period, how many further questions should I have been able to put to him!² The Lama, who subsequently became the spiritual head of a community of Kalmuk refugees in New Jersey in the U.S.A., was not only very old but also ailing, and this inevitably limited the number of questions one could ask him; however, in November 1964 I was able to visit him and hear certain important details about Ossendowski directly; but I am anticipating somewhat, and it would be better to retrace the steps which led, one by one, to the fairly copious documentation on which this article is based.

Certain readers may well remember the last occasion when Ossendowski was the subject of speculation: this was in the July—November 1951 number of *Études Traditionnelles* which was devoted to the memory of René Guénon shortly after his death and to which I had contributed an article on “Guénon and Buddhism”. In this I had raised the not implausible hypothesis that

¹ *Hutukhtu* in Mongolian indicates a Lama of “emanationist” lineage, that is, one who serves as a “human support” for a given spiritual influence: these Lamas, the most famous of whom is the Dalai Lama, are the same as those called “living Buddha’s” by European travelers (including Ossendowski), although this term is quite improper. The Tibetan term corresponding to *Hutukhtu* is *Lama Tulku*.

² Ossendowski speaks in his book only of the *Narobanchin Hutukhtu* (he writes *Narabanchi*) and he seems to be unaware only that this monastery sheltered two Lamas of the same rank, the other being the *Tilopa Hutukhtu*; he even appears to have combined these two Lamas into a single personage.

Ossendowski had heard in Mongolia about the mysterious Kingdom of Shambhala³ and its King; this legend, current in all Lamaist countries, shows certain points of similarity with the story of *Agarttha* as found in the pages of Saint-Yves d'Alveydre and later in Ossendowski's celebrated book *Beasts, Men and Gods*; I had then quoted the opinion of the Russian professor George Roerich, who was my neighbor in Kalimpong in the Himalayan foothills and who had himself crossed Mongolia several years after the First World War; according to Roerich, Ossendowski, being already acquainted with the writings of Saint-Yves,⁴ could well have thought that he recognized this author's *Agarttha* in the story of *Shambhala* and then felt justified in transposing their names for an eventual readership in Europe: he had occasionally worked as a journalist in St. Petersburg, and such a procedure on his part would have been far from untypical given his penchant, evident in all his writings, for highly colored reporting; to suppose this, even if it meant admitting a certain lack of scruple on the writer's part, would be less damning than the accusation of pure and simple plagiarism that Ossendowski's book inevitably attracted when it first appeared. In any case, this hypothesis related to *Shambhala* was by no means inherently improbable; one should add, however, that a detailed comparison of the two legends has not brought anything to light that would justify our perceiving a true assimilation; there is a superficial resemblance, but nothing more.⁵

³ The original source of this legend is the *Kalacakra Tantra* ("the Wheel of Time", *Tüingor* in Tibetan) through the intervention of which it entered the Lamaist world where it provides the support for a known initiatic path. The great *Dubtop* saints (in Sanskrit, *Mahasiddhas*) are supposed, after living on the earth, to retire to *Shambhala* situated symbolically in the North, there to await the end of the present cycle and the restitution of the golden age after the victorious war waged by the King of Shambhala against the unbelievers of this world.

⁴ In his preface to *Le Roi du Monde*, René Guénon expressed the opinion that it was very unlikely that Ossendowski had ever known the posthumous book of Saint-Yves: he mentions among other things the absence of a Russian translation, which seems to imply that he thought Ossendowski could not read French. In fact he did know this language, like most educated people in Russia and Poland at this period; he mentions it himself in one of his books. We must not lose sight of the fact that members of the general bourgeoisie of these countries, as well as the aristocracy, travelled a great deal in Western Europe and were avid readers of foreign literature of all kinds including occultism in every form. In his book *The Dark Shadow of the East*, Ossendowski declares that French occultism was all the rage in Saint Petersburg around 1897 when Papus was staying there. It is by no means improbable; therefore, that *Mission de l'Inde* should have arrived in Russian shortly after its appearance in France, although there is no definite proof of this.

⁵ Among the Tibetan sources there exists a treatise by a *Panchen Lama* of the eighteenth century under the name of the *Book of the Path to Shambhala*, a German translation of which by Professor Grunwedel, accompanied by the Tibetan text, appeared in Munich in 1915; this professor had been entrusted by Prince Ukhtomsky, Governor of Eastern Siberia, to study the religion and culture of the *Buriat* Mongols who live in the area south of Lake Baikal. As Doctor Grunwedel said, the *Panchen Lama's* book is based

Such being the case, the value of the testimony purveyed by the Polish traveler could only be judged on its own merits, by reviewing everything published by him on the subject of the *Agarttha* tradition in Mongolia and, when still possible, by submitting it to the opinion of competent traditional authorities.

Before going any further, one should perhaps attempt to summarize the career of Ferdinand Ossendowski in order to place his work in the context of the period. Before the First World War Ossendowski, like many of his Polish expatriates with technical knowledge useful to the government of the Tsar, had undertaken several expeditions as a geologist with a view to exploiting the mineral resources of Siberia, particularly in the more remote areas. His second book tells of his frequently perilous adventures; it is difficult even so to believe that the innumerable bandits, murderers and members of fanatical sects that Ossendowski brings together in this volume could fall to the experience of one and the same individual despite the chaotic conditions of which he speaks. The most pleasing side of this book is the description of the great virgin forests teeming with game of all kinds; but he spoils it all by yielding constantly to a passion for hunting which goes far beyond what a sincere love of nature would allow; wherever he goes massacre follows! One would have preferred to pass over this side of the story in silence in order to remain in contemplation of a paradise that was all but untouched and comparable with North America before the advent of the Pale-faces.

During the periods he passed in St. Petersburg, Ossendowski enjoyed the friendship of the Prime Minister Count Witte, whose liberal leanings inspired Ossendowski's praise. His relations with members of the highest aristocracy enabled him to enter society in the capital; another, and later, book⁶ describes the blend of luxurious living and brutality, superstition and political irresponsibility which infected the higher classes in Russian during the last days of the *ancien régime*; he also paints the life of the Russian people in no less somber tints, but it is hardly possible to take everything he says entirely seriously for his comments, which always veer towards the sensational, reveal the author as being imbued with a markedly Western and Catholic prejudice (anti-Russian, therefore, and anti-Orthodox) and as a liberal progressive conforming to the "intellectual" type of his age.

Taken unawares in Siberia by the 1917 revolution Ossendowski, who had declared himself entirely opposed to nascent Bolshevism, went to serve under Admiral Kolchak, chief of the counter-revolutionary forces. It was after the collapse of Kolchak's government that Ossendowski, warned of imminent arrest by the Reds, set out for Mongolia with the intention of reaching Peking and thence of returning to Poland which had now become independent; this extremely hazardous journey forms the subject of his most celebrated book, which attracted the attention of René Guénon.

on the *Kalacakra Tantra* referred to above. There is no detail in this book that recalls *Agarttha* in any way.

⁶ *The Dark Shadow of the East*, published in Warsaw in 1923.

After returning to Europe, Ossendowski spent most of his time in Warsaw, where he married a gifted and charming violinist; several of his books saw the light during these years, including a study of Stalin which earned him the lively hostility of the Communists. Ossendowski died shortly after the end of the Second World War.

People who knew him, and whom I was able to ask about his character and the things that interested him, have told me that he never spoke about the adventures that formed the theme of his travel stories, contrary to the usual tendency; he apparently preferred to save his story-telling talents for the printed word. One lady who knew him very well recounted that he had, as a writer, a mysterious flair for what would attract money. Two people said that he had some slight interest in the occult, but I was quite unable to elicit any precise information about this. It remains therefore to come back to Asia to seek out such details as might dispel the obscurity which has, up to now, enshrouded the writings of Ferdinand Ossendowski.

Among our sources of information it is quite clearly those originating in Mongolia that are the most important, to say nothing of the fact that they include the single direct testimony that remained accessible, namely, that of *Tilopa Hutukhtu*. However, at the very moment when I was setting about the task of uncovering all the various strands of evidence, the *Hutukhtu* had just undergone a serious operation and one could only await its results before venturing any kind of question to him; as for other Mongolian Lamas whom I wished to consult, it would take some time to establish contact with them, helped by Tibetan intermediaries, in the different parts of India they were living in. Meanwhile, however, the Hindu world which had so far been taken as the place of origin of an “Indo-Mongolian legend of *Agarttha*” offered a supplementary field of research: it was to India therefore that I directed my first list of questions with the help of Brahmin friends who had a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit and a familiar acquaintance from childhood with the entire traditional mythology of their homeland.

The crux of my questions was as follows: is there some source which will actually confirm the existence of a tradition associated with the name *Agarttha* or of an analogous tradition under another name? Is the name *Agarttha* semantically feasible in Sanskrit and, in that case, what is its literal meaning? To make even surer, I begged my friends to put the same questions to other authorities, the most eminent being Professor V. Raghavan of Madras. I shall here summarize the answers received from India which were, as the reader will see for himself, unanimously negative.

Nobody in fact accepted that the root of the word “*Agarttha*”, of which the first *a* would presumably be the negative prefix, actually exists in Sanskrit: in this regard the opinion of the eminent Sanskritist Dr. Meinrad Scheller, to whom my Indian friends also put the question, coincided with that of the Brahmins; the form *Agarttha* has absolutely no philological basis. The name *vattan* or *vattanan* which Saint-Yves, and Ossendowski after him, attribute to the mysterious initiatic language is entirely imaginary: the Brahmins too expressed the same opinion. The name *Brāhatmah* which Saint-Yves gives to the supreme pontiff of *Agarttha*, is

impossible in Sanskrit as Guénon too declared—his correction to *Brahmātmā* would be acceptable as meaning “he whose spirit is *Brahman*” or some such sense. As for the titles *Mahātmā* and *Mahānga* attributed to the pontiff’s two “assessors”, the first is currently accorded to anyone who shows somewhat exceptional spiritual traits—Mahātmā Gandhi for example - but does not correspond in any way to a specific function; the name *Mahānga*, which signifies “great-bodied” or “mighty-limbed”, is practically meaningless here. There is no underworld kingdom known to Hinduism recalling Saint-Yves’s description: if Professor Raghavan who has the broadest possible acquaintance with traditional material, was unable to put his finger on any Hindu legend that might furnish a basis, whether directly or in distorted form, for the account of this French author,⁷ one can only conclude that it is a piece of pure fantasy originating in the West; and this conclusion is strengthened by the very style⁸ of the so-called legend.

But let us come back to Mongolia: it was of this country that Ossendowski alleged two facts, namely the story of *Agartha* (sic) and the cult of *Rama*, the supposed existence of which in Central Asia particularly impressed René Guénon. The evidence falls into two categories that offered by the text of *Beasts, Men and Gods* and, later, the information elicited from living Mongolian Lamas including the *Tilopa Hutukhtu*. Let us take them one by one.

The first thing that strikes one on reading Ossendowski is the great number of inaccuracies in terminology and historical detail that are found in his writings especially when the phenomenon of tradition is involved in any form whatsoever; the mixture of disparate and wrongly defined elements frequently rises to a level that can only be described as grotesque. For my own part, until last year I knew *Beasts, Men and Gods* only through the quotations that occur in René Guénon’s *Le Roi du Monde*; it is only quite recently, after the problem of Ossendowski’s sources began to interest me directly, that I set about studying this text with some care. One of the first questions that arose in my mind in the course of my reading, given the large number of flagrant inaccuracies I noted, was the following: what degree of communication could there possibly have been between the Polish traveler and his Asian hosts to make these

⁷ Or Louis Jacolliot before him for, according to René Guénon, it was he who first mentioned a legend of *Agartha*: although Guénon described him as “hardly a serious writer”, this has not prevented the supposition that he may perhaps have heard some echo of this legend during his stay in India.

⁸ Every traditional mythology has its own style which can be recognized without difficulty. What characterizes the description of *Agartha* down to the smallest detail is the absence of the symbolist spirit found in every genuinely Oriental mythology; here one encounters only grossly material images and this, more than anything else, betrays the story’s nontraditional and Western origin. Besides, what shall we make of the fact that Saint-Yves boasts of a person bearing the bizarre name of “Prince Hardjij Schariff” as being his master who “initiated him” (sic) into the knowledge of Sanskrit? This individual’s photograph does not in the least suggest a native of India; it could perhaps be an Albanian, or some European dressed up as a make-belief Turk for a fancy-dress ball!

misunderstandings possible? Judging by what he said himself, he had no difficulty in making himself understood even when the conversation turned into abstruse pathways, which implies an adequate mastery of the language; however, as will shortly be seen, it is precisely in this respect that the author's veracity is suspect.

To give a striking example of the kind of confusion that such doubts raised in my mind, Ossendowski frequently states, and repeats in the glossary at the end of his book, that "doctor" Lamas in Mongolia are called *Ta Lama* whereas "doctors of theology" are known as *maramba*. My knowledge of the Tibetan language (for it is Tibetan that is used for monastic titles) made me suspect that *maramba* should actually be read *man-ramba*, which means "healer" and has nothing to do with "theology". *Ta Lama*, the correct form of which would be *Da Lama*, signifies "Grand Lama" and is an honorific title (Chinese) bestowed by the emperors on the heads of important Lamaist monasteries, several of whom still carry it in our own days. It was clear that Ossendowski had confused these two terms in a way that hardly suggested a profound knowledge of the language: imagine a foreigner travelling across France and supposedly able to speak French fluently who then brings out a book in which he maintains that those who tend the sick are called "abbés" and that churchmen of higher rank go by the name of "médecins"—this is what it amounts to! This single detail is enough to inspire the greatest distrust in Ossendowski's value as a witness.

As for other inaccuracies that burden Ossendowski's pages, let me quote a few examples. The monastery city of *Ta Kure* (= "Urga") at this period had ten thousand inhabitants and not sixty thousand as Ossendowski says; even so, this number exceeded the population of all the great universities of the Lamaist world among which *Drepung*, near Lhasa, took second place with its eight thousand souls. The founder of the order of "Yellow Caps" (Gelugpas), to which the Dalai Lama belongs, was *Tsong Khapa*; Ossendowski consistently gives it as "*Paspa*", a name which none of my erudite Tibetan friends has been able to identify although this is, quite clearly, a case of confusion. It is hardly necessary to tell the reader that the "poisoner Lamas" whose profession, according to Ossendowski, was to eliminate persons considered too dangerous, has never existed outside this author's all too fertile imagination! Most of what is said in *Beasts, Men and Gods* about the Pontiff of Urga (frequently known in the West as the "*Bogdo Khan*") is inaccurate:⁹ he is linked neither with the spirit of the Buddha *Amitābha* nor with the *Bodhisattva Chenrezig (Avalokiteśvara)* of whom the *Panchen Lama* and *Dalai Lama* respectively are the human supports.

⁹ It is worth noting that the title "*Bogdo Khan*" (better written *Bogd Khan*) does not indicate any permanent function in the Lamaist hierarchy as Ossendowski supposes, like many other ill informed Europeans. The Mongols gave this title to the Manchu Emperor, and it was only after the Chinese revolution of 1912 that the last of the Lamas of *Ta Kure* received the title on being proclaimed sovereign of a united and independent Mongolia.

Still according to Ossendowski, whenever a successor needs to be elected to the Grand Lama of Mongolia, the evidence touching his candidature is submitted to the *Panchen Lama* in Tibet who then proceeds to verify it by reference to “*the runes of Rama*” (this mishmash of forms is grotesque); he then returns the case to the *Dalai Lama* for definitive confirmation. The truth is that neither one nor the other of the great Lamas of Tibet plays any special role in the election of the Mongolian Pontiff: Ossendowski drew these details from his own imagination. The reference in “*Le Roi du Monde*”, based on Ossendowski’s statements, to a “ternary” in Lamaism, the third member of which is the Lama of Urga, does not correspond either to any reality. Historically and by reason of their “mythological” relationships,¹⁰ the *Dalai Lama* and the *Panchen Lama* stand together; there has never been any question of their having any associate or of their being any kind of complementary third function.¹¹

Aside from any question of detail, the facts as put by Ossendowski come up against two inherent improbabilities: firstly, we are asked to believe that a large number of notables, Lamas, tribal chiefs and so forth were ready to share information on all kinds of subjects considered sacred or even “esoteric” with the first individual that came along, an unknown European of specifically worldly caste and unapprised of the most elementary facts of the Buddhist religion, and this is at a time when partisan warfare was raging and Bolshevik agents and spies were hiding behind every corner. But this book would have us believe that everyone rushed to confide his intimate secrets to this wayfarer without the slightest preliminary safeguards.

This claim, which pervades the whole book, is vitiated by one insurmountable psychological obstacle: true, Tibetans and Mongolians are for the most part frank and hospitable to strangers, but this does not mean that they are lacking in elementary prudence—quite the contrary. They may seem at first sight open and easy to approach but, in reality, no people anywhere is less inclined than the Yellow Races to gossip with anyone before knowing what sort of person they

¹⁰ The *Bodhisattva Chenrezig* emerged from the head of the *Buddha Amitābha* and corresponds, in some way, to his “dynamic” aspect, of which Universal Compassion is the most typical expression. For this reason the Dalai Lama, who is the chief representative of *Chenrezig* on the earth and symbolically incarnates this virtue, plays a relatively more “active” role among men—which goes some way to explain the fact that he exercises temporal power; the Panchen Lama, despite the fact that he represents the principal aspect of the *Bodhisattva*, limits himself to a relatively “static” role. These few remarks will perhaps give some idea of Tibetan theory concerning the relationship between the two great *Gelugpa* Lamas.

¹¹ It is conventional to assign the third place among the leading Lamas of Tibet to the *Sakya* Lama because it was he who was nominated, during the period of Mongol domination, as the viceroy of the Great Khan for the Tibetan region. This state of affairs was perpetuated under the Mongol dynasty in China, but came to an end with the advent of the purely Chinese Ming dynasty. In any even there is no question here of a specific function.

are dealing with; no one knows better how to be discreet whilst remaining outwardly perfectly friendly.

The second improbability encountered in the pages of Ossendowski concerns his actual accounts of so-called mysteries, for what he considers such is entirely lacking in genuinely esoteric content, never goes beyond the phenomenal order and deals for the most part with entirely insignificant considerations: the same could be said of Saint-Yves, with even greater justification.

However, let us suppose that Ossendowski, having read Saint-Yves, did in fact come across allusions in Mongolia to *Agarttha* and its King; this would have been a sufficiently remarkable coincidence in the circumstances; and this is how the matter has been seen up to now. Then, let us suppose that it was the cult of *Rama*, also mentioned by Saint-Yves, rather than *Agarttha* that Ossendowski encountered among the Mongols: again it would be a remarkable coincidence. But that both coincidences should occur simultaneously is so very improbable, however one looks at it, that there is obviously no other explanation than that of wholesale plagiarism from Saint-Yves.

One further point should be mentioned which was previously taken as telling in Ossendowski's favor but which will be interpreted in quite the contrary sense by those who are acquainted with the customs of the Lamaist world. We know that the names given by Saint-Yves as *Agarttha*, *Brahatmah*, *Mahatma* and *Mahanga* reappear in Ossendowski in the somewhat peculiar guise of *Agartthi*, *Brahytma*, *Mahytma* and *Mahynga*: one could well find it intriguing—howbeit superfluous—to enquire why he writes an “i” in the first and “y” in the other three, which corresponds to no intelligible phonetic distinction. René Guénon in *Le Roi du Monde* took the trouble to comment on this difference in spelling and expressed the following opinion against the hypothesis of plagiarism: “we do not really see why he (Ossendowski) should have changed the form of certain words, writing *Agartthi* for example instead of *Agarttha*; on the contrary, this becomes quite explicable if he had from a Mongolian source what Saint-Yves had from a Hindu one...”; This argument which takes no account of the make-beliefs that are always open to a fabricator, loses much of its force when we consider the form of transcription adopted by Tibetan translators for such Sanskrit terms (names and *mantras*) as have passed into the sacred literature of Lamaism; in this respect Tibet and Mongolia fall together, since the liturgical language of both is classical Tibetan. Since certain Sanskrit consonants are lacking in Tibetan, and vice-versa, some phonetic adjustments are necessary; but this does not apply to the vowels which can all be reproduced without difficulty in the system worked out in the age of the great translators, from the seventh to the tenth century of our era; the substitution of “i” for “a” is hardly conceivable since it runs counter to a scrupulously established linguistic usage; *Mahytma* for *Mahatma* produces a completely grotesque impression and simply sounds wrong. The evidence of these names does not strengthen the case for the defense; on the contrary, it strengthens the hand of Ossendowski's critics.

It remains to us now only to consider the replies received to questions put to Mongol authorities, most of whom were members of the Dalai Lama's entourage who accompanied him on his flight to India in 1959; one of these carries the title of *Da Lama*, mistranslated by Ossendowski as "doctor". To these we must add two other persons who are particularly well informed and who were when I wrote to them, living in America in the community of Kalmuk refugees in New Jersey; one of these was the *Tilopa Hutukhta*, as I explained above.

As with the Brahmins who commented on Saint-Yves, the Mongol Lamas and *Geshes*¹² were unanimous in rejecting everything that Ossendowski wrote about the underworld kingdom, the "King of the World" and the cult of *Rama*. Three of my correspondents added that the only underworld kingdom known to the Mongols was that of *Yama*, the judge of the dead. As for *Rama*, one of them said that a goddess of this name, and a fairly obscure one at that, had her place in the mythology of his country, for it was said that she had created a spring, to help the dwellers in a land lacking water, at the request of *Padma Sambhava*¹³ the founder of Lamaism—and this is all that could be stated in this context.¹⁴

Now it is worth noting that everywhere in Ossendowski's book the stories of *Agartthi* and the "King of the World" are presented as being generally known among the Mongols; he mentions not only high Lamas and monks but also lay nobleman and ordinary people—a shepherd for instance—who spoke to him on this subject under different circumstances and on many different occasions. It would follow from this that the Lamas and scholars who answered

¹² In Tibetan, *Geshe* indicates a university degree which we could well translate as "scholastic doctor"; it takes about ten years of study to obtain this. Among the literate monks of the *Gelugpa* Order, the Mongols are particularly renowned for their vast erudition.

¹³ There is no question here of an historical fact, for *Padma Sambhava* was never in Mongolia, which was converted to Buddhism no earlier than eight centuries after him; it refers to a purely symbolical presence. Almost everywhere in Lamaist countries there are cases where *Padma Sambhava*, "the precious Guru", is reputed to have meditated. His meeting with the goddess *Rama* falls into the category of "pious fictions"; these have nonetheless a positive sense and many examples are offered by the traditional world.

¹⁴ Whilst we are on the subject of *Rama*, it is worth quoting a passage from a book that Ossendowski published in 1926 after a visit with his wife to North Africa. Speaking of Arab medicine he remarks that much of it is based on an ancient treatise bearing the name of *Rhama* (*sic*). Further on he says: "This name *Rhama* reminds me of the *Rama* of Central Asia whom the Lamaists consider as magus, doctor and chief. The resemblance between the name of this book and the word '*Brahman*' of the cult of the *Veda* in India is also very suggestive—it is quite possible that the Musulmans took elements for their book *Rhama* from India during their struggle against Buddhism". For the enlightenment of the reader we must add that this treatise is entitled *Kitab ar-Rahmah fi-t-Tibb* ("The Book of Mercy concerning Medicine"). The reader will be able to judge from this very typical example how far the linguistic and historical notions of the author extend. And if he should marvel at the manifold absurdities that Ossendowski links with the name *Rama*, this is as nothing compared with the absurdity of putting the name of Babylon into the mouth of a Mongol Lama, as he does in one passage from his most celebrated book.

my questions would necessarily have known something of this tradition, if tradition there were. Neither Mongolia nor Tibet is overpopulated: communication from one end of the land to the other in this traditional world is all the closer; in no way could a legend as widespread in 1920 as Ossendowski claimed incur utter oblivion a few years later: the least that can be said is that the rejection of both the name and the content of this legend by a number of aged and extremely knowledgeable Lamas is difficult to dismiss as direct and negative testimony. It remains to add one piece of direct witness, that of the *Tilopa Hutukhtu* which, for that reason, outweighs all the rest.

As I explained above, when I discovered, quite unexpectedly and after many years, that my friend the *Hutukhtu* had been present during Ossendowski's visit to *Narobanchin*, the Lama had just undergone a serious operation from which it was by no means certain that he would recover; in fact, after holding out for a time, he died in New York six months after my visit. I had to bridle my impatience and wait several months before it was possible for me to gather the *Hutukhtu's* invaluable evidence, by writing in the first place and by word of mouth later. For him I had reserved one vital query which he alone could answer: how well did Ferdinand Ossendowski speak and understand Mongol? The reply of the *Tilopa Hutukhtu* left no room for doubt: Ossendowski had only a few words of Mongol and he was incapable, as the Lama emphasized, of sustaining a continuous conversation on any subject whatsoever. Then were all the lengthy discussions spoken of by Ossendowski conducted through Russian speaking interpreters? Not one word suggesting this is contained in his book, with perhaps one exception;¹⁵ on the contrary, in many cases the circumstances precluded this possibility, to say nothing of the lack of privacy necessarily implied by the presence of an intermediary when more or less secret matters are being broached! And what kind of interpreters would have been available to a traveler in Ossendowski's situation? Malmuk or Buriat camel-drivers or muleteers, or perhaps monks belonging to these tribes, or even Russian smugglers of whom there were a large number in Mongolia at that period; yet judging from what he writes, one would imagine one were listening to a free exchange of ideas without any barriers of language or dialect. But anyone who has ever had to depend on interpreters in the course of a journey is aware of the delays and misunderstandings incurred before one can reach an understanding on even the simplest matters. If such were Ossendowski's situation in Mongolia (his meetings with Russians are clearly not at issue) one wonders what motive he could have had for the dissimulation of such an important detail. To mention it would, of course, have considerably blunted the dramatic impact the author is continually striving for; all his books have in common a greater or lesser leaning towards sensational journalism; to drama is added, in *Beasts, Men and Gods*, the element

¹⁵ *Beasts, Men and Gods*, page 280 of the English edition, where he happens to mention that on one of his visits to the *Bogd Khan* he recounted to him his wartime adventures in Russia, when Prince Djam Bolon interpreted for him into Mongol.

of “mystery”, which is quite enough, in my view, to explain the lack of frankness, for nothing in the world sounds so banal as a conversation conducted with the help of interpreters.

This question of language apart, the reader may well wonder what the *Tilopa Hutukhtu* thought about the extraordinary statements authored by Ossendowski. The writer devotes a whole chapter to the story, which he attributes to the Lama of *Narobanchin*, of the “King of the World’s” appearance in the midst of an assembly in this monastery, when he made certain prophecies about events to come during the next thirty years; it would be around 1891 that this prodigious event is supposed to have taken place. If this story were true, it would clearly be utterly impossible for anyone belonging to *Narobanchin* to be totally unaware of it, and certainly not one of the two presiding Lamas; this point has already been made above, but it is of capital importance. Moreover, when the American professor Owen Lattimore of Baltimore, who knows Mongolia and speaks the language and who constantly saw to the *Hutukhtu’s* comfort after his arrival in the United States, translated for him such passages from *Beasts, Men and Gods* as might particularly interest him, the Lama seemed to find it tedious, as the Professor told me, and finally said “That’s all make belief”.

However, on another occasion, as I heard some two years after his death, the *Hutukhtu* replied to a similar question put by one of his disciples by saying that Ossendowski had been alluding to the “secret kingdom” (of Shambhala), of which he may have heard some echo during his stay in Mongolia. This opinion of the Lama agrees with the one I too had voiced at one time.

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In the light of all the accumulated evidence touching upon Ferdinand Ossendowski and his sources of information, there can no longer be any question of Saint-Yves’s being corroborated by way of Mongolia; but if the “King of the World”, as we have known him, is no longer of the company, what then of the book that bears his name and which, without Ossendowski and his questionable pronouncements, would surely have assumed a form quite other than that which is familiar to us if, indeed, it had ever seen the light of day?

There remains the myth of Shambhala a few echoes of which may well have come across to Ossendowski through his Mongol interpreters. But putting this plausible hypothesis aside, we shall conclude in any case that the sacred geography and geometry, as they were treated by Guénon in his *Le Roi du Monde* and elsewhere, remain entirely valid. The symbolism of the Center or of centers that represent it in the respective traditions—together with the associated practices of pilgrimage, sites of Celestial influence and, at the microcosmic level, the means of concentration¹⁶—all this falls concordantly together at the same time as does the quest, through corresponding forms, for the lost Gateway and the lost Word.

¹⁶ The *mandalas* on which one meditates during Tantric initiations are a striking example of spiritual support in which the symbolism of the center determines all the rest: meditation on this or that *mandala*

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

When we remain as we have been created, we are in a state of virtue... If we had to seek for virtue outside of ourselves, that would assuredly be difficult; but as it is within us, it suffices to avoid bad thoughts and to keep our souls turned towards the Lord.

Philokalia.

operates under the twofold relationship of emanation (of Divinities etc.) and of re-absorption into the central point occupied by the divine aspect or “name” which presides over that particular *mandala*; sometimes the *guru* or personal Lama replaces the divinity, at the center of an initiatic diagram in the form of a *mandala*.