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EDITORIAL NOTE

LIDIA GUZY

This special issue of the *Irish Journal of Anthropology* on *Emerging Indian Adivasi and Indigenous Studies in Ireland* presents the proceedings of several conferences held at the Study of Religions Department, University College Cork. It is also a testimony to a successfully established international research network of anthropologists, Indologists and study of religions scholars mutually working on an emerging new research topic in Ireland: the study of Adivasi, indigenous peoples of India and their socio-cultural situations and worldviews.

Even though India is known for its ethnic and socio-cultural diversity in the form of both the caste system and religious plurality, it is rarely noticed that India is the country with the largest number of indigenous peoples in the world. The indigenous people of India, also known as *ādivāsīs*, “tribals” and “Scheduled Tribes” [ST’s], constitute according to the 2011 Census, 8.6% of the population: 104,545,716 out of 1,210,854,977 (1,21 billion) of the Indian population but in the study of South Asia and South Asian societies and religions they are largely invisible and voiceless. Adivasis, however, have their own cultural and religious traditions, observances, stories, and ideas which deserve documentation, recognition and study.

The term ‘Indigenous people’ has been used since the 1970s by international groups such as the *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs* (IWGIA) and *Survival International*. These organisations tend to reject the term ‘tribe’, which is considered a colonial designation that often carries pejorative connotations. As an anthropological term, however, ‘tribes’ is separate from the heavily politicized administrative category, operating as an analytical category, designating kinship based communities which, throughout history, have continued to reproduce their ethnic identity through distinct markers. In central India, tribal groups call themselves ‘Adivasi’, a term derived from the Hindi *adi*, meaning ‘beginning’, and *vasi*, dweller’, that was forged by Oraon and Munda students who founded the first Adivasi Mahasabha in 1915 (Carrin/Guzy 2012:1). In North East regions of India tribal people designate themselves as ‘indigenous’. On an international level the appellation ‘indigenous people’ is often used in a political context to advance claims related to ethnicity (Xaxa 1999; Karlsson 2003). For the Government of India, however, the administrative term ‘scheduled tribe’ refers to a category of people who are eligible to benefit from the politics of quotas, which are intended to compensate for the socio-cultural inequalities resulting from a lack of socio-economic “development” (Carrin/Guzy 2012:1).

The establishment of an Adivasi research network at UCC led to several conferences on Adivasi/Indian Indigenous people’s issues: *Adivasi religions – dialogues with the divine*, held from 1st/2nd October 2012 at Study of Religions Department; *Indigenous Aesthetics and Marginalised Knowledge Systems*, held from 30th September to 1st October 2013 in the context of the launch of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC); and *Medialising Tradition – South Asia Transforms*, in the context of the launch of the India Study Centre Cork (ISCC) at UCC on 12 February 2015.
Through this emerging research initiative, UCC and Ireland have already been situated as a major research destination for the study of Indian indigenous peoples, their worldviews and religions.

The present Special Issue introduces the manifold study of Adivasi and Indigenous peoples of India to Ireland and Irish anthropologists more broadly.

References


GENERAL EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

JAMES CUFFE

It is with great pleasure I invited a previous colleague to guest edit the Irish Journal of Anthropology in order to showcase the innovative and valuable work being done by the Study of Religions Department at University College Cork (UCC) and in particular the Centre of the Study of Endangered Worldviews founded there. As Lidia (& co.) point out in the introductory article there is a strong history in Ireland and in particular in UCC of Indian Studies but one that we may not be very familiar with. The current issue seeks to rectify this and introduce some of the work being undertaken in the subfield to our wider Anthropological community. In line with this special issue theme our interview is conducted with Prof. Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri, Director of the National Museum of Mankind in India by Dr. Ranju Hasini Sahoo.

As before we feature a topical discussion in our regular “Comment On” section; the discussion focuses on migrants seeking access to Europe written by Georgios Agelopoulos, Assist. Professor of Social and Political Anthropology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and we include two articles from up and coming scholars, Anna Poloni and Héctor Sanchez.

I am also pleased to welcome a decision taken by the AAI to make the digital edition of the IJA open access without any embargo. I trust this will help develop our audience into the future.

Thanks to the IJA team and wider IJA community who spare their time and energy for the journal in service of the anthropological community of Ireland.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Cover Photo: Stefano Beggiora and Fulvio Biancifiori, 2010
Location: Two Juang women from Keonjhar, Odisha, India

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Claire S. Scheid is a PhD student in the Department of the Study of Religions, National University of Ireland, University College Cork. Her doctoral dissertation, funded by the Irish Research Council, examines the Donyipolo movement and the formalization of indigenous religion among the Adi in the Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, India. She is interested in the processes by which Himalayan ethnic communities reimagine, restructure, and represent their religious beliefs in modernity. She holds an MSt in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford, UK, and a BA in Religious Studies from Rice University, USA.

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Dr Alles is professor of religious studies at McDaniel College, Westminster, MD, USA. A past president of the North American Association for the Study of Religions, he is co-editor of Numen, the journal of the International Association for the History of Religions. The author of numerous articles, he also edited Religious Studies: A Global View (Routledge, 2008). His current research interests center on the Rathvas of easter Chhotaudepur district, Gujarat.

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Dr. Ranju Hasini Sahoo is an M.A., M.Phil and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Sambalpur University, Odisha and at present Associate Professor of Sociology and Head of Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, India. Before joining as a professor in the University she worked as anthropologist in Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India. Most of her anthropological research relates to tribal communities of Bastar, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. She was the Principal Investigator and Co-project Director of two major research projects “Study of Folk Narrative of Human Origin” and “An Interdisciplinary Study of the Baiga”. Also as a layer she is engaged in the protection of the constitutional rights of the tribal communities since the last decade.

**Anna Poloni**

Anna Poloni recently graduated from Queen’s University Belfast with first-class honours in Social Anthropology. Within the field of ethnomusicology, her research interests include musical migration, local notions of tradition and questions of belonging and identity in today’s increasingly interconnected world. She is also interested in visual anthropology, the study of human perception in different cultural contexts and the use of audiovisual media for ethnographic research. Anna was Programme Winner in the Gender Studies and Anthropology category of the 2015 Undergraduate Awards. She is currently taking a year out to work and travel before pursuing her interests at the postgraduate level.

**Héctor Adrián Sánchez Garibay**

Héctor Adrián Sánchez Garibay is an undergraduate student in the Bachelor’s program of Social Anthropology of the Department of Anthropology at UAM-Iztapalapa, Mexico City. His research interests are rituality among Huichol people, shamanism, indigenous worldviews, ethnicity, and religious expressions as ways of cultural resistance in indigenous communities. Currently, he works in different Nonprofit Organizations focused on the community development of indigenous people throughout Mexico.
COMMENT ON

TO WHOM ARE THE GREEKS BEARING GIFTS? ASPECTS OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN GREECE

BY GEORGIOS AGELOPOULOS

Eyes
We were trying to provide clothes and shoes to the refugees at Idomeni camp. The refugees rushed to get whatever was available. I saw her running behind the tent. She returned a few minutes later, her eyes all red. I also had the same reaction in my first experience as a volunteer at a refugee camp. She took the initiative to explain: ‘I am crying for us, not for them… I am not sure if our society can cope with such a disaster.’

Feet
I asked him why, despite his old age, he is working so hard as an activist in groups supporting refugees. ‘A few months before the death of my uncle at the age of 91’, he said, ‘we cleared the cellar of his house. We threw away four huge bags with insoles. That day I could not figure out why he was collecting all these insoles. Can you?’ I replied in the negative. ‘My uncle, he explained, came as a refugee to Greece due to the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1922. He walked for 29 days together with the survivors of his village before reaching the seashore. When they managed to get into the boat which brought them to Greece, none of the refugees had shoes bearing insoles’.

Soul
It was the local branch of SYRIZA\(^1\) of that neighborhood in Athens that organized the public discussion on Greek economy. As soon as the floor opened to the public, the discussion turned to the refugee crisis. Someone from the audience was crystal clear: ‘We support the refugees not only because of humanitarian reasons and our leftist ideology but also to prevent the skatopsichoi\(^2\) from taking control of the country’. He used the term skatopsichoi with reference to the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn which received 6.3% of the votes in the most recent parliamentary elections.

According to the UNHCR estimations more than 880,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece during 2015. This number corresponds to 8% of the country’s permanent residents. The Greek state was totally unprepared to cope with such a humanitarian disaster. Taking into consideration the tremendous negative results of economic austerity on the state’s infrastructure, the overall financial disability of Greek economy, the high level of unemployment (26%) and the high percentage of households living below the poverty line (33%), it is difficult to explain how the needs of these 880,000 refugees have been actually covered. Refugees and migrants have to be provided with clothing, food and shelters. They have to be registered and protected. Their transportation has to be organized from the Aegean islands to ports of...
the mainland and from there to the northern borders of Greece. Their health care needs have to be covered alongside other special needs. Ethnographers point out the important contribution of Greek villagers and fishermen, Greek and international volunteers, activists and professionals of humanitarian aid missions in coping with the increasing volume of refugee arrivals. Beyond any doubt, this effort is the largest mobilization of Greek society since the 1974 war in Cyprus. Solidarity movements in support of the refugees are developing in all European societies. Their expansion relates to the social and political context of each nation state. Recent ethnographic studies of Greece provide a critical understanding of solidarity movements as a form of gift giving.

Solidarity to the refugees in Greece:
A) Is based on activist know-how developed against economic austerity since 2010 (Cabot 2014, Rakopoulos 2015, Rozakou 2016);
B) Capitalizes upon resistance practices experienced since the December 2008 uprising in main Greek cities (Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011);
C) Reformulates the segmentary politics which constitute a structural element of modern Greek society. As Papataxiarchis (2016) argues, solidarity ‘replaces “hospitality” as the dominant mode of engagement with the refugees’.
D) Builds upon positive perceptions of refugees historically established in Greece since the early 20th century exchanges of populations in the Balkans (Voutira 2003).
E) Involves important changes in the political system of Greece and the power structures at the national and community levels. SYRIZA’s coming into power strongly encouraged positive perceptions towards the refugees and politicized every aspect of solidarity. This creates an ‘impressive contest among politicians, businesses, institutional agents and many others who strove to occupy the important position of the donor’ (Papataxiarchis ibid). Obviously the skatopsioi face problems in advancing xenophobic practices. Such a background, however, does not exclude the possibility of future ‘donor’s fatigue’.
F) Provides Greeks with a new context for accommodating themselves in European politics. According to Papataxiarchis (ibid), solidarity constitutes ‘a positive image with which Greece is engaged in the European moral crisis thus overshadowing the stereotype of the “scapegoat”’.

The continuous support provided by most Greeks to the refugees is to be understood as a gift involving various recipients: the refugees, the present day Greeks, their early 20th century ancestors, and the European public as well as activists throughout the world.

References


**Notes**

1 The left wing party of SYRIZA won the EU elections of June 2014 in Greece, as well as the parliamentary elections of January 2015 and September 2015 (35.5%).

2 *Skatopsicho* is a compound word based on the notions of *skata* (i.e. shit) and *psyche* (soul). The term literary means ‘having a soul made out of shit’. In the present political context at Greece, the term is metaphorically used for all those against solidarity movements.

3 Refugees and migrants pay the regular transportation fares. All other provisions (food, clothing, etc.) are provided.
EMERGING INDIAN ADIVASI AND INDIGENOUS STUDIES IN IRELAND: LOCAL AGENTS, PERFORMANCES AND TRADITIONS

BY LIDIA GUZY (UCC), GREGORY D. ALLES (MC DANIEL COLLEGE), UWE SKODA (AARHUS)

Introduction

At University College Cork (UCC) research on India has a strong history. On the one hand, multiple historical connections and archives are a testimony to the time when, as Queen’s College Cork, UCC trained civil servants for the colonial administration of the sub-continent. On the other, for several years now, in the context of a strong internationalisation policy, UCC Cork has been pursuing a committed India Strategy (Patrick Fitzpatrick/Christopher Shepard/Meenakshi Batra, leading to University wide research and network initiatives such as Research Ireland India at Tyndall Institute the India Study Centre Cork at School of Asian Studies and Study of Religions and since 2011 the specialised lectureship in Contemporary South Asian Religions (Lidia Guzy). In this research climate, a deep engagement with Adivasi or Indigenous peoples in India is beginning to emerge at UCC. Today, UCC is a leading research university in the Irish Republic seeking to re-establish earlier historical connections with India as well as to develop new research collaborations with a ‘New India’ as one of the world’s coming superpowers.

Adivasis and indigenous peoples in a ‘New India’

The recent spectacular economic growth on the Indian subcontinent has shaped a new, powerful, globally active, and even assertive India. At the same time India’s indigenous peoples, numbering over 100 million out of 1.2 billion people, have benefitted the least from the country’s rise. They also remain relatively under-researched in the study of South Asia. This Special Issue brings together scholars from area studies, anthropology, Indology and the study of religions to document indigenous worldviews and practices, not only fostering highly needed basic research but also shifting the scholarly and public focus away from mega-cities as growth hubs to the far less prominent rural areas, where the majority of Indians still live. The contributors concentrate on the ways in which indigenous peoples negotiate traditions, engage with the state (Lidia Guzy; Marine Carrin, Uwe Skoda) and the wider society, and contest and creatively appropriate development(s) in a ‘New India’ through cultural performances (Monica Guildon), art (Stefano Beggiora), ritual practice (Gregory Alles) and religious
movements (Cécile Guillaume-Pey, Claire Scheid). Thus, this Special Issue examines the ways in which India’s indigenous peoples are acting to engage with, negotiate, perform and contest traditions in contemporary India.

Recent publications trying to grasp India’s period of accelerated change and interrogating its rise from a “developing” to a “developed” nation (see Chowdhury 2011, Majumdar 2011; Sender 2000 et.al., Kohli 2012; Kaur 2012; Abdul Kalam and Rajan 2011; Deb 2011; Dawson Varughese 2013) have often employed and critically discussed the idea of a ‘New India’ – a designation almost excessively used, as Anthony D’Costa argued already in 2010. This image of a ‘New India’ has been epitomized in a video clip of the same title. Produced on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Indian independence and conveniently forgetting and erasing all previous avatars of a ‘New India’, it starred the iconic Amitabh Bachchan, who confidently proclaimed “a pulsating, dynamic ‘New India’ is emerging” – an “India looking up to the sky and saying it’s time to fly”. It was certainly no coincidence that the construction site of a major infrastructure project in Mumbai, the Bandra Worli Sea Link, was chosen as the background for the superstar; after all, Mumbai is the business capital and megacity that has benefitted the most from economic growth following the policy of liberalisation, market reforms and diaspora connections. Yet, as D’Costa reminded us, this ostensibly and occasionally hyped ‘New India’ - with its references to an expanding and increasingly wealthy middle class and their forms of consumption - is highly selective and equally tied to new forms of social exclusion and marginalisation.

By focussing on indigenous or Adivasi cultures in rural areas, we intend to engage critically with the notion of a ‘New India’ that neglects indigenous peoples and rejects their cultures through its own self-affirmation. Instead and against this backdrop of a rapidly transforming India, this special issue presents a collaborative and comparative ethnography of indigenous peoples in the so-called ‘tribal belt’ of India, stretching from Gujarat (see Gregory Alles) in the west through Madhya Pradesh (Monica Guidolin) in central India, Odisha (Uwe Skoda, Lidia Guzy, Marine Carrin, Stefano Beggiora), Chhattisgarh (Lidia Guzy, N.K. Das) and Jharkhand (Marine Carrin) in the east and expanding to the Northeast provinces (Claire Scheid).

Indigenous peoples in India speak more than six hundred languages, and their diversified socio-cultural systems and religious worldviews differ sharply from the hierarchical logic of the Indian caste system (see Pfeffer 1997: 3-27). Though highly politicised, the administrative label ‘Scheduled Tribes’, used by the Government of India in the constitution, to a large extent overlaps with the widely used working definition of “indigenous” proposed by Jose R. Martinez Cobo in his “Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations.” According to this definition, indigenous people are:

(...)

those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (Cobo 1987).
Following this working definition “Scheduled Tribes” are considered to be “indigenous peoples” by transnational multilateral agencies, such as UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs).

Although the root meaning of the neologism ‘Adivasi’ would seem to imply that Adivasis are the ‘first settlers’ of the Indian subcontinent, persistent historico-cultural exchanges within local groups make it difficult and perhaps even futile to identify any group of people in India as ‘first settlers’. Some Adivasis might in fact be first settlers in a specific area, but others are certainly recent newcomers who have replaced the initial inhabitants. Some Adivasis have taken the historical implications of the term to heart and insist that they are in fact the first inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (Vasava 2011:3). Others, such as the Indian government and researchers like the sociologist André Béteille (1998:187-191) and the historian Sumit Guha (1999), have abstained from using the category ‘indigenous people’ in the Indian context. However, as Alan Barnard (2006) has stressed, ‘first come’ and ‘cultural difference’ may not be the most decisive criteria in determining indigeneity, which is primarily a legal and political notion. It may be more appropriate to focus on criteria such as ‘non-dominance’ (see below) and ‘self-ascription’ instead. ‘Adivasi’ and ‘indigenous’ have become the crucial terms by which these people distinguish themselves from other communities, often considered to be outsiders. After all, Adivasi as a category was created by indigenous Oraon and Munda students in 1915 at the beginning of the Jharkhand movement with the founding of the first Adivasi Mahasabha (great assembly), later renamed the Jharkhand Party. This political struggle with these organisations in the forefront finally led to the creation of the Union State of Jharkhand in 2000 (Carrin/Guzy 2012: 1-18), which is often perceived to be an “Adivasi state”.

Marginalisation, exclusion and cultural devaluation

In Pre- as well as Post-Independence India indigenous groups have been persistently marginalised and often dominated by others (Carrin/Jaffrelot 2002:21-24). In fact, indigenous peoples in India are often subject to multiple marginalisations by governments, businesses, non-governmental organisations, and scholarship.—The prototype that these groups have of the marginalised has generally been the Dalit communities (Scheduled Castes, ‘harijans’, former untouchables), not indigenous peoples. While Dalits and Adivasis share a history of manifold marginalisation, several socio-cultural differences are visible: Dalits who live in closer symbiosis with caste society have different traditions, worldviews, and practices. They have a relatively larger presence in urban areas (26.3%) than tribal populations (10%) and have been politically relatively more united and successful. For all of these reasons Dalits appear to have attracted more attention from scholars and academics working on issues such as poverty, inequality, and development in India. This work has often centred on the analysis of social inclusion and exclusion. The combination of a tendency to privilege the cultures and goals of Sanskritic, affluent, caste-Hindu society and to view marginalisation largely through the lens of Dalit experience has rendered indigenous people, in the terms of Ramachandra Guha ‘invisible’ (2007: 3305).

In public policy discourse ‘social exclusion’, a concept originating in the writings of Rene Lenoir (Borooah 2010: 31) and later promoted through the work of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2000) and Arjan de Haan (2004), has
often been linked to its conceptual twin ‘social inclusion’ as well as to the notion of ‘inclusive growth’ (see also Skoda / Nielsen / Fibiger 2013). In his influential work, Sen pointed out that people may be not only unfavourably excluded but also unfavourably included, that is, included on greatly unfavourable terms or conditions. He pointed out further that exclusion may be either active or passive. It can be the result of deliberate attempts by social or political elites to deprive people of opportunities. Alternately, it can be the outcome of more subtle and mundane, everyday social practices embedded in local relations of power. Similarly, Sukhdeo Thorat (2011) has recently emphasized the importance of social relations in the analysis of poverty and inequality. These concepts have, however, rarely been applied to indigenous peoples in India, where – apart from a small elite - diversified small-scale communities live either in remote areas as forest dwellers, hunters and gatherers, shifting cultivators and agriculturalists, or in precarious social conditions in industrial resettlements or urban slums – a tendency which has been accelerated by recent processes of industrialisation linked to a new wave of displacement (see e.g. Behera in Skoda / Nielsen / Fibiger 2013).

In the socio-political domain, the post-Independence policy of positive discrimination through the administratively constructed category of ‘Scheduled Tribe’, although intended to contribute to the welfare of these peoples, has often had the opposite effect. It continues to marginalise indigenous peoples as primitive, backward, and non-sedentary, with a pre-industrial way of life, while at the same time, through a rigid system of quotas, both allowing for the emergence of a small indigenous elite and fomenting resentment among more privileged segments of society. The result is that indigenous peoples are still measured by others, and often measure themselves, in terms of an evolutionary model that sees urban modernity, sedentariness, and industrial development as superior and definitive of the kinds of life to which they should aspire. Such presuppositions inform political policy, as in the government of Gujarat’s Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana (tribal development plan; now apparently implemented on the national level as well). More broadly, they underlie the assumption in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, that there are ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’, until recently designated simply as ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’ who are self-evidently ‘most backward’ and so require attention by state Development Agencies of various sorts.

India’s economic rise ultimately continued the pre-Independence colonial exploitation of indigenous people through displacement and ruthless industrial environmental destruction, as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the “Save the Narmada Movement”), a resistance movement against the Sardar Sarovar dam, has made very clear (Baviskar 1995, 1997). Such an industrial development-induced displacement in certain cases has been unmasked by human rights activists as a euphemism for “cultural genocide” (Padel 2006/2008). However it also needs to be noted that some Adivasi people themselves – especially those with a formal education, middle class or elite positions – have themselves voluntarily embraced such economic development. In contrast to them, and in relation to indigenous resistance movements and the indigenous fight for fundamental civil and human rights, a recent awakening of indigenous political resistance and identity can be noted throughout India. A socio-political ‘Adivasi awakening’ has already led to a new administrative reshaping of three Indian states (Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh,
Jharkhand), but it has also been influenced by or fed into a militant Maoist resistance movement. As Ramachandra Guha has pointed out, this alliance has enfolded as double tragedy for the Adivasi. “The First tragedy is that the state has treated its adivasi citizens with contempt and condescension. Their second tragedy is that their presumed protectors, the Naxalites [Maoists], their presumed liberators, offer no long term solution either” (Guha 2007: 3305). Jha (2012) adds that the Naxalites/Maoists, only want to use the Adivasi “as cannon fodder, in order to create a new political order through armed struggle.”

The socio-historical and political complexity of today’s situation among diverse indigenous peoples and cultures in India has given rise to a strong socio-political discourse on indigeneity (Devvy/Davis/Chakravarty 2009; Karlsson 2004) that encompasses violations of indigenous and human rights as well as the present general indigenous quest for adequate representation of marginalised communities in culture, media, education and politics.

Religio-cultural performances
Apart from the socio-political and economic-developmental domains just referred to, the closely interwoven religio-cultural-performative domain is a crucial dimension of Adivasi/Indigenous Peoples Studies to which this special issue mainly aims to contribute. Both Indians and scholars of South Asia have tended to neglect the demotic and vernacular practices of indigenous peoples and opted instead to take the Sanskrit practices and worldviews of literate caste Hindus as normative or prototypical. There has been a persistent tendency to view the traditional practices of indigenous peoples as degenerate forms of caste Hinduism rather than as worthy of attention in their own right (see e.g. Ghurye 1963). The logical consequence has been the conviction that these traditions and practices should be eliminated through reformation and purification, a project shared by Gandhians and proponents of Hindutva alike. M.N. Srinivas’s now classic notion of sanskritization (1952; 1966) even attributes to indigenous people an innate desire to reject their tradition and become like caste Hindus, in effect implying that in negotiating the challenges of the ‘New India’, as of the old, they will inevitably deny their identity, abandon traditional practices, and (attempt to) join the mainstream.

This Special Issue concentrates on the religio-cultural-performative domain, one that is very significant in indigenous peoples’ lives but one that is also, in comparison to the socio-political and the economic-developmental domains, relatively neglected within the context of the supposedly ‘new’ India. As stated above, our objective is to discern and understand the ways in which indigenous people are engaging with, negotiating, and contesting traditions in contemporary India through their worldviews, practices, and cultural performances. In this regard it is important to remember, as David Hardiman (1987, 2007) has stressed, that indigenous people are themselves agents of preservation, resistance and change, not passive objects manipulated by and purely dependent upon the agency of others. It is also important to remember that tradition is not a static inheritance from the past but rather a vernacular practice, constantly constructed and re-created. Thus, we aim to investigate the cultural expressions, creativity and agency of peoples who are relatively marginalised politically and economically.

This Special Issue presents an ethnographical approach to Adivasi and Indigenous Studies in India, which often means studying local traditions, vernacular beliefs and ritual
practices from the ‘bottom up’ rather than the ‘top down’. Several contributions engage with specifically situated ‘cultural performances’ (see Guidolin, Guzy, Skoda) – an idea developed by the anthropologist Milton Singer (1959, 1972), and understood in a broad sense, i.e. not only as plays, concerts and lectures, as a common sense Western view might suggest, but ‘also prayers, ritual readings, recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things, we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic’ (1972: 71) It is possible to analyse these acts and events – such as rituals or religious acts, but also theatrical performances, often with explicit political connotations – together within a common framework as ‘elementary constituents’ of a culture. Following Singer’s lead, one may also focus on ‘cultural media’, i.e. audio-visual expressions including music, dancing, possession, drawings, etc., and argue that cultural performances are based on existing socio-cultural configurations, predispositions and repertoires, on traditions as vernacular practices and fields in which indigenous peoples and wider society have interacted for centuries, but also as fields in which boundaries are drawn according to demotic worldviews, alternative centres are established, counter-narratives created and hegemonic narratives resisted.

With the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, which was formulated on October 17, 2003, and took effect April 20, 2006, an international instrument for advancing respect for cultural variety and human creativity was created. According to the definition of UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage includes (a) orally transmitted traditions and forms of expressions, that is, language, (b) performing arts, (c) social actions like rituals and ceremonies, (d) local knowledge systems about nature and the universe, and (e) knowledge about traditional craftsmanship. With the adoption of the UNESCO convention of 2003, which has since been ratified by more than 50 mostly non-European countries, India among them, the highest priority has been ascribed to the collection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the entire world.

The UNESCO concept of intangible cultural heritage, in conjunction with the anthropological concept of ‘orality’ (Goody 1968; 1986 Ong 1969; 1991), are helping to overcome the hegemony of the script, which long excluded or marginalised techniques of knowledge transmission and knowledge systems not encoded in script. The unwritten heritage of societies without script has long been overlooked. The lack of script has become a socio-cultural pattern in the sociological and ideological marginalisation of societies dominated by orality. Adivasi cultures are predominantly cultures of orality and performed cultural memory. This means that local values and knowledge systems are enshrined in what is oral: speech, song, action and ritual performance. Local knowledge systems and meanings can be understood as indigenous theories without any script. Indigenous theories stand for local systems of meaning or understanding. A system of meaning entails a mode of perceiving, feeling and reasoning that is often subjective, culturally specific, and locally designed and transmitted. Meaning systems create sense, not in the least by means of the diverse senses: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Knowledge is generated and transmitted through techniques of acoustic and visual, oral or literal representation. Local or indigenous theories and knowledge systems consist of ideas and values that are sensually communicated. They use language in the form of ritual speech, the body as ritual instrument (trance), music and dance. Mythological narratives, healing ceremonies,
oracles or liturgies are clear manifestations of indigenous theories. Due to the hegemonic script-centred interest of pre- and post-Independence India, many of these indigenous theories of orality and oral theories were ignored. Indigenous India possesses an overwhelming richness of indigenous theories that are oral and performative. Though we cannot fully escape script-centrism in publications like this one, we can certainly acknowledge this dilemma of reducing multi-sensorial performances openly.

**Objectives of this Special Issue**

The *Special Issue* aims at increasing the academic and public visibility of (studies on) Adivasi/indigenous peoples against the backdrop of a supposedly and often celebrated ‘New India’ – not only in Ireland but also beyond. In this sense the *Special Issue* aims at counterbalancing the socio-cultural marginalization and social exclusion of Indian indigenous peoples. By examining local Adivasi theories and adivasi specific agency our *Special Issue* sets up a counterapproach to parameters of an ostensibly ‘new’ India. The aim is not to speak for indigenous peoples but to bring out for scholarly discussion, as far as is possible in a format like this, their individual voices and subjective points of view. This approach relates specifically Indian indigenous issues to a more global agenda in which indigenous peoples are under threat worldwide from hegemonic societies, cultures, economies and political entities. By focusing on indigenous perspectives, and specifically the religio-cultural-performative domain, this *Special Issue* contributes to the recognition of otherwise marginalized communities in India. The interdisciplinary team of scholars on Adivasi and indigenous cultures assembled here represents an emerging academic translation of the knowledge of vulnerable local communities.

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### Notes

1 see [http://www.ucc.ie/chronicon/irishindia/](http://www.ucc.ie/chronicon/irishindia/)

2 According to the 2011 Census, almost 834 million Indians lived in rural areas, accounting for 68.9% of the population.

3 The terminology is fluid. Many people in Middle India self-identify as Adivasi (adi – the first; vasi – dweller), while others, such as people in the North-East, that is, the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, prefer the term “indigenous people”.

4 There are however exceptions such as for example the NGO Bhasha / Adivasi Academy in Vadodara, Gujarat, aiming at fighting against the marginalisation of Adivasi people rather than Dalits.

5 For a somewhat more positive assessment of these quotas, see Moodie 2015.
Performing Indigeneity and the Politics of Representation: The Santals in Jharkhand, Odisha, Bengal and Assam

By Marine Carrin

Abstract: This article deals with several indigeneity discourses among the Adivasi of India. It discussed in particular the different levels of representation and agency of Santals of Jharkhand, Northern Odisha, Bengal and Assam. Amidst political fragmentation an emerging Santal elite such processes are creating a civil society group and an Adivasi discourse on Santal citizenship.

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Introduction

The Santals, the largest Austro-asiatic group in India, known for their rebellion of 1855, have a long tradition of exploitation and migration. With the hul, the Santal chiefs become socio-historical subjects, as rebels against the empire. Guha (1983) shows that they also helped to develop class consciousness among Santal peasants.

In Adivasi societies today, indigeneity involves different levels of representation and agency. First, we must distinguish ascribed indigeneity, imposed on Adivasis by dominant ideology or by state politics, from indigeneity assumed as part of their identity by the Adivasis themselves. Ascribed indigeneity is imposed by Hindu castes who judge them jungly or impure, since they insist on worshipping tribal deities and on eating meat.

Today the Santals number more than ten million, scattered in Jharkhand, Bengal, Assam, Nepal and Bangladesh. Everywhere they have retained their identity, though they have had to accommodate to the different conditions in each state. I shall evaluate the situation of the Santals in the different regions with regard to dominance and subalternity. This paper derives from previous work (e.g. Carrin 2013b) where I explore Santal memory work that sustains a reinvented tradition. Here I shall examine how Santals assert their identity as against the different regimes of dominance imposed by historical and political contexts.

The Santals in Jharkhand

In Jharkhand, the Santals and other Adivasis have evolved a powerful form of political imagery, generated by official and subaltern legacies, which have contributed to create the political space of the recently formed Jharkhand State. The project of a separate State became a central issue in the seventies. Finally, in 1998, the BJP proposed a separate
state, the Vananchal, in its election manifesto, to replace the Jharkhand project. The Jharkhandi-BJP alliances led to a compromise; the creation, in 2000, of a state limited to the districts of South Bihar, including the Chota Nagpur plateau and the Santal Parganas. Importantly, the project of a separate state no longer corresponded to the demands of the low castes and the Adivasis. In 1950, the Scheduled Tribes represented sixty per cent of the population of Jharkhand, but they form only twenty three per cent of the population today. Though a ‘tribal’ state, with the Munda, Santal, Ho and Oraon as the largest tribal populations, it has a Hindu majority, due to immigration from the plains. Given the Indian state’s policy of affirmative action for scheduled tribes, the recognition of indigenous peoples in Jharkhand lead to discourses where tribal identities and interests are openly positioned towards the state and against the competing political parties, though the importance of the Naxalite movement must be explained by the absence of State response to distributive demands. In Jharkhand, the discourses of tribal identities are expressed by the State as well as by the Adivasis themselves, while the voices of the latter are muted in most other States. The State of Jharkhand has vast mineral resources accounting for forty-two per cent of the mineral wealth of India. The struggle to control these resources deeply influences the politics of Jharkhand (Carrin 2013a).

The Santals in Northern Odisha

Bordering Jharkhand, Mayurbhanj, formerly a princely State in Odisha, is seen as the bastion of Santal identity. The Santals were considered as loyal subjects of the king when they fought to prevent Mayurbhanj from becoming a part of Odisha from 1947 to 1949. Mayurbhanj is also a mining area but it has not benefited from legal exceptions through tenure laws (Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 and Santal Parganas Tenancy Act, 1908), aimed at protecting Adivasi lands from alienation. Odiya and Bihari settlers came to the district as contractors, and employ Santal workers to cut timber in the forests. To-day, Mayurbhanj is seen as a peripheral region where illegal mining, migrations, and the activism of the Hindu right threatens the tribal economy, curtailing the rights to resources of indigenous people. In response to ascribed indigeneity, we observe, in Jharkhand as well as in the North of Odisha, a conscious reinvention of the tradition which is expressed through a religious movement, the invention of a script and the emergence of a Santal literature (Carrin 2013b).

Sarna Dhorom

It was in Mayurbhanj, in the thirties, that a Santal prophet and reformer, Ragunath Murmu, invented the ol’Chiki script for Santali. He argued that his script expressed Adivasi sensitivity as rooted in daily experience, since its characters evoked ‘the sign language of branches’ used during the hunt. Murmu claimed divine inspiration, but he was also a reformer who dreamt of another age when the Santals were not corrupted by drink and led a spartan life. He argued that their decline from a glorious past was due to the negative influence of caste society. His puritanism shows how the Santals - like other Adivasis - have interiorized a stigma. The raja of Mayurbhanj supported the new script and industrialists in Jamshedpur financed the making of fonts to print the first newspaper in ol chiki. In the sixties, the government of Odisha acknowledged the script and sponsored the preparation of school-books printed in ol chiki and recruited Santal teachers for primary schools. The movement has been quite influential in the Santal Parganas - in
Jharkhand - where a curriculum in Santali using *ol chiki* was implemented at the Sidhu Kanhu University in the sixties. In the seventies, Mayurbhanj became the symbol of Santali culture when the Santal elite organized a network of associations in the different states where Santal people were living, aimed at defending the Santali language and script. One consequence of the language revival was that Santali was recognized in 2002 by the Central government as one of the thirteen minority languages of India.

The Sarna Dhorom movement was founded by Guru Besnao, a disciple of Ragunath Murmu in the 1970s, also in Mayurbhanj. The cult is not marked by formal institutions but is expressed in family worship where the Sarna deities receive sacrifice during the main agricultural rituals. These deities dwell in a sacred grove called Sarna by the Munda, Dessauli by the Ho, and Jaher by the Santal. The sacred grove is a stand of virgin forest left untouched when the village was founded. In the grove, we find the stones of the spirits associated with the village and with the Creation Myth. Present in every village, the sacred grove has become emblematic of indigenous religion for all the Mundari groups.

To convey his moral message, Murmu produced a village theatre linked to the Sarna Dhorom movement, which has been influential in the Jharkhand movement. The construction of an alternative culture through narrative, village theatre and other cultural expressions became part of the reinvention of Tradition. The *ol chiki* movement mobilized Santal youth, and volunteers taught the script to children and adults (Carrin 2002).

In Odisha and Jharkhand, the performance of indigeneity is now staged through cultural events. Each year the martyrdom of the Santals who fought in Gumuria to support the Raja of Mayurbhanj (Sahid *bonga*), is celebrated by praying for the memory of the dead. After the death of Ragunath Murmu, the Santals decided to honor his memory on 28 February (Carrin 2013a).

*Ol chiki* is probably the only tribal script so far that has established itself in printing, teaching and distribution. Its diffusion, through a network of journals and publications, has strengthened the status of Santali language in the public sphere. In Odisha to-day, the *ol chiki* script has become an up-to-date means of communication and a symbol of high culture and prestige. Internet and mass media are now able to offer access to Santali literature, both to the elites and the masses, and constitute a new forum for preserving the cultural heritage. But in Bengal, as well as in Jharkhand, most writers use Indian vernacular script or even Roman script to convey their social message.

The invention of a script and the religious movement of Sarna Dhorom or adi-Dharam for the Munda and Ho, have also been rooted in the Jharkhand movement that led to the creation of the Jharkhand state in 2000. Through commemorations and cultural events, the Santals defend the idea that they constitute an autonomous periphery, but they are sometimes perceived as dominating by other Adivasi groups. The Santals see themselves as agents having a memory work to perform. It has become essential for them to include the past in the present so as to voice a counter-hegemonic stand.

When, in the late seventies, Ragunath’s son Sidalal Murmu became a Congress MP, he defended the right of Santal children to be taught in Santali, and in *ol chiki*, for the first three years. This is now the legal position,
though it has not been successfully implemented, partly due to the resistance of the Hinduized Santals who are part of the Bengal elite, as well as the Christian Santals in Jharkhand who prefer Roman script (Carrin 2016).

Since the creation of Jharkhand state, several influential Adivasi leaders, such as Shibu Soren, have been in the government though the BJP is now ruling Jharkhand while the tribal party is declining. This political setback has not led the Adivasi to give up their struggle. Rather, we observe a displacement of the struggles which now revolve around environmental issues. In Odisha, where resistance since the sixties has aimed at a revival of Adivasi religions, the BJP has targeted Adivasis to bring them under mainstream influence, using Hindu cultural dominance and militant mobilization. Since 2007, Hindutva repression against Adivasi Christians has been violent in Mayurbhanj. The Sangh Parivar has acted as the supervisory body in monitoring attacks on Christians, intimidating religious minorities (Chatterjee 2010: 263-264). But the Sarna Dhorom, presenting itself as a reform movement insisting on abstinence from alcohol, has survived in Odisha as well as in Jharkhand.

The Santals in Bengal

The construction of the Santals in Tagore’s writing, and more generally in Bengali movies and literature, have certainly influenced the perception of Adivasis in Bengal. From a sociological point of view, however, the Santals in Bengal seem to be more enclaved within caste society, which is more homogenous and more brahmanical than in the north of Odisha. The movement of Jitu Santal in Bengal (1924-32) bears testimony to the Hinduization process as well as to the participation of the Santals in the Gandhian movement. But the Santals did not forsake their traditional faith, and Santal priests officiated in reinvented Hinduized rituals, which derived from reform movements of the nineteenth century such as the Kherwar. In Bankura, as well as in Birbhum, the Rarhi culture made the blending of Hinduism and folk religion easier, through the local cult of Shiva, as well as of Dharma and Manasa - the goddess of snakes, seen as their patron deity by Santal healers (ojhas).

But cultural blending did not bridge the psychological gulf between the Santals and the Hindus. The Santals remain ambivalent towards the Hindus who are still contemptuous of Adivasis despite the influence of the Brahmo movement of the nineteenth century, which was against caste. In Bengal, we find a few well-to-do Santal peasants in Bankura, while most have lost their land and become agricultural labourers.

The influence of Christian Missions has been less pregnant in Bengal. The different Churches did not really succeed in educating the Santals. In the fifties, the Santals of Midnapore reconstituted the old Santal Gaontia (formed in 1946), with a view to associate themselves with the larger political struggle, and they joined the Adivasi Mahasabha. The leadership of the Jharkhand party in Bengal was, unlike in Bihar, in the hands of non-Christians. In the sixties, Santal peasants felt solidarity with the Naxalites and often associated with Marxist students who belonged to other communities. When the Naxalite movement was crushed in Bengal, the Santals moved towards the Jharkhand movement, but the latter was weaker in Bengal than in Jharkhand, due to the importance of the communist parties. In 1970, there was a split of the Jharkhand party in Bengal, as one group of Santals joined the moderate N.E. Horo group, while others supported the radical Hul Jharkhand group.
In the mid-seventies, the Jharkhand party began to decline in West Bengal, but the Adivasi Socio cultural Association (ASECA) gained considerable influence and organized two important rallies in 1973. Still, the Santals were isolated in Bengal and failed to organize other tribal communities, such as the Mahalis, Koras and Lodhas, who were increasingly marginalized.

In 1980, under the JMM, the Jharkhand movement revived once again. Meanwhile, responding to tribal protest, the Bengal government introduced a number of schemes such as “Food for work” and organized commemorations of the heroes of the Santal rebellion. Later, ol’ chiki was recognized, and teaching of the script was implemented. In Birbhum, the influence of the intellectuals and NGO’s of Shantinikitan was important to help Santals access education and take advantage of government schemes. The situation was worse for the poor and non-educated Santals in Midnapur or Bankura who could not access distributive politics. The Santal elites in Bengal were more isolated from Santal agricultural classes, than similar elites in Jharkhand. This is still the case of the Santal community in Howrah, where many Santal are functionaries who have little contact with rural Santals.

The Santals in Assam

The Santals to Assam came as ethnically unmarked dangar or coolies, to work in the tea plantations. In colonial times, the British grasped most of the profits, but after Independence, the money was channelled to corporate offices in Kolkata and Delhi. The arrival of a Santal Christian community in the region was rooted in a missionary utopia, since the Scandinavian missionaries, who had been evangelizing a minority of Santals around Dumka in Santal Parganas, decided to transplant landless Santals to Assam in order to found an ideal evangelical community (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008).

Immigration continued, as Santal and Mundari labour were recruited for the tea plantations. With the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act in 1951, the situation of the labourers improved slightly, though the estates preferred to contract on a casual, rather than permanent basis. Both forest and tea industries needed a docile work force, provided by thousands of workers brought through middlemen from Chotanagpur, which was affected by a series of famines in the nineteenth century (Siddiqui 1995). The tribal tea workers still work under a very rigid regime and live in secluded quarters controlled by the henchmen of the boss.
Today, Assam has become the theatre of ethnic conflict between the Santals and the Bodos, where the Santals are targeted as outsiders. Let me recall that the Constitution made a distinction between the tribal areas of Assam (five of the seven states of North East) and those of the rest of the country. While tribals elsewhere came under the Fifth Schedule, the Sixth schedule provided for the administration of the tribal areas of Northeast India (Baruah 2003: 50). The region where the Santals live is situated in the north-western part of the state, where about 1.5 million of the population consider themselves as Bodo, speaking a Tibeto-burman language. The liberation of Bodoland has been the main goal of their guerrilla, which has been active since the middle of the 1980s. The Bodo demand for separate status dates back to the creation of the All Bodo Student’s Union (ABSU) in 1967. Violent Bodo agitation has become a part of Northeast India’s security conundrum. For a while, until the mid-1980s, the Bodo movement attempted to form a united front with other tribals fighting for a similar cause, and its leaders hoped that peace would aid the Bodo community to escape economic pressure. The making of Bodo ethnicity implied resisting the Assamization of the state. The Bodo reinvented their traditions, based on old Kachari narratives, and emphasized their existence in the pre-Ahom days before 1228 (Endle 1910).

In 1987, strong demonstrations were staged against Assamese supremacy and insurgency movements such as the Bodo Voluntary force arose. But hate led the Bodos to a policy of ethnic cleansing in 1996, when two hundred Santals were murdered. The Santals counter-attacked. The result of these killings was that about 250000 people were forced to take shelter in relief camps.

The formation of The Bodo Autonomous Council (BTL) after peace talks, in 2003 brought no solution, since the Council could not liberate the tribals from their entrapment in the forest and plantation industry. Moreover, the Santals consider that the creation of the Council has prevented them from obtaining the Scheduled Tribe status they enjoy in Jharkhand or in Odisha. Similarly, other non-scheduled tribes, like the Rajbansis, are claiming ST status. In 2006, 54 000 were still living in the relief camps. Many Santals and other Mundari live in camps around Bongaigaon, afraid of returning to their devastated villages. Since then, the number of relief camps has risen again and in some of these, the refugees must pay a rent to the “owners”, who make a profit from the refugees. In the Assam parliament (where Bodo representatives are influential) the Santal, Oraon, Kharia and Munda populations on the tea estates have been blamed for the entrapment of the Bodos.

### Internal fragmentation

Understanding ethnicity is important to grasp people’s claims and identity formation, but I agree with Suykens (2006) that in Assam, the sources of conflict are linked to three inner borders, the ethnic border, the forest border, and the tea estate border. The ethnic border has been strengthened by the Bodo movement, and by the absence of minor groups from the Bodo Tribal Council. The forest became a place of exclusion for the non-ST groups, since the Bodo Council has the power to implement afforestation schemes, and to control employment in the forest. The symbolic border which define ST status, serves the electoral game since non-ST groups (Santal, Rajbansis) are not eligible for the BTL. But in Assam, as in other regions, the Santal elite is emerging as a civil society group defending the rights of Santal refugees in the camps, while others who belong to cultural associations, such ASECA, are promoting education and Santali language and script.
The Santal from Jharkhand, Odisha and Bengal help the Santal refugees in Assam by donating funds and sending delegations. In towns like Guwati, Santal lawyers are ready to defend their Adivasi clients, in cases of murder and witchcraft. Every year, Santals come from Assam to join the Logo Buru pilgrimage or to celebrate the birthday of Ragunath Murmu. But in Assam, the movement associated with the ol’ chiki script is weak. The post-traumatic context does not inspire a reinvention of Tradition, though Santal refugees enjoy watching Santal movies. One of the most popular concerns the migration to the tea plantations while movies by Adivasi activists dealing with the destruction of the environment are also popular.

Let me quote the story of a Santal writer I met in 2012 in Bongaigaon. Kumar Soren, a Santal from the Catholic community, was an accountant in Guwati for many years. He retired in the nineties to the Kubrajhar area, and was friendly with a Bodo priest who came to see him in the parish kitchen where we had the interview. Kumar Soren explained how he worked to improve “Santal cultural activities”. He wanted to write a history of the Santals of Assam and had started to document life in the tea gardens and in the forest. Meanwhile, he had bought land, and planted seven hundred fruit trees. After the violence opposing Santals and Bodos, everything was spoilt. His family escaped the massacre, but one morning he found all the trees of his plantations dug out, and understood that this had been done by Santals. He told me: “I suspect my own family, my brother-in-law and some others, since after such events (the ethnic cleansing) nobody wants you to pursue your life. Any attempt to get out from the tunnel and “somebody cuts your legs”. Next day, Soren took me to some abandoned rice fields and explained that no Santal wants to cultivate anymore, since they think the Bodo will ‘take one look at the paddy fields, then kill us to take our lands’. They had killed the Bangladeshis to grab their land, he added. “Anybody who leads a “normal life” may be killed, only to remind others that this is no longer possible. Young people prefer to go to the forest and cut one or two valuable trees, sell them in the black market and buy a Kalashnikov.

In this underground economy, racketing at the check post on the Assam-Meghalaya border is an important source to finance the traffic in arms and the electoral campaigns. The Santal Tiger force, too, racket the villagers, threatening to kidnap those who want to live as peaceful citizens. Shopkeepers must pay the weekly ‘revolutionary fees’ if they do not want their shop burnt. Some of my informants, like S.Tudu, a Santal lawyer in Guwati, told me he had to deal with murder cases among Santals. Those who had married Bodo were targeted. Kidnapping was a common threat and Santal parents had to accompany their children to school.

The situation of the Santals in Assam is tied to the forest economy and the tea plantations. High youth unemployment increases the conflict potential, and facilitates recruitment to the Santal Tiger Force or Cobra group. The latter controls the local elections and its leaders do not hesitate to kidnap or kill political opponents. It is difficult to grasp the political agenda of these groups, since they systematically practice racket and retaliation. Illegal business of all sorts prevails, including traffic of weapons, drug market and prostitution of young girls.

The performance of indigeneity
Historicity is a way to build identity, producing a relation between what supposedly happened in the past, and the
present state of affairs. This leads me to the question of authenticity versus invention. Various scholars (Friedman 1992, Hanson 1989) assert that indigenous people, as well as anthropologists, have been inventing traditions, but I would argue that both ‘authentic’ and ‘invented’ traditions are equally real. In the Santal case, these traditions are conveyed through a polyphony of voices, prophets and reformers, artists and writers. The Sarna Dhorom movement harbours its own constructions of the past that may be at odds with those of official representations. While for some it is a question of reinstating the past, for most there is an essential continuity that comes from the mouths of the elders and links concepts such as ancestors (hapram ko) with three related ideas: disom land, itihas, history, hul rebellion, and samaj (society, i.e. the Santal community) versus diku “outsiders”. These concepts are enacted in commemorations and other “cultural events”.

Santal narratives about history provide us with historical agency, since we see, here, how the Santal chiefs become historical subjects, as rebels against empire and peasant leaders developing class consciousness. The Santal intellectual today is often part of a group, a religious movement, a cultural association, or even an informal group of villagers, when he engages in political activity, and his politics is steeped in or closely linked with cultural assertion (Carrin 2013a: 78). Among Santals, as in the Hawaiian case discussed by Friedman (1992), the past as defined by outsiders is denied, and a present cultural identity employed to forge a viable past. The Santal movement represents an attempt to extricate itself from mainstream Indian culture, and establish a self-centred autonomy, capable of influencing the cultural assertion of the Mundari groups. These complexes are instrumental aspects of Santal identity today, and they are clearly continuous with what might be described as tendencies towards a Santal corporatedness that may have emerged in the 19th century, which may be seen as social defence mechanism in face of an encroaching society.

The gurus of the Sarna Dhorom movement developed cultural activities such as village theatre, while promoting the diffusion of the new script, the protection of the Santali language and the development of literature. Other cultural reinventions concern the religion of the Sacred Grove which has been adopted by other Adivasi in Central India. It is linked to different ecological movements, which insist that all Jharkhandis are citizens of the forest.

The Pilgrimage to Logo Buru as a reinvented tradition across the States

I shall now turn to the Logo Buru pilgrimage, a collective event attracting thousands of Santals from different states to Jharkhand each November. The Logo Buru festival has both a cultural and a political meaning. It is linked to the Jharkhand State through the presence of the tribal leaders, if only to indicate that “we are coming to thank the buru bongas (the Hill deities) for all we have achieved”. Officials of the Jharkhand party, writers and intellectual form a kind of separate delegation, which should arrive first on the top of the hill to watch the sunset on the cave of Logo Buru. This cave stands for the Harata cave, a mythic place where Santal ancestors are said to have stayed seven years. In the evening, the officials sit on a dais nearby and watch “the cultural program”, a political version of tribal dances where performers are dressed in green clothes, the colour of Jharkhand party. This official performance aims at presenting the Santals as hard working and disciplined;
The next morning, the chief minister, followed by other officials, enter the cave one by one. They peep through a hole which allows them to contemplate Cae Champa, the Santal mythical Kingdom. During Logo Buru, the contemplation of a loss becomes an act of representation where the actors seem keen not to propose interpretations, since it is more important to erase all versions of the past, except the one true version captured by the imagery of the empty cave. Marching to Logo Buru means, for everybody, sharing a festive event with other Santals and Adivasis, and the event also celebrates the achievements of the Jharkhand party. It seems that the figure of Shibu Soren, sometimes identified with Cando, the sun, was important to reaffirm the importance of the past struggles at a time where his own myth and politics had become disenchanted.

Logo Buru celebrates environmental beauty, and the processions defend the hill as a sacred place of the Santals, when other hills are threatened by industrial exploitation. For the Santal delegation coming from Assam, the Logo Buru pilgrimage represents a hope: it offers an image of Santal unity which is difficult to achieve in Assam, where the ethnic cleansing has produced inner fragmentation.

**Conclusion: the emerging Santal civil society**

In Assam, as well as in the other regions, the Santal elite is emerging as a civil society group, engaged in defending the rights of the Santal refugees in the camps. The Santal from Jharkhand, Odisha and Bengal help the Santal refugees in Assam by donating funds and by sending delegations. In towns, Santal lawyers defend their Adivasi clients. But in Assam, where Santals feel they are denizens rather than citizens, the post-traumatic context does not inspire a reinvention of tradition.

The comparison between the states where the Santals live has allowed us to identify some of the tensions at work. In Odisha and Jharkhand, cultural assertion has been central to the recognition of Santal identity, but has not redressed inequality. In Bengal, the Santals seem more assimilated to mainstream society for historical reasons, but their economic situation is more precarious, except for the Santal elites in town. The situation of the Santals in Assam seems inextricable, since the Government will not grant them the status of ST, which could help them to redress other injustices. The feeling of being denizens has suppressed the voice of the economically and culturally entrapped Santals. Yet, the Logo Buru pilgrimage which attracts Santals from all the states has become a symbol of Santal unity and solidarity. Jharkhand is not really an Adivasi state, but it seems to promote an Adivasi cultural assertion which would need to be combined with social struggle for equality.

**References**


Endle, Sidney (1910) *The Kacharis (Bodo)*. Guwahati, Macmillian and Co.


**Notes**

1 The Santal rebellion (*Hul*) of 1855 was the most important of the tribal rebellions in colonial India.

2 The Adivasi Mahasabha, created by the elites of the tribes in 1915, asked for separation of Aboriginal districts from the rest of Bihar. This request was rejected by Congress in 1947. From 1949, the Jharkhand movement got under way, while the Constitution of India was being made and tribals were recognized as minority. The Jharkhand party was founded in 1951, led by Jaipal Singh, a Munda educated at Oxford. From 1949 to 1963, the Jharkhand movement grew and the party was joined by caste people. From the 1952 elections onward, the votes the party attracted were mostly motivated by its request for a separate state, Jharkhand. From 1952 to 1957, the Jharkhand party won its greatest electoral successes, especially in Chotanagpur and in the Santal Parganas. It was during this time that the party formulated the territorial claims necessary so that the Jharkhand would be a state controlled by the Adivasis (Carrin 2002, 2011).

3 BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Party is currently India’s ruling party. It is usually characterized as Hindu fundamentalist.

4 The dominant castes remain influential within the BJP. Certainly, the Hindu nationalists in general do not care about the exploitation of lower castes and Adivasis, nor about protecting the cultural unity of Mundari groups. The *Jharkhand Vikhas* Party, advocating the idea of an Adivasi religion was founded by the intellectual Ram Dayal Munda (1992). The extreme left includes the Maoist Coordination Committee (MCC) and the People’s War Group (PWG), who are seen as engaged in terrorist activities.

5 The Indian Constitution grants special status to tribals, creating a separate category for them on a footing with low castes. Consequently, the designation Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) applies to people characterized by a low stage of development to whom certain advantages are provided to offset the wrongs they have suffered in the past. Since 1951, the government has...
reserved places and posts in education, seats in elected assemblies and jobs in the civil service for members of these underprivileged communities.


7 R. Murmu realized that the Santals should be educated in their own language and script at least up to the primary level. So, he decided to write school-books to propagate the script.

8 The implementation of a script does not necessarily follow its invention. Such is the case of the Chakma of Bangladesh. On tribal scripts, see Ramnika Gupta 2007.

9 Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, the left wing of the Jharkhand Party, dominated by the Santals.

10 Besides the Mornai tea estate, which still belong to the Northern Evangelical Church, the old “Assam colony” still has a few Santal villages named after the missionaries.

11 Between 1872 and 1880 26,300 coolies arrived, and by 1892 almost 40 000 were reported to have migrated in the estates.

12 To-day, there are more than eight hundred tea estates in Assam. Traditionally, plantation managers and workers have concentrated on the estate itself and on wage disputes, rather than taking an interest in whatever happens outside.

13 Though Bodo history applies to a smaller heartland (Kobrajhar, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Kamrup and some part of Darrang) they claim to be an important part of the Assam population.

14 The Assam accord of 1985 between the Central government and the AASU leaders led to a disappointment for the Bodos. The political party, Ahom Gana Parisad, formed by the AASU seemed to have lost interest in the Bodo cause.

15 Baruah uses the term “ethnic cleansing” (2005).

16 The negotiations held in 2003 granted tribal self-determination under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The Scheduled, originally designed for the “Hill tribes” was amended to include the plain Bodos. It included other non scheduled tribes like the Rajbonsis who started an agitation to get the ST status.

Abstract: The present article discusses the performance of the ancient artistic technique of the wall paintings known as anital among the indigenous group of the Lanjia Saora of the Rayagada district in southern Orissa (India). The anital is a painting in which the aesthetic holds maybe a lesser importance if compared to its ritual function in Saoran shamanic practices performed by the kuran (the medicine man of the community). Through the wall-painting, as through a window between the dimensions that constitute the cosmos, the group strengthens the covenant between the living and the dead. The subject of this ādivāsī art form is thus highly symbolic and usually tells a dream, or a vision of the shaman that, through his performance, portrays the subtle world. However, with the advent of Christianity the anitals have become a target of persecution among the converted, precisely because they embody the tribal identity of the past. The recent revival of indigenous works along with many initiatives developed by local NGOs have tended to replicate ad infinitum the arcane motifs of anitals, identifying them for the consumption of modernity as purely ‘tribal art’ deprived of its ancient and authentic religious value. Despite this moment of profound social change and anthropological transition I will demonstrate how the traditional technique is still alive and how it can be decoded through knowledge of the Saoran culture.

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[O spirits] Come in [to my] body, come in [to my] mind, come to reveal the cause of the affliction.
O you, come instantly,
I will tell you about all circumstances.
Fathers of the fathers, mothers of the mothers,
O kurans (shamans) of previous generations, please come!
Sonums of the Lanjia Saora people, please come!
Strangers gods and goddesses from distant lands, come!
Gods and goddesses, come all together in the place of the pūjā.
Deities, spirits and ancestors all, come in the place that I’ll show you and that I only know.

Introduction: classical art, tribal art and the spiritual path

This invocation is the classic incipit of a shamanic prayer of Lanjia Saoras, an indigenous group of the state of Odisha in Central-Eastern India (Beggiora, 2010: 136). The Saoras have transmitted a magic-religious complex universe in which the kurans, or shamans in the Saora language, are the intermediaries between the village community and the subtle entities (sonum) that inhabit the forest. The place of pūjā, or the ritual, the secret place that only the shaman knows, is actually a particular artistic painting (anital) which according to the tradition of this indigenous group forms a real door of communication with the afterlife. The present study aims to show how this
particular art form possesses fundamentally ancestral and cultic features, as the cult of the dead and the worship of ancestors is vital in the shamanism of these areas. Since this indigenous culture is fast disappearing today under the pressure of modernization, we consider it absolutely necessary to put forward some considerations on this subject, especially since in contrast to its context, this art form is in some way managing to survive this period of strong contrasts and social transition by reinventing itself. However, given that the topic of art in India is extensive and tribal performance has arisen almost as a genre in itself since the Modern age, we consider it appropriate to propose some preliminary discussion of Indian art.

It is well known that Indian art has always been somewhat complex for the ‘outsider’. This is because the performance of the Indian artist transcends the aesthetic and goes well beyond the figurative genre. Not only is the artistic theme in India closely connected to the religious and metaphysical themes, but at the same time the artwork should express concepts, should be propaedeutic. Indeed the same canons of classical Indian aesthetics - rasa and bhāva i.e. frame of mind and emotion - interlinked to each other, are classed as steps to a spiritual path (Mukerjee, 1965: 91-96; Dasgupta, 1969: 14; Coomaraswamy, 1924: 30ff; Deheja, 2013: 13ff). On the one hand therefore an infinite number of symbols are displayed in front of the observer and on the other the gesture of the artist must be flawless, retracing perfection. According to the traditional conception of time in India, humanity currently lives in the Kali Yuga. Of the four eons (yugas) that make up the time cycle, the calculation of which was based on the precession of the equinoxes, the Kali Yuga is the worst because it is dominated by violence and ignorance. Humanity would be without any possibility of salvation was it not confident in the teaching of various texts of Hinduism with particular reference to Tantra.

In relation to art, among many sources, the myth of the dialogue between the king Vajra and the sage Markandeya is particularly renowned. The Visnudharmottara Purana (III. 86-66) tells how king Vajra consulted the saint (ṛṣi) Markandeya about the way of salvation (Kramrisch, 1976: 425; Delahoutre, 1994: 12-13). The sage replied that only the images preserved in the temple could provide union with God. Therefore the contemplation of art can be considered as a way of transcendence for man. On the basis of that King Vajra requested to learn the art of sculpture from the sage, in order to acquire happiness through the worship of the gods. Markandeya replied that there is no sculpture without painting. Moreover there can be no canon for painting without the knowledge of dance. So we could add that dance cannot subsist without instrumental music, which in turn does not exist without the study of singing. Song, and therefore in extenso the knowledge of mantra – numinous sound - is the knowledge of the whole. From this it is clear that in India figurative art should be considered within the set of the arts. Consequently it is therefore conspicuous that in India the arts are considered a science, and as such must be accurate, as well as a sacred way of knowledge. Moreover, as Coomaraswamy (1975) has already pointed out, art cannot be conceptually separated from religion, from astronomy, from astrology, etc., or from the conception of the cosmos and from alchemy, which regulates the manifest world.

Nevertheless so-called tribal art is considered a separate genre from the main strands of classical Indian art. Although the art of ādivāsīs is also rich in sculpture, paintings, and representations of various types, many scholars are inclined to consider the two
types of performance on a different level (Vidyarti and Rai, 1977: 308ff; Panikkar, Mukherji and Achar, 2003). But since the ādivāsī religiosity is very rich in terms of shamanic and ancestor worship and since for centuries it has lived in parallel or often intertwined with Hindu traditions - or at least at a popular level (Mallebrein 2000: 51ff) - is it possible to consider that ādivāsī art has equally assumed similar aims and importance?

If it is a fact that, in synthesis, a theoretical approach to the existence of a post-mortem is present also in complex and articulated forms in Indian shamanism, in the present study, however, we would like to explore some perspectives - these are real and genuine views or ‘visions’ - on it. Therefore we propose a case study among the group Lanija Saora of Odisha. Here not only is the shaman able to see beyond the threshold of death, but the whole process of rationalization of this event, sometimes traumatic by definition, and the normalization of relations between the community of the living and that of the dead, takes place through the perfect gesture of the artist who represents the details of this vision upon the wall (Beggiora, 2003: 139-158).

The definition ‘tribal art’ is extremely general, or rather completely generic, but is at least to some extent intuitive and it is perhaps appropriate to summarize a large amount of phenomena, including the example which I go on to document. One of the biggest problems we face when we intend to treat of art and religion in an Indian tribal context – and here too they are two closely interlinked concepts - is how this ‘low’ tradition handles cultural institutions, including those of caste which were particularly dominant in this region. Moreover, one of the distinctive features of Hinduism is its versatility in incorporating and correlating the religious elements of the Indian Subcontinent. According to this process cults of localized communities, and consequently the relative artistic expression, would be homologated over time to the highest models of religiosity, sanctioned, accepted and widespread as a transregional language by the intellectual-sacredotal Brahmanical class. This is what many scholars perhaps too summarily term a process of Sanskritization, an undeniable force in many cases at the present time. However, in our opinion this definition is partial in that it assumes a prevailing unidirectional relationship. We have strong evidence that the higher tradition, the socio-culturally prominent castes of the major centers of the Subcontinent, has maintained a constant dialogue with a large number of territorially important cults (Schnebel, 1995: 145-166; Saraswati, 1997: 114-116). This has meant that over the centuries alongside schools, in parallel with the technical and higher teaching of the śrenis, whose production was probably destined for the most important places of worship and temples, there existed a real kaleidoscope of productions emerging through a more popular or folkloric matrix, equally intended for the sacred geography of the territory (Nayak 2012: 169-180; Bundgaard 2013: 220ff).

Images of minor deities, but also popular representation of ancestors or various kinds of tutelary spirits, symbolizing the territorial ancestrality, but also guaranteeing life after death, have come over time to overlap with the canonical images of Hinduism: sometimes assimilating to them, sometimes – pay specific attention to this - vice versa, that is moulding the Hindu tradition over the specific regional form. A glaring example in Odisha is the emblematic and still mysterious mūrti of Jagannāth in Puri, whose origins are still being debated, and which are an issue for movements concerned with the re-
appropriation (da Silva, 2010: 10-11, 16-17, 235ff) of local identity.

Coming back to folk and tribal art the flowering of a large amount of complex representations of various kinds should be then imagined, in addition to images of deities or spirits, an innumerable variety of different objects, ritual or more commonly used instruments, which have merged in the specificity of local handicrafts. Of this mass of material, whereas it is often possible to identify genuine works of excellence, unlike classical art in India, habitually nothing remains over time, due to the fact of its being predominantly made on and with poor and perishable materials. This last fact seems to be extremely important in two fundamental aspects. The first is that in many parts of India, as well as in Odisha, this kind of production has historically put tribal groups and their production in contact with many low castes specializing in handicraft work, possibly through the employment of simple or poor materials, such as brass and copper among the metals, crockery and terracottas and so on. This socio-historical process is important and testifies to the reducing of isolation for many indigenous groups, as well as the possibility of putting folk/tribal art and handicrafts on a single plane which might be defined as vernacular (Mahawar 2011; Manohar and Shah, 1996: 47).

The second aspect of great interest for the purpose of our study is the possibility that the object, made with poor material on the whole, may deteriorate. Or ‘die’: in the sense that it can disappear. From this then arises the need to ritually renew it, to produce it again, to cyclically let it be reborn, to give it a 'second life' after death - that is exactly what in one way or another many of these works represent.

Another major problem we have in identifying the eschatological and shamanic theme of Indian tribal art, is the caesura that occurred in colonial times. It is well known how the British period was a revolutionary period for Indian art, or an involution phase depending on point of view. With the British, Western art makes a powerful entrance into the Subcontinent, from painting to architecture, distorting all the previous parameters and turning it towards a contemporary and international dimension (Mitter, 1992: 180, 270ff).

In short, and because it would take too long to summarize here so rich and complex a period, we will observe that if on the one hand the production of the period seems to accompany the statement of colonial rule in India, on the other, particularly after the Mutiny (1857), the Indian art scene will turn to the dynamics of affirmation (the symbols of nationalism), identity paths and self-assertion (in which even ethnic minorities have their considerable weight) and new socio-religious reform movements (avant-garde).

In this process, having demolished the canons of aesthetics of classical Indian art, or the rasa and bhāva as transcendental means or a spiritual path, the modern artist will be engaged in dissimilar rules, techniques, but mostly in different purposes for performance. The paradox in this is that already in the Victorian age and in the last century the British showed great appreciation or at least a certain pleased attention to those forms of minor folkloric art, that the 'high' Indian tradition had relegated to the background. Therefore collecting phenomena, musealisation and mass production of tribal art began in order to meet a purely aesthetic taste, which generally loses contact or memory itself of the original meaning of the work (Guha-Thakurta, 2004:43ff). If in a sense
this is fortunate for certain genres because it will allow them to survive the sometimes fierce impact of the contemporary and globalized world, on the other hand, as we shall see, it is a tragic dynamic because the survival of this art scene is detrimental in leading to the death or the drastic decline of its original cultural matrix. Furthermore, it often today exists by virtue of tourist or commercial dynamics.

Since in this framework the topic is mural painting, we would like to remember that, according to a general overview of murals or of simple applications in relief of mud, performed on the walls of the houses for ritual or at least auspicious purposes, there are characteristic forms of both rural Hindu India and the more properly ādivāsī context (Chaitanya 1994: 43ff). These include the typical decorations with mud of Gonds in central India, the peculiar images of the Bhils in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and many other examples from different ethnic subgroups of Odisha and again Deccan and Gujarat. It is a reality that today is rapidly disappearing as are the tribal cultures themselves, but where it survives it does so by virtue of the dynamics that we have mentioned above. Among many, an example: the mass production of Madhubani paintings that were typical of Bihar and Nepal or the Warli paintings of Maharashtra. The techniques change, they are made on a base of paper, the colours become industrial, once again the purpose of the work is modified.

**Anital: a window on the afterlife**

Coming back to the topic of shamanism in ādivāsī art, the actual case study in our research, we will analyze now a special traditional style of mural that represents in fact a piercing of the veil between the human and the subtle world. In Odisha the oldest and more interesting tradition of the wall paintings is certainly that of anitals of Lanjia Saoras. The Saoras are one of the largest indigenous groups in Odisha; they are now classified by the Indian Government as Scheduled Tribes. Within the major grouping of Saoras the minority of Lanjias, or Hills Saoras, is distinguished. Living in groups of villages, they inhabit the plateau rising from Gunupur towards Pottasing in southern Orissa, in the districts of Rayagada and Gajapati. The Lanjia Saoras are today classified by the Census of India in the subgroup of PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group), on account of the peculiarities of the territory in which they live, the low level of growth and in general the backwardness of the techniques and methods of their subsistence (Singh, 2001: 1058-1060; Patnaik, 2005: 167-183). Moreover, perhaps thanks to the fact that they have lived throughout history in relative isolation in the jungles of the highlands, from a cultural point of view the Lanja Saoras are renowned both for the peculiarities of a particularly vigorous shamanism and for the deep symbolism in their art. Once again, however, we document how the two concepts are not at all disconnected from one another, i.e. a form of art that is closely linked to the magical-religious world of local shamanism and that can only be interpreted through it. Indeed the anitals are paintings devoted to the dead and in general to ancestor worship and specifically their representation, as we shall illustrate, results in a certain sense in a vision, a particular perspective that the shaman (kuran or kuramboi if female) has about the afterlife, articulated through predetermined stylistic features.

The term anital (sometimes idital or ittal depending on the area) is derived from the Saora verbal root *id-* write, and the noun *talan* (probably contraction of *kitalan* wall (Elwin, 1955: 401). So the term can be translated as mural-writing or wall ‘painting’. 
The name of the so-called *anitalmaran*, the performer, could be translated as painting-man. In ancient times, when this tradition was certainly more intensely widespread, it is said that it was an adept, an assistant of the shaman (*idai*), who traced the work under his supervision. Probably some people, including those who consider themselves the custodians of the art among the various clans, in the past followed the instructions of the spiritual leaders of the group in this sacred representation. More recently, however, there has been a progressive simplification of the ritual of performance and, where this has not yet died out, it is usual for the shaman himself to represent the vision seen in a dream by his own hand.

The interpretation of dreams (genümten) is very important in the Saoran culture. It is in fact a kind of vision of the subtle world that only the shaman is able to interpret appropriately. In the cosmological conception of Saoras, the nature of the shamanic universe is the result of interpenetration between the empirical world and the subtle realm of spirits and deities (*sum / sonum*) that inhabit the forest. The spirits of the dead (*raudu*) are destined to a chthonian dimension called Kinorai, the world of the dead, which extends below the earth's surface. This dimension – a fairly typical element of the indigenous cultures of India - is a kind of reflection of real life, but in some way contiguous (Vitebsky, 1993: 66ff). In the immediate post-mortem, for the Saoras the souls of the dead are scared, frightened and wander in the forest seeking to return to their villages of origin. This is a particularly dangerous phase because, as is common believed in many cultures, if they do not receive the appropriate funeral rites, they could become larvae or spectra, embodying the dynamic of revenants, the dead coming back after death afflicting his place of origin on account of his suffering\(^\text{11}\). However, if these souls receive the appropriate rituals, which formally - as we shall see - correspond to the donation of symbolic or more explicit means to reach the Kinorai and start a new life, in this case they will be destined to become ancestors, protectors of their clan (*jujum*\(^\text{12}\)). All these spirits are thus seen in constant motion, travelling, in procession to the afterlife; or even imagined as living parallel lives in the chthonian dimension. But if the dream of the common man can be said to be influenced by these presences, once in the waking state they are like a fleeting glimpse, evanescent memories of a dimension that is absolutely alive and real but difficult for the layman to understand. Only the shaman, who has a controlling influence on the practice of trance - and therefore by extension on his dream activity - is able to look through this window, to seize this shining perspective on the subtle world and to fix it forever, like a photograph, on the mural.

For this particular reason, all the many elements that populate the paintings of the *anital* are considered non-human agents, or at least no longer human. It is interesting in this regard to note that according to the conventional creation of the painting, the artist's task is to sleep at the foot of the wall, observing fasting, after offering libations to the spirits of the ancestors. Once asleep, his dreams will inspire the subject to paint, or else the state of trance of the shaman can come in support and clarification of the ongoing representation. In some cases direct interaction with the spirits, through the mouth of the possessed shaman, can provide guidance on adjustments to be made, including through symbolic offerings then transposed into painting, to complete the work. We can therefore say that the *anital* is really a means of communication between the world of living and the world of the ancestors.
In agreement with the theme of ancestrality, strongly present in local shamanism, each kuran has on the other hand in his home a personal anital, celebrating his guiding spirit, or telling - through the usual and complex grid of symbols – the initiatory experience, the abduction in the forest, the processions by spirits of men and animals, the axis mundi and sacred plants, and the visions seen in trance, etc. During my fieldwork I noted that all of these paintings, specifically by virtue of their function, were positioned in the darkest and most intimate corner of the hut, or always inside and never outside. This is also the reason for the poor quality of the images that I can now produce and the use of infrared or photographic filters to bring out some details (Figure 1 and 2). In any case, we can deduce that the anital is not a work with only aesthetic purposes, or at least we can infer that such aesthetic transcends the mere empirical dimension.

Figure 1: Anital at Dengorjango village

Moving on to examine some of the details, we see that the most common subjects are means of transport and processions of musicians and dancers (Figure 3 and 4). These should not be interpreted as a representation of something tangible, but as processions of dancing spirits or tutelary entities. Means of transport, such as horse or elephant, but also modern vehicles such as bicycle or bus clearly indicate a journey. The theme of the trip, as we have said, the departure is important in the cult of the dead who are imagined as preparing to embark on a new life in the hereafter. So these (Figure 3) figures are intended as souls of the dead who are preparing for a journey that is both long and exceptional; the means represented is in a sense an obligatory pass for the current process. It is interesting to note that the subjects of past and present, insofar as they gradually adapt to modernity, whatever mode of transport they use always satisfy the unique character of the event as reflected in the exceptional nature of the vehicle. This is one that, insofar as it may be known, is not commonly used by members of the villages: i.e. as once ādivāsīs were not accustomed to riding horses or elephants (or it was at least a rare possibility) so today the trains and planes represented certainly do not halt in the jungles of the highlands.

Figure 2: Anital at Sogeda village

In figure 5 there is another interesting example where the real and the supernatural overlap at the same level in the representation. A seated figure is performing a ritual, assisted by two other silhouettes alongside. This is therefore a shaman, although the image is stylized, it is recognisable by the classical sitting posture, in which the Saoran medicine man officiates shaking the rice winnowing fan (runku), which is substituted for the shamanic drum among the indigenous peoples of these areas. Next
to him can be identified human assistants and a spirit assistant (probably the guiding spirit) who attends the scene standing holding a rifle. Nearby in the representation is the patient for whom the rite is held, lying suffering in what appears to be a charpai. In this little vignette, portrayed with a few brush strokes, is depicted all the dramatic tension of a healing pūjā.
offering, evoking the spirits and renewing the alliance between the living and the dead through this particular type of alcohol. In the indigenous cultures of the place, as well as indeed elsewhere in India, the trees that ooze latex are the symbols of the divine motherhood: this is why it is thought that they are sought after by those spirits who try to return to life. However in the shamanism of the tribes of the region, the plant embodies a true divine manifestation in this case vegetal: its juice opens intimacy with the supernatural forces, tearing the veil that hides the secrets of the forces that govern the surrounding nature. Therefore processions of armed men, who are the guardian spirits of sacred places, and soon follow in the paintings. It would be too long to enumerate here all the subjects that we were able to record in the field - we give a brief summary in the note\textsuperscript{13} - not least because the local variations are many. What certainly appears to be fundamental in this analysis is to understand how the representation of the painting and its codification correspond to a strict symbolic grid substantially based on the relationship of the living with the dead and with the post mortem.

With regard to processing techniques we document that the surface on which the work is created is the wall of the hut, which is beforehand washed with water and red clay\textsuperscript{14}. Concerning the application we observe that the \textit{anitalmaran} prepares the colors with natural products thus: for white he mixes water with rice flour and for black he needs ashes and water to which can be added soot or red ocher to darken or lighten the tone.

There are no other colors; the background of red clay of the wall is the basis on which the figures are drawn. On the other hand it is known that \textit{anitals} are all bichromatic or at most trichromatic. First of all, the artist draws the outline consisting of a double or triple frame in a generally quadrangular shape, although trapezoidal or semicircular ones are quite common. The decorative motifs are often rhomboidal or herringbone, surrounded by a thick outer frame, white, with points facing outside. The silhouettes of the figures, however, are generally constituted of triangles to which are added the limbs and the head, with fineness of detail relating to all that they hold in hand. However the general structure of \textit{anital} – the trapezoidal shape is the most recurring, almost bringing to mind the shape of a hut – is clearly that of a house. And in any case it should be considered in that way: a house where the ancestors are called to reside during special festivities. When the work is completed, then the shaman consecrates the painting by hanging in front of it various types of offerings: usually he lavishes palm wine in jugs hung opposite the image (but also umbrellas, peacock...
feathers, various kinds of vegetable offerings).\textsuperscript{15}

Another interesting aspect of this cult is that not only the totality of the figures, but the image of the spirit-guide or ancestor in particular, should be represented to perfection with all his attributes. In the case of spirits of the dead it is frequently the custom to graphically represent all the most important objects they owned in life, such as animals, tools, agricultural utensils. Likewise the structure-house should be stylistically appropriate to the figures represented on the inside or outside. This requires frequent corrections and additions. In the event of accident, illness or disasters that hit the village and if these events can be related to the action of some nefarious ancestor who is angry or dissatisfied (as a result of some fault of the group or infringement of taboos), this could be an opportunity to adjust the dedicated \textit{anital}. Mediation between the spirits and the group is always through the shamanic trance. However, the painting can then be expanded over time through successive rituals, if the shaman deems it necessary. So basically this is not only an artistic genre that is updated, refreshed by coping with modernity, but we document a sequence of works that are themselves constantly expanded and modified across the years. Some \textit{anitals} indeed display different layers of representation that testify to later additions over time. Others are preserved intact, but circumscribed by layers of new plaster, a sign that the tradition was interrupted in some way, but ancestor worship is still alive (Figure 7).

Some scholars have noted strong similarities between the \textit{anitals} of Saoras and the famous rock art engravings in the site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh (Pradhan 2009: 1-11; Mathpal, 1984: 217; Tribhuvwan and Finkenauer, 2003: 95ff; Chakravarti, 1999: 213-222; etc.). In Bhimbetka a large collection of images which apparently have been handed down through different historical periods are still studied by archaeologists, considering the richness and the high number of caves they show great vitality and narrative skills. Leaving aside the later phases, i.e. the ancient historical and the later medieval periods having a different variety of graffiti, the early prehistoric periods seem to be truly interesting. The earliest phase is dated to the Upper Palaeolithic period and is characterized by large linear representations of such animals as rhinos and bears: it is undoubtedly fascinating but probably less interesting for the purposes of our study. However the representations of the Mesolithic period are smaller and portray, besides the animals, human activities. Lastly the paintings from the Chalcolithic period (Early Bronze Age) clearly expose the primeval conceptions of human
beings related to the agricultural revolution. In fact, in these last two phases can be found elements of strong analogy with our subject of study. There is a very heated debate in India around these issues into which we think there is no need to enter in this case. However, we notice on the one hand a tendency in some universities to consider ādivāsī society as a sort of open laboratory, an observatory, a cross-section of lifestyle and techniques of subsistence of proto-historical societies (hunters and gatherers or the period of the agricultural revolution / Bronze Age) (Nagar, 1977: 23-26; Ghosh, 1984: 106-111). In other words there is a tendency to give an overly evolutionary interpretation to the reality of the indigenous ethnic minorities of India which in our opinion cannot be placed scientifically in relation to such prehistoric communities. However the fact remains: a certain similarity of some elements, of some figures and of the way of articulating a general structure of the image is in some cases very strong; it seems nevertheless appropriate to reject this suggestion. At least, from the deeply symbolic interpretation of the shamanic phenomenon of anitals, we can assume that – also on the basis of the cornerstone of Leroi-Ghouran’s study (2006) - these ancient societies could conceivably have a religion similarly profound and articulated through these messages written on the walls. However having already experienced not a few difficulties in the codification of anitals, it seems prudent not to enter deeper into this always fascinating mystery.

Conclusion: continuity and change in indigenous communities

In anthropology in modern times, the first to link the mural painting of the tribes of Odisha to a deep and articulated magical-religious code was Verrier Elwin, in the Forties / Fifties of the last century (1948: 35-44; 1951: 197ff; 1955: 401-443). Although the anitals of the Saoras have become very popular today, for reasons that we shall soon see, there do not currently exist many systematic studies of this religious tradition and its initiatory meaning, except in relation to an external or superficially folkloristic appearance.

Moreover we have documented that for more than twenty years in the Pottasing and among nearby settlements there has been a constant process of Christianization (Catholic). Pottasingh is in the heart of, or rather in the access area to, the plateau inhabited by Lanjia Saoras; it is a large village mainly inhabited by low caste Hindus and Pano untouchables (Dom). They were the first to convert to Christianity, thus becoming the vehicle of the new religion in the area. Already at the time of our first fieldwork in the late ’90s I noticed how the missionaries were particularly intransigent towards all the fundamental aspects of tribal culture and identity. In exchange for some medicine and food aid, the Christians were forcing conversion upon the people of the neighbouring villages. Among the converted then there was the peremptory obligation to abjure tradition: that is the rejection of shamanism, the systematic destruction of murals, even to the desecration of cemeteries. It goes without saying that this process had led to extreme tension between converted and non-converted people, but it is nevertheless quite clear that social contrasts between low castes/untouchables and the ādivāsī population were involved in this dynamic around issues of the welfare state and privileges, as well as matters of political relevance to the government of the local pañcāyat. In one way or another, however, in all these years the idea that conversion to the new religion implied the fact of ‘becoming modern’ has basically been predominant. This would signify having access to welfare and the glorious development of contemporary India: roads, schools, TV, electricity, buses, Coke,
things that until a few years ago were unthinkable in these villages, and remain so in some remote areas. Today a paved road joins the Christianized villages, all connected with providing electric pylons, which are however lacking in settlements inside the forest. But the problems of the area are far from resolved. Moreover since my last fieldwork I recall that many antitals had by then been obliterated, while some others had been preserved almost in secret in some homes. Along the roads connecting the converted villages or on the iridescent facades of the churches the ‘tribal art’ has been replaced by a chaotic jumble of Christian themed graffiti: hearts, doves and crosses of various kinds and sizes.

It is noteworthy that at the same time, as a sort of repercussion to this deplorable trend of annihilation of ādivāsī culture, throughout the state interest in this kind of art is experiencing a moment of genuine revival. The people realize that it is an endangered, if not yet vanished, tradition and that it must be protected by some means. So the Government of Odisha and many NGOs organize studies, craft workshops, schools, that work on reproductions of antitals on any scale. A workforce of tribal origin is often employed in this new dynamic, with the task of mass production, reinterpreting the traditional patterns of antital in a modern way. Today all this practice is becoming a big business, especially in recent times, and is fairly successful. For example, traveling today across Odisha, is easy to see everywhere the motifs of antitals or similia, that are replicated, mass produced in thousands of released variants: T-shirts, postcards, paintings, prints, wristwatches and wall clocks, even applications for nail-styling! For many metropolitan non-governmental organizations this is a way to prevent the disappearance of this kind of art and at the same time to re-employ the fruits of this business in fair trade projects or cooperative development of ādivāsī existence. It is hard to say to what extent this reinvestment of funds is incisive. It should however also be noted that the driving energy for this flawed revival has developed during a particular period of international enhancement and valorization of ethnic arts, a moment in which perhaps the fruits of the interest and appreciation accumulated over the past decades are tasted. For this reason, we repeat, these activities often have the direct patronage of central institutions or at least those of the state, because in any case they are economic activities that produce a certain income and, if not providing relief to a somewhat disadvantaged social subject, nevertheless they can be understood as a form of development. On the other hand, after more than sixty years of a somewhat ineffective – if not occasionally destructive – tribal policy, we believe it is currently possible to wish for more.

The fundamental problem is that these performances, conveyed nowadays, as we have said, on paper with industrial colours, and which distort the traditional subjects while wherever possible imitating the style, are completely decontextualized from the ritual scope and tragically lose their original and deep meaning. The motifs of the representations moreover do not respect any criterion or rule. The definition of tribal art has in some way become a stereotype, due to homologating a wide range of expressive and aesthetic peculiarities of the ādivāsī matrix, through a standardization that has lost even the memory of its origins.

One of the interesting aspects of this phenomenon is that on the other hand separated genres of tribal art have now become the symbol of some ādivāsī groups, which historically being marginalized communities, have thus the opportunity to
emerge and to reaffirm their identity. Artists have arisen who, aware of their role as spokesperson, even promote themselves as national and international celebrities. This too is a phenomenon deserving of renewed interest in the sense that previously, as for classical art in India, the single performer, the artist, did not exist as an individual creativity. Rather, the work conveyed sense, meaning and values through a style that was exclusively shared within the group. Today this ancient meaning has been lost, but this same style conveyed outside the community becomes the desperate cry of the indigenous communities that affirm their right to exist in the contemporary world. The systematization of this dynamic, the patronage of the reiteration of a certain ādivāsī ritualism in the arts, as well as the musealisation of the ethnic today seems to be the only way of survival of what remains of these cultures. The theme is extremely topical and is the subject of debate today, not only in India, but almost everywhere.

In conclusion, observing the mysterious anitals, that once enclosed the secret initiation of shamans and allowed man a view of beyond the dimension of space and time, we can attest that today they have survived the decline and disappearance of ādivāsī culture. However, there remains also the bitter realization that this new life is nothing more than a pale reflection of what it once was.

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Notes

1 The Saora Language, or Sora, is classified as Austro-Asiatic, Munda, Ethnologue ISO 639-3 srb.

2 Among many materials on this theme, we would like to mention the collection of Rigopoulos and Mastromattei (1999)

3 With particular reference to region of Orissa are very interesting the German works of Orissa Research Project. In brief we quote Schnepel (2002) and Pfeffer (2007).

4 Here understood as traditional art or craft guilds

5 For which the aniconic or the symbolic in the representation are anyway prevalent. See Elwin (1955: 178ff; 1951: 110-126)

6 See again the dense work of Partha Mitter (1994; 2007)

7 On ādivāsī art in the dimension of global contemporary art see also Guzy (2010: 169-179)


11 Kulbā or kulbānji, generic expression referable to the odiā bhūtō (hin. bhūt).

12 Colloquial expression meaning ‘grandfather'; more specific terms are idaisiman or idaisumji.
13 Angaisim/ Moon sonum; Bees/ Labosim (Earth sonum); bow and arrows/weapons of spirits ilda; banyan or sal/trees of raudas (ancestors); harvest/wealth; frog/rain; fish or crab/ decorative motifs; snake or jitipiti (gecko)/Uyungsim (Sun sonum); tiger/Kinasim (Tiger sonum or man-tiger metamorphosis); dogs/spirit dog (Kambutung) dogs of Ratusim (sonum of crossroads); person sitting on stool/guiding spirit; man drinking, preparing liquor or dancing/servants of ilda spirits; etc.

14 The huts of Saoras are entirely built of mud. This technique is probably intended to compact and smooth the surface to be painted.

15 The plants chosen in particular are all considered sacred; the feathers are from a sacred animal representing royalty and the descent of the spirits, as we have seen. The use of umbrellas is quite common, especially during funerals. While celebrating the guar ceremony, with the sacrifice of a buffalo and erection of the memorial stone for the dead, the soul is considered absolutely naked, frightened, cut off. In this period, the family builds a miniature hut on piles whose roof is made with an umbrella. The soul of the deceased is imagined to reside temporarily there and then beside it are placed all his properties. The umbrella symbolizes a hut, or better the protection of a roof.

16 See also Jasiewicz and Rozwadowski (2001: 3-14).

Abstract: The article introduces two types of animal fight in western Odisha, which differ in terms of performance, participants and audiences. While it is generally a predominantly male affair; farmer castes indulge more in bird fights, whereas Adivasis rather prefer cockfights. These collective preferences I argue could be explained through a combination of three overlapping dimensions: those of history, caste and the law. First, the historically conditioned positions of the communities differ significantly. Second, the fights are hierarchized and bird fights are preferred by farmers because they are in line with Brahmanical ideas about purified spaces etc, while Adivasis follow a different logic of wealth and pride. Third, the legal aspect and the ambivalent involvement of the modern state, banning animal fighting, but also partially protecting it as customary, determines the involvement of the different communities. Thus, juxtaposing these co-existing fights reveals a multi-dimensional, enduring yet also changing social chasm in a relatively remote area.

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Introduction
Travelling around in the winter months in the former princely state of Bonai, one may encounter forms of animal fights such as cockfights or Champa bird fights, the latter sometimes also referred to as bulbul fights. Although participation is not restricted to particular communities, the former is relatively more popular with Adivasis and lower castes, while the latter is a preferred pastime among the farmer castes (e.g. Kultas) who migrated into the region in nineteenth century. Of the two, the bulbul fight is clearly less well known and has not been mentioned in the literature so far. It is certainly less widespread in Odisha and perhaps not as popular these days as it used to be if the impression of my interview partners is correct.

Talking about cockfights, one might immediately think of the Balinese tradition of cockfighting documented by Mead and Bateson (2012 [1942]) and analysed in Geertz’s pioneering work, in which he unearthed the event’s various layers of meanings and discovered the specific “intimacy of men with their cocks” (1995 [1983]: 418), which he saw as a kind of “sentimental education” about the “culture’s ethos” (ibid.: 449). Geertz argued:

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not [...], that it reinforces status discriminations [...], but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function [...] is interpretative: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves. (448)
Like Geertz’s famous example from Bali, cockfights and bird-fighting in Odisha reveals a nexus between animal fights and the male domain in terms of participants and audiences, which, however, is not my main focus here. Unlike Geertz, I compare two different types of fighting preferred by different communities respectively and therefore seen as distinguishing markers on the community level.

I argue that the contrast between these fights, which take place in close proximity, sheds light on differences among communities, particularly with reference to three dimensions:

a) historically, as a situation of a multiple cultural encounter in western Odisha that has shaped the local society since the princely state era, has had repercussions on historically conditioned forms of social integration, somehow persists despite later changes and is possibly reflected in current popular pastimes;

b) in terms of caste values, particularly impurity, combined with social and spatial hierarchies; and

c) concerning the legality of such animal fights and the relatively ambivalent role of the state – laws being alternatively followed, ignored or even challenged. Thus, the (dis-)pleasure of cockfighting and bird-fighting is intimately tied to an enduring chasm between predominantly farmer castes on the one hand and an indigenous “tribal” or Adivasi population (e.g. Bhuiyans) and lower castes on the other, though this rift has occasionally been bridged by royal families, such as that of Bonai, which patronizes and indulges in both activities. As Geertz poignantly argued: “Every people [...] loves its own form of violence” (ibid.: 449).

Juxtaposing the two ways of fighting, which are more or less violent, offers collective reflections and commentaries on “others” and perhaps even more on “selves” within a relatively remote society.

The cockfight (ganjaa ladhei / kukraa ladhei)

The day of Char Khai, first day of the month of Margosiro, usually marks the breaking of the fast that many observe during the preceding month of Kartik (roughly November), and particularly during the final five days of this month, known as Panchaka. On this day, in front of the Bonai palace, an arena has been demarcated and fenced off by the organizing committee, which includes members of the royal family. By noon the place is crowded, with hundreds of people, their bicycles – because most of them have come from nearby villages – and, most importantly, their cocks, preferably slim and large in size. Importantly, they have not been fed – or if at all, only with a very little rice – in order to make them more aggressive.

In the crowd, some people are sitting displaying the sharp blades (kati) which they are binding to one leg of the cock before fights, which are accordingly known as “slasher fights” elsewhere. A fight is arranged by the owners of the cocks, who examine each other’s cocks and try to evaluate their chances. Or, as the late Rajasahib of Bonai, K.K.C. Deo, said: “You go round if you are interested in a fight. You look, which size and what. Size, height and then who wins, wins.” All fights are equally important – there are no finals, semi-finals or main fights of any kind. If a fight is agreed upon, there are a few rules:

1. The owner of the winning cock will be given the other cock, which might be dead or severely injured by then. 2. If the cocks do not fight at all – a very rare case indeed – it is counted as a draw.
3. If one cock is pushed out of the arena or if a cock tries to abscond, the other cock is declared the winner.
4. The owner of the winning cock pays ten rupees to the organizing committee—a rather nominal amount compared to the monetary value of a cock.

A fight usually starts by the owners each holding their cocks in their hands and moving the cock closer to the enemy. The speed of this movement increases with the aim of stimulating aggression. Then, both cocks are put down on the ground at a distance of half a metre, and they are finally pushed by their owners in the enemy's direction. The cocks display their feathers to impress their opponents before they attack them. Some run straight to the other cock, sometimes they jump into a fray. If they manage to pounce at the enemy, they quickly injure it with the help of the blade, and the fight turns bloody. The fight may go on for quite some time until one cock finally collapses and a winner is declared. The winning cock is taken back by the owner, while the losing one, if dead or almost dead, is just thrown to the side, where the blades can be removed and where it can be picked up, almost like a trophy, by the new owner later.

The almost completely male crowd densely surrounding the arena is not only excited by the fight itself, but also by the betting that accompanies it. Banknotes are held up order to show one's willingness to bet on one or the other cock. There is permanent shouting, partly to announce one's intention to bet, and money is placed in a rush just before the fight is about to begin, partly to push forward one's own fighter, partly out of sheer excitement and joy, and partly related to the consumption of alcohol that has also been going on. Unlike the Balinese cockfights, betting itself is quite simple, both parties agreeing an amount of money, with the winner taking all. There are no complicated or sophisticated quotas.

The atmosphere around the arena is charged, and not all the participants always agree with the declarations of the organizing committee standing at the side of the arena. As Fulvio Biancifiori (personal communication) noted in 2008 while observing cockfights next to a cattle market in the neighbouring district and former princely state of Keonjhar:

*There is always a very tense atmosphere, and often I found myself in trouble. A time when the competition judge [person acting as a kind of umpire – US] allowed me to enter the enclosure to take better photographs, the loser then had a fight with me.*

However, unlike the relatively improvised cockfights close to markets without proper organizing committees, on Char Khai in Bonaigarh the police patrol openly and prevent the fighting spirit from spilling over from the cocks to the male audience. The event used to be patronised by the Raja, is still performed in front of the palace and is considered part of the tradition of the area, with the police nolens volens accepting or tolerating the event. Yet, the later in the day a fight takes place, the more likely that it will be contested by owners and bettors alike, who have often consumed more alcohol by then. The event finally comes to an end around 4 pm.

**The bird-fight (champa ladhei)**

The picture of the bulbul fight, which is popular among farmer castes such as the Kultas, could hardly be more different. The day of Makar Sankranti, the 14th of January, which is linked to games in various places in India (Bates / Armstrong 2001: 192), is considered to be the traditional day for bird
fights in villages near Bonaigarh dominated by Kultas, where around 10 am a little ritual (puja) is performed by a village Brahman at the mandap or village altar for ceremonial occasions, after which prasad is distributed. Slowly men with their small birds, known as champa, gather next to the mandap. The birds have been caught a few weeks before the fights in the fruit trees close to the villages or kept in cages. Around one leg of each bird (male and female birds are both used) is a small thread by which the bird is tied to its owner’s forefinger or a bamboo stick. A specifically coloured bunch (kala bhaunri) is tied to the thread to support the balance of the bird and indicate ownership.

As in cockfights, birds are not fed before the fight, and the rule regarding one of the birds leaving the demarcated arena, then immediately being declared the loser, is the same. In fact, flying away is the most common way to decide the fight, and in any case no bird is killed. Other outcomes, however, including one bird sitting on another, which does not move anymore, which is considered to be a victory. The overall system is more complicated than in the one-to-one cockfight. As a Kulta explained:

“Prizes” are given; only 1st, 2nd & 3rd prizes are given.... Here 100 birds will come, 50 pairs of birds. Two birds will fight, and the winning bird will stay, and the other will be left to go. Here is “ticket system”. For one bird one ticket is necessary. See, there are total 100 birds; all will be kept in one place. Only two will be brought for fighting. The winning bird will be kept in a separate place, and the other will be left. To the 2nd round there will be only 25 pairs. To the next round there will be 12 pairs, and to the next round six pairs, then three pairs, will remain, and at last three birds will remain. Out of three, one will be called ‘baya’ [mad] bird, who will wait till the fighting of the other two will be decided. The winning bird will fight with that ‘baya’ bird. Those who win will be declared as first, then the second and third. We have done this “prize system” only for the sake of “enjoyment”; the fighting of champa birds are organized for that.\(^5\)

In this well-organized manner, the names of all owners are written on small pieces of paper, and afterwards the matches are determined by a lottery, which means that a “chief guest” has the honour of picking the first two sheets of paper from an earthen pot. Unlike the cockfights, the owner cannot influence the match. The rather nominal prizes include a blanket, dhoti (traditional loincloth) and gamja (armless shirt) and used to be sponsored by village headmen (Gauntia), though nowadays an organizing committee is responsible for this.

Compared to the cockfight, the event is not only very well-planned, but also much less emotional. Alcohol is forbidden and so is betting. There is hardly any shouting, and the men joke about birds escaping from the arena. However, all the birds remain with their respective owners, even the losers. They are far too small for eating anyway. Generally, the atmosphere is joyful rather than tense, and the absence of blades prevents the fights becoming bloody.

Historical encounters, princely states and social integration

In order to understand the different fights and perhaps even some of their structural features, I follow a historical approach. The farmer castes’ history during and involvement in princely state and colonial rule shows striking parallels with the organizing principles of these fights, which are worth considering. Now a sub-division of Sundargarh District in north-western Odisha, Bonai finally came under British control in 1818 and was officially ceded to them in 1826. Though
relations with the British slowly intensified, Bonai remained fairly remote, a barely accessible and sparsely populated kingdom surrounded by hills and tiger-infested jungles, as W.R. Gilbert, A.G.G. Hazaribagh, reported in 1825 to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government, after travelling through the neighbouring princely state of Gangpur (now also part of Sundargarh District). Gilbert did not just mention the want of cultivators and the way peasants were actually encouraged by the rulers of these states to in-migrate, offering not just land, but tax reductions as additional incentives. As Gilbert continues his report, a military road from Calcutta to Sambalpur was already under construction, which, passing through Gangpur, would make the area more accessible. Railway projects, particularly the Bengal–Nagpur Railway passing through Gangpur slightly to the north of Bonai, soon followed. Also, farmer castes, such as the Aghrias, Kultas, Kurmis / Mahantos and Chosas, migrated into the region from various directions, now being settled in high concentrations in Sundargarh District as well as in neighbouring Sambalpur District, and they seem to have made use of these new opportunities.

Thus, the combined efforts of British colonizers and local princes resulted in a constant influx of settlers, increasing considerably the population density of the feudatory states of western Odisha, which almost doubled between the censuses of 1881 and 1931 (Schwerin 1977: 48). However, these migrants did not just occupy land but took up the headmanship of villages, becoming revenue collectors for the petty Rajas. As such, the search for farmers like the Kultas, Aghrias and others was not only instrumental in transforming a landscape – notably by clearing the forests and spreading plough-related intensive wet-rice cultivation – but also the state, here an emerging princely state, that could intensify its grip on certain areas with the help of the newcomer farmers generating and collecting revenue.

The area Gilbert passed through was, as he noted, sparsely populated by “aborigines” – Adivasi or relatively more autochthonous groups who had often settled prior to the arrival of these peasants. Thus, a situation of multiple cultural encounters emerged, with British colonial administrators and older elite, including the Rajas, rather industrious migrant farmers brought in to increase revenues and relatively autochthonous communities such as the Bhuiyans. The latter, literally “earth people” claiming to be the first settlers, were considered powerful communities with their own militia and were only loosely linked to certain Rajas, for example, offering tokens of allegiance to “jungle kings” (see also Roy 1970 [1912]: 199; Gell 1992: 4) instead of paying substantial revenues or taxes, and occasionally ‘rebelling’ against attempts to raise taxes. Thus, their degrees of outside involvement or better integration into state structures differed considerably from the often wealthy and hardly rebellious migrant headmen and may still differ to a certain degree. For example, until recently communities in relatively remote hill areas such as the Paudi Bhuiyans were classified by the Indian administration as one of the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) (now renamed Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups).

The contrast between (Paudi) Bhuiyans and Kultas is quite striking and resembles ideal types in a Weberian (2002 [1922]) sense. However, the empirical situation is more complex, with other communities such as the Kandhs, Gands, Bhuiyans etc. considered Adivasi / Scheduled Tribes (ST) (though not PTGs) in the plains and living historically in closer proximity to migrants like the Aghrias or Kultas, by whom they have been influenced relatively more. To complicate the picture
further, there also communities such as the Mundas, Orams etc., claiming Adivasi status and regarded as STs by the administration, but having their own history of migration under colonial rule and thus not being able to claim autochthonous status like the Bhuiyans (and to a lesser extent the Gonds and Kondhs).

However, though the social situation is complex in practice, with significant differences between the hills and plains, in terms of participation in the two fights considered here one finds a more clear-cut distinction. Though everyone is free to participate in any fight – Aghrias or Kultas in cockfights, Bhuiyans or Mundas in bulbul fights etc. – which itself may be seen as a sign of convergence in the north-western ‘hinterland’ of Odisha – migrant farmers such as the Kultas, as well as Brahmans etc. and the higher castes more generally (classified as General Castes and Other Backward Classes) tend to participate in or patronize bulbul fights. Conversely, Bhuiyans, as well as the Kondhs or Mundas (i.e. Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes) and other communities classified as Scheduled Castes (SC), tend to enjoy cockfights more. This close connection might partly be explained by the fact that communities classified as SCs by the state have often lived for a long time in close proximity to Adivasis, and in fact they may be considered integral parts of a larger tribal society (e.g. in Koraput), in which so-called Harijans (Pano, Dombo) have acted as clients and outside mediators for Adivasis for centuries (Pfeffer 2002).

Considering this history of migration and evolving princely state structures and the rather “ideal typical” cases of the Paudi Bhuiyans and Kultas, it is tempting to relate it to the different organizing principles of the fights, that is, the contrast between the order of the bulbul fights as a very systematic arrangement with an unambiguous winner and the hardly centralized cockfights. This contrast would seem even stronger if one considered all cockfights in the region, that is, Char Khai, with its organizing committee and patrolling police as a special, slightly more institutionalized and legalized version of what otherwise goes on during market days. Thus, one could actually imagine cockfights around the markets and the bulbul fight of the Kultas as two poles of a continuum, with Char Khai in between, though closer to the more spontaneous cockfights near local markets.

Considering the ends of such a continuum, one would find the cockfight pairs on one side, i.e. A is fighting against B in a way that could be seen, following Sahlins (1965: 144), as a form of ‘negative reciprocity’, which he linked to social distance and also occasionally to violence. As Sahlins (1965: 148) writes:

‘Negative Reciprocity’ is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, the several forms of appropriation, transactions opened and conducted toward net utilitarian advantage. Indicative ethnographic terms include ‘haggling’ or … ‘gambling’ … and other varieties of seizure. Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal sort of exchange.

The cockfights for which people from different villages around Bonaigarh gather could fall into this category. Significantly, Sahlins (ibid.: 144) also quotes Oliver (1955) and Pospisil (1958) in this regard, who both see negative reciprocity as concerning often far-off people, those socially most distant, with traders especially, who believed to cheat anyway, also figuring in the list of these distant ‘creatures’. Understanding cockfights as a form of negative reciprocity may thus also offer a clue about the common link between the fights and local markets, which are often held on the periphery of villages,
rather than at a sacred centre like the Champa bird fights.

Looking at the typology of exchange that Sahlins (1965: 141) developed, one finds reciprocity (direct or indirect, negative or otherwise) as a between-relation being contrasted with forms of pooling or redistribution, which Sahlins calls a within-relation, that is, a collective group action, rather than an exchange between two parties. This group dimension comes to the fore during the bulbul fight, when every participant is and agrees to be part of a pyramidal structure, or a redistributive system. The Gauntias or at present the organizing committee redistribute pooled resources in the form of prizes (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: “Atomistic” structure of the cockfights versus pyramidal structure of the bird fights**

Without denying that all communities are now more or less integrated into the structures of the modern state and that “little kingdom” or princely state structures have largely been transformed, the kinds of fights preferred as pastimes may well reflect historically conditioned forms of social integration and mirror somewhat enduring ideas about social structures. They may be seen as a kind of resilient metasocial commentary in the sense that the pyramidal structure of the Kulta bulbul fights indirectly corresponds to the involvement of the Kultas in the princely state. That is, the Kulta farmers used to pay taxes to the headman, the Gauntia, who then forwarded a share of them to the Raja, who in turn paid tribute to the British, but who redistributed them at least partly in festivals patronized by him etc. Farmers like the Kultas or Aghrias, and particularly their headmen as revenue collectors, but also village justices of peace, were directly involved in and formed part of the pyramidal, redistributive power structures of the “little kingdoms” and contributed to their transformation into princely states.

The cockfight with, to use Geertz’s (1995 [1983]: 248) phrase here, its “radically atomistic structure” corresponds to Sahlins (1968: 5) notion of the “tribe” as characterized by the absence of a central authority and a Hobbesian state of “warre” – that is, as the absence of an institutionally guaranteed peace and a lack of “a sovereign political and moral authority; the right to use force and do ‘battell’,..., is held by the people in severalty”. Cockfights around markets, where everyone can let his cock fight against another cock, provided the owner does not back down and without or with relatively weak umpires (or without organizing committees or police to settle disputes), come close to this idea of “tribe” or “warre”. However, the (Paudi) Bhuiyans at least pledged allegiance to the Raja of Bonai and offered nominal tribute, thus showing how some forms of relatively centralized authority progressively increased historically with an expanding (princely) state.

“Small people”, spatial hierarchies and Brahmanical values

While the integration of different parties into a larger encompassing competition clearly distinguishes the bulbul fight from the one-to-one cockfights, another feature seems to be of equal importance: a distinction in status, in that the farmers in particular despise cockfighting. As a Kulta argued: “In our ‘caste’
we do not require wine (mod) and chicken (kukurua). So we never do the cockfights. In former times there was no play for enjoyment (manakhusi). So they were catching the champa birds...” While alcohol might be avoidable during cockfights, poultry is obviously a necessity, and here lies the crux of the matter, as one Kulta participant stated:

We never touch chicken. ... we do not eat chicken ... It is our ‘custom’ that if we touch chicken then we have to change our clothes. If we eat chicken meat, then we are driven out from the caste (jati), and only after observing due formalities i.e., only if the hair of the head are cleanly shaven and sugarcane juice drink is given etc., only then we are again included in the caste.

It is impossible to say whether the avoidance of chicken is indeed a strictly observed rule as is claimed here or whether this is rather an exaggerated self-image of the community, but I suggest there are certain clear indicators hinting at the link between purity or rather impurity and poultry. Among Aghrias, it is quite common to keep chickens in the house and also to consume them, but it was often mentioned that this is a recent development, and in fact it was accepted as characteristic of their community that lowered its status. Conversely, according to the Aghrias (and my own somewhat superficial observations), the Malis, who are considered to be a caste of gardeners, follow strict rules of chicken avoidance, which the Aghrias accept as a marker of their relatively higher status. In fact, Aghrias claim to have observed similarly strict rules regarding the avoidance of poultry farming, but argue that in an age of general degeneration, the present kali yug or “age of vice”, caste members hardly follow the tradition. Similarly, many Kultas claim that they avoid chicken completely and link this feature to their status. This was clearly expressed in a group interview in which Kultas were asked whether they participated in cockfights on the day of Charkhai, and the answer was “no”:

Answer – The “low caste” people are going there, because they are eating chicken.
Question – Lower caste means? Are they Kultas? [as my brahmanical assistant provocatively asked.]
Answer – No, No. Those who are below the Kulta samaj [society – US], they were going: Adibasi and Harijans.

This exchange exemplifies processes of othering and the role of cockfights as a medium of distinction between “self” and “other”. Not only the Kultas, but also Aghrias or members of royal families consider the bulbul fights to be “well-cultured” and “civilised” alternative or substitute, while cockfights in this perspective are something for lower status communities, for so-called chot lok or “small people”, that is, Harijans (Dalits) or so-called Scheduled Castes (SC) are presumed to be “low castes” in the same or at least in a very similar way that Adivasis are. However, the interviews with Kultas stand in stark contrast to the perceptions of the cockfight among Adivasis, among whom I never heard any excuses for or pejorative comments about cockfighting. On the contrary, in a press statement Golak Bihari Naik, Odisha's Fisheries and Animal Resource Development Minister representing a reserved ST constituency, argued that:

the fighter cocks were the ‘life and pride’ of a tribal family. ... a family possessing a number of fighter cocks were considered as ‘affluent’ and ‘powerful’ in the tribal community.²

While he stresses the power and wealth linked to cockfights, what seems to be at stake here for the farmer castes is something very different: the underlying notion of potential impurity. Chicken are despised because of their diet, that is, how they run about in villages and pick up whatever food is...
available to them, thus being in contact with polluting food remains and even excrement. As a newspaper praising the fighter cocks noted: The chicken are allowed to scavenge [my emphasis] for their food in the backyard – to build up that 'fighting' spirit. Free-range chicken are linked to scavenging, a term otherwise used with reference to so-called “Untouchables” and their work.

Champa birds, in contrast, are believed to survive exclusively on a vegetarian diet consisting basically of fruit. Thus, a differentiation of animals and fights is ultimately linked to a hierarchy of food as a pillar of the caste system. However, the risk of pollution and contamination is also closely associated to blood and death. A member of the royal family who experimented with fighter cocks out of curiosity made this point explicit:

US: Some of the Aghria told me they were criticized when they joined cockfights, but fights with bulbul were quite alright...
KGD: ... because they never died. No blood.

The link between caste status and purity is also manifested in terms of locality and spatial hierarchies, at least from the perspective of the farmer castes. While the cockfight in front of the Bonaigarh palace, a multipurpose place, was somewhat exceptional, fights are usually held on the fringes of local markets. This link between Adivasi communities, cockfighting and markets has been frequently mentioned in the literature on Middle India, with weekly markets being “well-known venues” (Grigson 1991 [1938]: 162, also Ghosh 2006: 26; Hahn 1907: 69).

In contrast, the bulbul fight is often organized inside a mandap or pavilion, that is, a site explicitly demarcated for temporary religious purposes. In one case I had accompanied the Bonai Raja a few weeks earlier to observe a festival for Krishna taking place in the very same mandap. And the locations of these two events are certainly not coincidental. The late Bonai Raja also narrated that his grandfather, Raja Nilamdar, being very fond of bulbul fights, had ordered that they be held inside the premises of the Jagannath temple, that is, inside the walled temple compound and not far away from the open square where cockfights took place. However, for the Raja it was unthinkable to perform a bloody cockfight in a sacred temple space.

However, while the fighting animals and the locations are hierarchized into pure and impure, it is important to realize that everyone is free to participate in all these events, and that the collective norms and stigma linked to cockfights among the farmer castes, even the risk of being expelled from the community mentioned by the Kulta may be overruled by personal considerations and the attraction of the fights. For example, occasionally non-Kulta villagers from surrounding villages bring their birds for a relatively unproblematic fight, but the Kultas usually dominate on these occasions. Conversely everyone is welcome to join in the cockfights, but I found relatively few farmers among the participants. For example, during the cockfight in Bonaigarh there were about ten people known as katidar renting out blades (kati) to be bound to the cocks’ claws. Among them were one Chosa, a retired teacher, and one Mahanto / Kurmi working for a bank. The others were Kisan, Gand, Munda and Bhuiyan, all communities listed as Scheduled Tribes. The Mahanto said that his son and daughter-in-law criticized him for his presence and asked him: “Why are you in this business? You are earning enough money, why are you indulging in this work of low prestige?” These words again indicate the social stigma associated with cockfighting
among farmers, but apparently they did not prevent him from enjoying this pastime.

In the case of the Kultas, I did not hear of any instance in which the sanctions for touching chicken mentioned earlier were actually enacted – assuming, of course, that one’s caste brethren come to know about any participation. This is also mirrored in a statement by the old Bonai Raja: “The bulbul fight is for those who are interested, that might be Brahmans etc., there is no blood. No bloodshed. And cockfights the Brahmans may also do, but through somebody”. In other words, status-conscious Brahmans, who are paradigmatically linked to the value of purity and central to the caste hierarchy (Dumont 1980 [1966]), to which the status-conscious farmer castes subscribe as well, would rather not turn up themselves with their cocks for a fight and do not like to be seen there, but may ask their servants etc. to arrange the fight for them. Or it might be something which can be excused for young people only.

As the son of the last Rajguru of Bonai, the Brahman family highest in status and also the former headman (Gauntia) of a village, told me, as an adolescent boy he used to go to a nearby market to watch the cockfights, but as he added immediately: “Now I feel ashamed about it.” Such statements, hinting at ideas of shame, are reminiscent of Elias’s (1976) work on processes of civilization that are linked to varying degrees of affect-control, embarrassment etc. In fact, as shown in the earlier quote, the Kultas claim to be “civilized” – in contrast to the Adivasi and Harijans – by associating themselves with this bloodless fight of fruit-eating birds staged in sacred spaces, which allows them to claim a higher status according to Brahmanical values.

The ambivalent state: fights, the law and contestation

Apart from the question of the fights’ potential to integrate parties and the distinctive caste dimension just analysed, there is a third aspect, namely the question of the legality of these fights. The aura of illegality surrounding cockfights – particularly next to local markets, rather than in front of the palace in Bonaigarh – is well-known to the participants, as well as those who stay away from it. Technically, this is primarily linked to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal (PCA) Act of 1960, under which, as newspapers also widely report, cockfights are banned. However, as I argue, the “state” as a multi-layered institution appears in often contradictory avatars and does not just ban cockfights and promote animal welfare, but also values and protects customs and promotes tourism. But I shall start with the provisions in the PCA as the most important law in this context. Chapter III of the law, entitled “Cruelty to Animals Generally”, forbids that any person:

(a) Beats, kicks, over, ever-drives, overloads, tortures or otherwise treats any animals so as to subject it to unnecessary pain or suffering or causes or; being the owner permits, any animal to be so treated ; or…

Moreover, there are provisions to protect “performing animals” such that: “No person shall exhibit or train … any performance animals unless he is registered in accordance with the provisions if this Chapter...” Violations can be punished with a fine of a hundred rupees or a jail term of up to three months.
Looking at the fights again from this legal angle, it is clear that cockfights violate a number of provisions of this law: for example, slasher fights could be interpreted as torture (a). And indeed, for outsiders the treatment particularly of the losing cocks may be rather shocking. Sometimes, they are just thrown to the side or, as Fulvio Biancifiori (personal communication) noted: “I’ve seen a lot of drunk people [and] if the cocks were losing the fight, sometimes the drunk owners killed them [by] kicking against [them]” – all actions the law is trying to prevent.

It is debatable whether any “unnecessary pain” is inflicted on Champa birds, even if the fight is usually neither bloody nor fatal. One may also ask whether the birds used in fights require registration as “performance animals”, but in none of the cases I observed did I hear anything whatsoever about registration, and people were hardly aware of any such law applying to bird fights.

Irrespective of legal provisions, it is only cockfighting that has the aura of an illegal or at least semi-legal activity, which may not be limited to the PCA. Interlocutors among Aghrias told me, with reference to cockfights at a nearby local market, that some of the money earned during cockfights by a “contractor” who organized it was used to bribe the local police. However, other eyewitnesses told me about occasional police raids and how villagers sometimes lost their cocks because they had tied them to the ground somewhere before the fight and had to leave them behind in order to escape quickly when the police suddenly rushed in.

Such incidents or raids, when the state tries to uphold the ban on cockfighting and particularly the betting that goes along with it, have also been reported in newspapers. Here is one example from January 2013:

A special police team that raided the village arrested 20 people for betting over cock-fights involving roosters in a violent fight for entertainment in a village in Odisha’s Ganjam district. Around 160 people had gathered in the ground to participate and witness the scene. The police team also seized 26 roosters, some with injuries, knives, 22 motor-cycles, two four-wheelers and Rs 9000 cash from Alipur village in Aska area yesterday. The arrests followed a tussle between those involved in betting and police personnel, said sub divisional police officer – [SDPO – US], Sarah Sharma. A constable was injured when the gathering started attacking the police party, Sharma said. ”We managed to nab 20 of persons, while others fled from the ground,” Sharma added.” And Sharma was further quoted saying: ”It’s nothing but a high-stake gambling and cruelty to the animal. We have booked them on charges of practising of gambling and meted cruelty to the birds.”

The same article also mentions that “Cockfights are a popular way of celebrating festive occasions in many parts of India. In Mayurbhanj, another district of the state, Christians observed Christmas betting over cock-fights last month.” And further, “The sport prevails, even though it is illegal under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. But animal rights activists point to the lack of enforcement of the law.”

The police may or may not enforce the ban on cockfights depending on the situation and on the people involved; for example, the participation of legislators as representatives of the state may have an impact here. If they are present and are enjoying the fights, the police may prefer to look “the other way”. Moreover, the courts may even officially sanction such events, and various such court
orders have been reported from Tamil Nadu so that “Cock fight [were – US] held after court nod”\textsuperscript{17} because they were considered by the court to be “traditional games”. Nonetheless certain restrictions were imposed, such as all the birds being checked by a veterinary doctor.\textsuperscript{18} While I am not aware of any such court order for Odisha, the non-interference of the state in the staging of the cockfights on the day of Char Khai in front of the palace was motivated in a similar way. As the Raja also argued, this was seen as a customary event, and although the police patrolled openly, this was in order to prevent fighting between participants or spectators, rather than to launch a raid.

In passing, one should note that it is not only the state that tries to uphold a ban on cockfights – at least occasionally as other actors do so as well. If newspapers are to be believed, a ban on fights has been imposed by the Maoist guerrillas in Odisha, but with relatively little impact, as one paper also noted: “\textit{Despite the ban, cockfighting continues to flourish in public places of tribal Odisha and is the most popular rural sport}”\textsuperscript{19} And, apart from Maoist groups, animal rights activists like People for Animals (PFA - www.peopleforanimalsindia.org/), which is championed by the politician and activist Maneka Gandhi,\textsuperscript{20} support the ban by staging demonstrations. Discussing the issue with the late Bonai Raja, and mentioning the PFA chairperson, the Raja said: “\textit{Oh yes, [that is] honourable, but you see, still in the whole Adibasi areas it is going on. That is their sports}.” Thus, as the Raja pointed out, this had rather little impact on the local population, who considered it to be a sport rather than a criminal activity, and even many animal rights activists seemed to focus more on animal sacrifices than on cockfights.

However, cockfights are not only tolerated occasionally by the state – certain state agencies even seem to actively promote or indirectly patronize them. On the official webpage of the Odisha government, in the section entitled “Other Activities” of the “People” of Odisha, we read:

\begin{quote}
\textit{On festivals like Raja, Dasahara, Malrar, etc. wrestling, stick play and athletics are organised. Kite flying and cockfight are common pastimes on the day of Makar Shnkaranti [sic]. The people of Odisha in general are lovers and connoisseurs of art.}\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Here cockfighting is neither morally condemned nor outlawed, but rather presented as an art or at least an indigenous pastime attracting and meant to attract tourists. And indeed, the opportunity to “witness [a] cock fight at the market” is a central part of many “tribal tours” offered by travel agents in Odisha and neighbouring Chhattisgarh. They advertise not only visits to the Dongria and Desia Kondhs and the Gadaba tribe, as well as to the Bondas as “the most interesting tribes [sic] of Orissa”, but also include cockfights in their tour schedules,\textsuperscript{22} while animal rights activists such as the PFA support the idea of “a responsible eco-friendly tourist”, which includes rules like “Do not go [to] animal fights.”\textsuperscript{23}

Debates around the culling of chickens due to the outbreak of bird flu in Odisha in 2008 also exemplify the ambivalence on the part of the state. While the Government of Odisha decided to cull the birds, the local population was worried that, due to the culling, “unique fighter breed cocks” known locally as \textit{hansli} in Mayurbhanj would disappear. And it was the Fisheries and Animal Resource Development Minister, Golak Bihari Naik, who hailed from Mayurbhanj District and was an Adivasi himself, who opposed the government decision by arguing that the fighter cocks were the “life and pride” of a tribal family.\textsuperscript{24}
However, the ambivalent attitude of the state towards cockfights is not a recent phenomenon, but dates back at least to the time of the princely states. The late Kesri Gang Deb (henceforward also KGD), then the most senior member of the Bamra royal family (bordering Bonai), explained the policy in Bamra state prior to the merger with the Indian Union in 1948, which probably started under his grandfather, Raja Satchidanand.

KGD: At one point of time, cockfight was strictly prohibited in Bamra.
US: When was that?
KGD: During state time it was strictly prohibited.
US: For which reason?
KGD: Cruel. It’s a cruel sport.
US: Like in the Prevention of Cruelty Act...
KGD: ...no, no, that was much before. Let’s say in the 30s. 20s or 30s, since then cockfights were strictly prohibited. And after the state merged cockfight restarted and all that. But the bulbul fight was never prevented.

He then went on to describe how progressive Bamra state was in having the first hydroelectric power plant in Odisha, the first printing press etc. Probably he wanted to present his family in the light of these “progressive” innovations and considered the cockfight “cruel” or indirectly as “backward”, though he also mentioned his own experiments with and curiosity for cockfights.

Thus, the legal status of cockfights in princely Odisha seems to have differed from state to state, as well as from ruler to ruler. Contrary to Bamra, the Raja of the neighbouring state of Bonai did — according to his son, the late Raja K.K.C. Deo — enjoy cockfights and encouraged his relatives to participate with his and their own cocks. At the same time, his grandfather was apparently fond of bulbul fights and held them on many occasions. Thus, in Bonai the royal family seems to have indulged and participated in both kinds of event. As such, they may have rather bridged any gap here between the indigenous population and the in-migrating farmers.

In rejecting cockfight, many Aghria and Kulta farmers have a lot in common, which might be linked to their already mentioned role as revenue collectors in these princely states — that is, they also despise cockfights simply because they are not fully legal. Adherence to the law or not coming into conflict with law agencies seems to be a value as such, specifically for village headmen or Gauntias, who historically were appointed by the ruler and were part of the otherwise not very elaborate bureaucratic structures of the former princely states. As Gauntia they also acted, and in many cases still act, as justices of peace in village matters. As some of them told me, for them as Gauntia it was shameful to call in the police or outside forces when they were unable to control their own village affairs: in fact, calling the police in from outside came close to admitting that you were unable to fulfil the role of village headman properly. Aghrias, Kultas and others were implicated in state structures in a way that Adivasi communities usually were not, and this ethos might have had a persisting effect.

In contrast, rather than subscribing to the law and staying away from cockfights, as most farmers tend to do, Adivasis may rather contest the law, stressing their own customs and complaining about forms of discrimination and economic disparities, as an incident or rather anecdote narrated by the late Raja of Bonai indicates. To paraphrase his account here, the cockfight has a long tradition in the former princely states of
western Odisha, but was prohibited after their merger. There were many accidents because of the sharp blades bound to the cocks’ claws and because of the simultaneous consumption of alcohol. It was simple considered too dangerous. The new law prohibiting the cockfights was strongly disliked by the Adivasi, the main participants in them. Therefore they decided to send a delegation of four Majhi to Delhi to meet Pandit Nehru. He offered them biscuits and asked: “Anything I can do for you?” The speaker of the group, an eloquent matriculate – an exception among Adivasis, as the Raja emphasized – replied:

We were all happy about the Indian independence, the freedom of the country and the unity of the country under one flag. However”, he added, “did we really become free if we are not allowed to follow our traditional customs such as the cockfight? Our ancestors and these Rajas and their ancestors, always we had cockfights for one month or something, and suddenly the new government has stopped it. Of course, these fights are dangerous, but what in life is totally safe? Even while taking a walk, one can have an accident. And alcohol simply belongs to our culture. To every new-born baby out of joy the mother gives a drop of mahuli (liquor made of mahua flowers) on the lips, and then we celebrate and dance. Is the new freedom only holding true for the rich, who are allowed to enjoy dog racing and horse racing, who may bet on these occasions as they wish, who may play cards etc. What about us, the Adivasi? You should not interfere. Rich people, who have money and power, everything is excused in their case, but we poor Adivasi people, we are proud Adivasi people, why shall we be deprived of our rights?” And they said: “In the eyes of law everybody should be the same.” And Nehru: “I agree. I am a barrister myself.” “Sir, in the clubs, how people get drunk. If we, the Adivasi drink, what is the harm? We can’t afford to drink foreign liqueur in the hotel. So if we drink in our own ways, is there any harm? That’s number one. And what about greyhound races and horse racing? There is a lot of gambling there, and there is no bar to it. Why our sports? Why there is a bar? And security? Everywhere is insecurity.

Nehru listened and agreed and sent an order to the Odishan Chief Minister Mahtab: “Don’t stop Adivasi, don’t stop cockfights. Legalize the cockfights again.” This account, whether true or not, certainly portrays Nehru as a benign but distant representative of the state and interestingly illustrates a perceived nexus between cockfights, alcohol and betting on the one hand, and tradition, custom or what Orans (1965: 7ff.) once called an Adivasi “pleasure complex” on the other, as well as a certain assertiveness and willingness to challenge the state, whether by sending a delegation or by simply continuing to stage fights despite a ban.

Conclusion

While an individual might be passionate about a particular type of animal fight and may therefore disregard norms, there are clear collective preferences. The farmer castes tend to indulge in the bird fights, while Adivasis rather prefer cockfights. Despite legal ambiguities, especially around cockfights, these animal fights continue to flourish in western Odisha. Thus, the two types of fight introduced here differ to a great extent in performance, but also in participants and audiences, though these are predominantly male. The cockfight, with its characteristics of a “real”, bloody fight, a battle over life and death without centricity in Polanyi’s (1968 [1957]) terms, stands in contrast to the bulbul fight, which, though also considered to be a fight (ladhei), may rather be seen as a match, a competition between sportmen comparing their power and strength without killing each other. Compared to the cockfight, the bulbul fight appears to be a kind of domesticated or tamed variant of the former.
The collective preferences for both of them could be explained through a combination of three overlapping dimensions: those of history, caste and the law. First, the historically conditioned positions of the communities differ significantly, with a relatively more autochthonous population nominally acknowledging a Raja being opposed to and by farmers who have migrated into the area. The preferences for the fights and their integrative potential, especially the pyramidal structure of the bulbul fight, shows interesting parallels with the social position of the farmers and their headmen being strongly involved in emerging princely state structures with similar forms. Secondly, particularly in the perspective of the farmers, the fights are hierarchized and bulbul fights are preferred because they are in line with Brahmanical ideas according to which potentially polluted chicken are to be avoided and purified spaces should be chosen, whereas people engaging in cockfights are generally considered “small” or “low”. Conversely, Adivasis not following this logic see the ownership of roosters rather as a sign of wealth and pride. The farmers’ migrations seem to have led not only to an expansion of the state, but also to an extension of the caste system and an endorsement of caste values, thereby turning the manner of fighting into a game over status. Thirdly, the legal aspect and the ambivalent involvement of the modern state, banning animal fighting through the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, but also partially protecting or tolerating it as customary, has an impact on the fights, influences the different preferences and determines the nature of the involvement of the different communities, with Adivasis tending to ignore bans or even challenging the state’s right to impose them in the first place. Thus, following Guggenheim, animal fights may well be understood as “dramatizations of social structure” (Guggenheim 1994: 159). In particular, juxtaposing these co-existing fights reveals a multi-dimensional, enduring yet also changing social chasm in a relatively remote area which might be read as “metasocial commentary”.

References


Notes

1 I also heard about, but never witnessed, other fights such as *titer ladhei* or partridge fights. Generally, animal fights as a pastime have a long tradition in India and are known from the courts of the Moghuls.

2 See also Dundes 1994 on this nexus.

3 *Kukraa* signifies “chicken”, referring to cocks and hens alike. However, in the context of fighting it only refers to cocks, for which the term *ganjaa* is used more specifically.

4 Food offered to the gods and partly left by them to be returned to the devotee.

5 The names have been omitted.

6 Miscellaneous Despatch Book from 26th September 1822 to 4th May 1826.

7 http://tribal.nic.in/index1.html - accessed on 22/03/05.

8 See *The Tribune*, http://www.tribuneindia.com/2008/20080208/nation.htm#8, accessed on 15.04.2008. His comments were made in the wake of a bird-flu epidemic and in order avoid the culling of chicken.


10 See www.mp.gov.in/veterinaryanddairy/12crueltyact.doc - accessed 14.04.08.

11 For example, *Sunday Times of India*, Bhubaneshwar-National, 21/12/03, p.12.

12 The NGO People for Animals lists on its webpage other laws protecting animals, but the PCA seems to be the most relevant in this context. See also http://www.peopleforanimalsindia.org/animal-protection-laws-a-judgments/65-animal-protection-laws-in-india.html - accessed 07/11/2013.

13 See www.mp.gov.in/veterinaryanddairy/12crueltyact.doc - accessed 14.04.08.

14 See www.mp.gov.in/veterinaryanddairy/12crueltyact.doc - accessed 14.04.08.


16 Such an incident was reported in the following way: “In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, for instance, several legislators cheered on as cock-fights took place. The police looked the other way.” - http://southasia.oneworld.net/news/twenty-arrested-in-cock-fight-betting-case#.Un7vOKr8SU – accessed 05/11/2013.


Interestingly the cockfights are not only condemned by the state, but also banned by the Maoist guerrillas, who are very active in the region and control various tracts of Middle India. See *Indian Express*, BBSR edition, 09.11.06, p.5 and http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/09Odisha.htm, accessed 14.04.08.

Second, in later years enstranged daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi and wife of Sanjay Gandhi, grandson of Nehru.

http://Odishagov.nic.in/people/other.htm - accessed on 14/04/2008.

Watching cockfights is part of the itinerary of various travel agents offering trips to Middle India; see e.g. http://www.aetravel.com/india_tribal_tours/Odisha_tribal_tour.html, accessed 14/04/08.

Another example of ambiguity on the part of the state was the recent discussion whether all chickens in northern Odisha bordering West Bengal should be culled or whether the unique species of fighting cocks so valued among certain tribal communities should be spared because of a tradition. See e.g. *The Telegraph*, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080211/jsp/nati
Abstract: This article showcases the recent phenomenon of Baja Bazaar – market of music – as a part of a long term anthropological and ethno-musicological documentation of local marginalised music traditions of the Bora Sambar region of Western Odisha conducted between 2002 and 2011 (Guzy 2013).

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Introduction

Since 2006, the phenomenon of baja bazaar, the “market of music”, has emerged among local groups of orchestral music of the Bora Sambar region.

The Bora Sambar region belongs to the Bargarh district, a western part of the Indian State of Odisha, bordering on the province of Chhattisgarh. Surrounded by the mountains of the Gandhamardan to the north and south, the Bora Sambar region extends around the town of Padampur (Padmapur), on a plain watered by the river Ong (Ang), “which rises in the south west, describes a great semi-circle to the north and then runs eastward in a widening valley” (O’Malley 2007: 3). Literally, Bora Sambar means “the region of the deer swallowed up by the cobra”. The language of the region is Sambalpuri.

Historically, the Raj Bora Sambar can first be traced as an autonomous ‘little kingdom’ or rather chiefdom of the indigenous Binjhal population, bordering on the tributary Princely State of Patna. However, due to the “inaccessible forest tracts” (Sahoo 2007: 1) which covered large parts of the area and owing to the lack of written sources, a reconstruction of the structure and boundaries of the historical Bora Sambar kingdom remains difficult.

Bora Sambar, according to the Bengal District Gazetters on Sambalpur of 1909, belonged to the Maharajas of Patna, “who were the head of a cluster of States known as the AtharaGarhjat (the 18 forts)” (O’Malley 2007 (1909): 21). Bora Sombar presumably was one of the AtharaGarhjats, whose chiefs were indigenous Binjhal. Recent research on Princely States in Odisha has shown the important role of indigenous or tribal communities in establishing a regional autonomy of the local sovereigns, which were also called “little kings” as analytical terms by Cohn (1959) and further developed by Schnepel (2002).

Under the British colonial rule, the status of Bora Sambar changed from Raj Bora Sambar (Bora Sambar kingdom) to Bora SambarZamindari(landownership). With the establishment of the zamindari system by the
British colonial Empire in the Bengal Permanent Settlement Act in 1793, many indigenous territories were conferred to feudal lords for the purpose of revenue collection (Bijoi 2007: 15-27; Munda 2002). During the British Raj (1858-1947), with its feudal Princely States headed by local authorities such as Maharaja (great king), Raja (king) or Nawab (governor) as well as holders of land domains (Zamindar) for land tenure and tax collection, the Bora Sambar region was the largest among the sixteen zamindari of the Sambalpur district (O’Malley 2007: 21; 164). The traditional relationship between the Bora Sambar chiefs and the Maharaja of Patna remained. During the British Raj it is reported that “the Binjhalzamindar of Borasambar still affixes the tika [the royal sign on the forehead of the king] to the Maharaja of Patna at the time of his accession” (ibid: 76).

Bora Sambar: a name and a legend

Mythologically, the name Bora Sambar is linked to the small village of Bora Sambar and to its inhabitants from the indigenous Adivasi community of the Binjhal. Literally, Binjhal means “without sweat” and the Binjhal have a local reputation as hard fighters and labourers. The Binjhal consider themselves as the most ancient people of the region, as the local “old people” (purkhalok), who cleared the jungle (safokoriba), and invented agriculture (chas bas), thus creating culture out of nature. Up to now, even if the Binjhal besides their traditional occupation as agriculturalists have to hire themselves out as daily workers (buti), they still have a proud self-perception of being peasants and owners of their land. In former times, the Binjhal had their own language, called Binjhalbasa, which however has fallen into oblivion and cannot be remembered even by the oldest living members of the community. Only some fragments have survived in the oral tradition of certain songs. Binjhal music thus represents a kind of cultural archaeological artifact, fragments of the sound vessel of a cultural memory. Culturally the Binjhal can be associated with the Gond complex of Western Odisha and Chhattisgarh, former Andhra Pradesh (Führer-Haimendorf 1979; O’Malley 2007). However their relationship to the Gond complex remains unclear.

Population of the Bora Sambar region

The population of the Bora Sambar region is an ethnic tapestry of diverse Adivasi communities and different categories of Hindu settlers. Today, the Adivasi communities have mostly assumed a peasant Hindu identity, while retaining a high self-esteem of being culturally distinct from other regions. Bora Sambar is still mostly an agrarian area, not yet transformed by industrialisation as some of the neighbouring districts.

Besides the Binjhal, local communities of Gond, Dumal, Soara and Khond are the dominant groups in the area. Beyond these communities other local communities such as Mali, Telli, Luhar, Gour, Kulta, Ganda (Harijan) and Brahmin populate the Bora Sambar region. A strong inter-communal and inter-ethnic exchange is emphasized by many people is visible in the use and functioning of ritual music.

The village orchestra - gandabaja

Ganda Baja is may be the most prominent musical and ritual feature of the Bora Sambar region. It is an instrumental orchestral1 music, performed exclusively by musicians originating from the marginalised Harijan caste Ganda (also called Pano). The instruments forming the gandabaja village orchestra can be divided into three categories: membranophones (dhol, nissan, tasa, also called timkiri), an aerophone
(mohuri) and idiophones (kastal/jhang or jumka). Membranophones are musical instruments that produce sound by a stretched membrane (animal skin). Aerophones are musical instruments which produce sound only by using air without any string or membrane and idiophones are musical instruments which resound in themselves, without any strings, air or membranes.2

Figure 2: Gandabaja orchestra met on a road to Padampur town, from the left: nissan, mohuri, tassa, jumka, dhol, L.G.

Dhol
The dhol which is the village orchestra’s leading instrument, is a large membranophone. This large, long drum (90 cm to 1.5 metres in length) is made from the trunk of a tree and strung with cowhide (gaichomora) on two sides. Along the length of the dhol run strips of cowhide (badi) which are attached to the instrument by rings (kol kola). The skin of the right-hand side, named tali, is made from calf’s skin; the left-hand skindhaaya is made from cowhide. The tali is slightly smaller (37 cm in diameter) than the dhaaya (38 cm in diameter). The dhaaya is beaten with a rubber stick (khanda/nara) of about 40 cm in length; the tali side is played with the right hand. The dhol player, known as the dholya, directs the changes of the rhythms of the gandabaja orchestra. Rhythms usually emerge spontaneously with the dholya giving the lead. Musicians gain knowledge of the rhythmic and melodic patterns by listening to various rhythms from early childhood on. It is said that the voices of the goddesses appear first in the dhol drum and express their moods by changing the rhythms.

Figure 1: Mohuriplayer, village of Cherchela, 2006, L.G.

Nissan
The nissan drum, another membranophone, has a tapered form, resembling a melon cut in half. It is reported to be the most ancient instrument of the village orchestra. A nissan is made of wooden and iron sheets and is played with two rubber sticks (chimta). The leather (chipra) of the drumhead is made of cowhide or goatskin and often covered with colourful paintings. In the Bora Sambar region and Sambalpur area nissan drums were traditionally decorated with deer antlers, but as hunting deer has been forbidden, today this form of embellishment has nearly disappeared.

The nissan is always played with maximum strength, thus producing a deep and penetrating sound which is compared to the “sound of the thunderstorm” and identified with the horrifying strength of Goddess Nissani.
Tasa

The tasa (also called timkri), a small membranophone, is a drum made from clay (matul) and strung with cowhide (gaichomra). The drumhead is attached with leather strips to the tapered body of the instrument (mola). It is played with two thin bamboo sticks. The tasa produces a high and thin sound. Even if the sound of the tasadrum is not associated with a specific goddess, it contributes to the divine drum chorus.

Mohuri

The mohuri is an oboe-like instrument. According to the Ganda musicians, its sound plays a crucial role in changing the character of the music and rhythm. It is often compared to the “seductive voice of a capricious woman”, as the musicians explain, but can also be associated with the “desperate wailing of a mother crying for her dead son”. Those poetic descriptions refer to the arbitrary character of the mohuri’s sound, which is considered the most difficult instrument to play in the orchestra. The sound of the mohuri is identified with the expression of the specific goddess which enters the musical scene during a gandabaja performance.

Kastal

The kastal or jhang are iron cymbals; they may be replaced by a kind of rattle called the jumka. Their sound is associated with the goddess Ganeshwari (“the goddess of bells” (gantha=bell)).

Ideally an orchestra consists of five instruments and might include five to seven players. Sometimes, it is also called panchabadya referring to the five instruments assembled. Similarities can be traced between gandabaja and other orchestral traditions like those of Chhattisgarh (Prévôt 2008: 75-88) or Nepal (Helffer 1969a/b, Tingey 1994, Wegner 1988).

All gandabaja instruments play together in tune and rhythm. It is central for the formation of a Ganda musician to listen to the play of other musicians and to learn to play together with them. Besides the command of one’s instrument, playing gandabaja thus implies a sophisticated culture of listening. The beat of the right-hand tali side of the dhol provides orientation for the tasa, which in response beats a double rhythm. The beat of the left-hand dhaaya side of the dhol provides orientation for the nissan, which answers with a counter-rhythm to the beat of the dhaaya. As the sound of the mohuri is intended to resemble the flirting of a women’s voice, it is played in an extremely alluring way. All the instruments in the inter-village orchestra are worshipped before being played. Notably, they are used for the worship of gods and goddesses, but at the same time require worship themselves. The instruments are usually only touched by the musicians, but there is no ritual prohibition to touch the instruments. However, no one should step over them as this is considered disrespectful and is supposed to cause a curse by the goddesses. The instruments are stored in a
secular context: they are kept by the particular musician who plays an instrument. The sacredness of the instruments evolves mainly through the ritual context and the sound vibrations transforming the instrument to the mediator as well as to the corpus of a particular goddess.

In the performances of gandabaja notions of an identity between music and goddesses come to light. Various goddesses are assumed to appear through the sound of specific instruments and their rhythms (par), while the polyrhythmic structure of the orchestra is understood as the manifestation of their voices. In the rural regions of Bora Sambar no socio-religious ceremony, such as marriage or puja, the ritual service for gods and goddesses, may be celebrated without gandabaja music, played exclusively by the Ganda musicians. A village orchestra, usually formed by inhabitants of one and the same village, is called to the neighbouring villages for the celebration of such musical-religious events. The musicians are invited through turmeric powder by the different local communities of Binjhal, Gouro, DholKhond, Mali or Kulta in order to perform in their villages. Thus, the music of the Ganda musicians connects local communities, places and religious concepts. The gandabaja can be considered as an inter-village orchestra, representing a force of relatedness, connection and communication between different villages and communities. The Ganda musicians play the role of ritual and social mediators, linking tribal and semi-tribal local groups and mediating local values as well as local power configurations. The gandabaja orchestra thus plays a double role: On the one hand the baja transcends local communities in its function as a ritual inter-village orchestra. On the other hand, through its musical expression of transcendence, the baja creates a sensual experience of the local community in terms of communication with a holy sphere and the manifestation of the powers of local goddesses.

In former times, musicians were engaged and patronised by local rajas or landowners (zamindar) of the Raj Bora Sambar kingdom (later Padampur). Local power holders employed village musicians for the performance of politico-religious rituals, legitimating their social and symbolic power during such events as dusshara, the festival of the goddess Durga, and of the clan goddess Patneshwari.

A proverb describes the ritual relationship between musicians and the local king: “age baja, poche raja” – in front of the local king, there should always march the village orchestra. While performing in front of the raja or the zamindar the musicians had to wear colourful and extravagant clothes, a tradition that can still be traced today in the multi-coloured clothes and longer than usual hair of village musicians. The performance of the politico-symbolic powers of the power holder was designed to be a cheerful event, associated with public entertainment and joyful festivities.

**Baja Bazaar – Sacred Music for Sale**

Since 2006, the phenomenon of baja bazaar, the “market of music”, has emerged among baja groups of the Bora Sambar region. At a central intersection in Raipur, the capital of the newly created state of Chhattisgarh and in other urban settings near the capital, hundreds of baja groups from the neighbouring regions gather in order to offer their musical services to potential clients. These markets of music simply consist of groups of musicians presenting themselves with their instruments on the street sides – performing tunes for ritual events to attract customers. Clients approach them to select...
and hire groups for ritual occasions and marriages. The musicians then accompany their temporary patrons into their villages in order to provide the musical performances which are necessary components of rituals for village goddesses and gods or of ritual marriage preparations.

In the year 2000, the state of Chhattisgarh split from the former state of Madhya Pradesh. It was not least the awakening of an Adivasi consciousness and political resistance in the course of a pan-Indian Adivasi movement and indignity discourse (Karlsson 2003: 403-423; Devy/Davis/Chakravarty 2009), which led to the shaping of three new Indian states (Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand). The state of Chhattisgarh was formed around the core of the ancient cultural province of DakshinaKoshala, embracing its neighbouring provinces Jharkhand, Orissa, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

In the year of its foundation, the government of the newly created state released a statement of cultural intent, announcing efforts to “...identify, recognize, document, revitalize, present and disseminate the continuing cultural traditions of local communities...”. The promotion of local musical traditions has in fact since then been a recognizable objective of governmental policy in Chhattisgarh: “Earlier we were called by our patrons (malik) to play our music for rituals”, explains one musician from a village near Raipur, “but some years ago the new government (sarkar) started to stimulate musical competitions on the crossroads of Raipur with prizes to win and the baja bazaar started.” Another musician from the Bora Sambar region adds: “I heard about the baja bazaar from my elder brother (borobhai). I heard that we can earn there and so we started to come here each year”. With the emergence of the baja bazaar in Raipur, the news about its new economic possibilities quickly spread among musicians of the whole neighbouring area. In this sense, the phenomenon of the baja bazaar has not been invented by the state but still relies on the traditional patron-client structure between musicians and their ritual customers. But governmental incentives nevertheless played a significant role in the formation of structures which revitalized local musical traditions, as the participants themselves acknowledge.

Baja bazaars are held in the Chenichere market in Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh), in the Burhatalab market in Raipur and in the Champa market in Jharkhand. For the baja bazaars, gandabaja orchestras from the Bora Sambar region and from other neighbouring regions gather and present themselves in their full festive costumes: they cook, sleep and perform their music on the bazaar. Especially during the months of magho(February), falguna (March), choit(April/Mai)and boisaka (June/July) and during the time of kartika(November), up to 1000 musicians (baja mane) gather at the diverse “music markets”.

“Baja bazaar”, the people tell, “is welcoming the summer and winter season and it expresses a farewell to the rainy season. It is a market for the worship of the gods”.

Baja bazaars are also hold for the marriage season of the Raut/Gour (the caste of herdsmen), the dominant caste in Chhattisgarh, in the four months between magh (February) to boisaka (Mai). During this time, musical parties from the music market are engaged by patrons (malik) for the ritual of biha lagan – the approaching of a high status religious priest and astrologer, the Pandit or Brahmin, in order to ask him for a good marriage date. After hearing the bajamusic, the Brahmin priest augurs the
right date (lagan) for the marriage, which should take place during the marriage season. During the marriage season two divine couples: Shiva-Parvati, the divine pan-Indian Hindu pair, and Goura-Gouri, the local mythical ancestors of the Gour caste are equally worshipped through the music of gandabaja.

Also during various other times of the year, gandabaja music offered at the baja bazaar plays an important role for different ceremonial occasions:

Diwali

After diwali, the “festival of lights”, held on amavasyaday, the day of the new moon after the ceremony of dusshara in the month kartika (around November), the baja bazaar begins to fill with different bajagroups. In reference to the pan-Indian Ramayana epos, the festival of diwali celebrates the return of god Rama to the holy city of Ayodhya after Rama’s exile in the jungle, his victory against the demon-king Ravanna who has abducted his beloved wife Sita and after his happy reunion with his lost wife. In the course of a 7 to 8 days ceremony, many gandabaja orchestras compete with each other, in order to get engaged by maliks (patrons) of the Raut/Gour.

During this time, the baja bazaar is also called Rautbaja. The biggest rautbajas are held in five main places: Raipur, Bilaspur, Champa, Raygada and Shakti, but there are also rautbajas in small towns and villages. A real musical competition takes place to attract a patron, who, in order to test the quality of the different bajagroups, chants traditional Gour songs together with theorchestras and dances the rautnaach, the traditional dance of the Raut, a stick dance symbolising the identity of the Raut as a cast of herdsmen.

In case a Rautmalik is satisfied with a baja performance, he engages the group for a time of up to 8 days. The selected baja party then proceeds to the malik’s village by foot, where it performs its musical services in the post-diwali celebrations.

After diwali, on ekadosi which is the eleventh day of the rising moon in the lunar cycle and the 4th day before the full moon, the Raut celebrate the god Krishna, who in Hindu mythology is depicted as a herdsman, as their ancestor.

When listening to the performance of the baja, all women of the village become boil, possessed by the spirit of the goddess Gour Mata, the cow goddess. During the night, they are held to embody further deities, such as for example the pan-Indian gods Ishwar and Parvati. The possessed women and girls carry lights on their heads. Accompanied and guided by the baja, they submerge into the water of the village pond. On the next evening, the Gobordanpuja, the worship of the god Gobordan, an incarnation of Krishna, takes place.

Figure 4: Gandabaja at the Baja Bazaar in Raipur, 2008, L.G.
After diwalli, gandabaja musicians are supposed to have collected enough money to subsist with their families for the following months.

In the context of the ceremony of diwalli the Ministry of Culture in Chhattisgarh has started to reward the best dance and music group with a considerable amount of money in order to keep the local dance and music tradition of rautnaachandrautbaja alive, respectively to re-vitalize them in cooperation with the local communities.

The market of the gods

The recent tradition of a baja bazaar, the market for ritual music, is intrinsically related to the old local tradition of “dev-bajar”, the god’s market. Devbajar is a local ritual which traditionally takes place in the mixed “tribal-caste” villages of Chhattisgarh during the weekly bazaars (haat) of the local Adivasi communities. Devbajar which is also named devkhel “the play of gods” is described by Nicolas Prévôt for the region Bastar in Chhattisgarh (Prévôt 2005, 2008: 75-88) as follows:

Music is an essential element of the ritual [the devbajar L. G.] especially during the “play of gods” (devkhel). This marks the climax of the ritual. Musicians become central actors of the event as men, possessed by different gods, ask for their tune to be played so they can participate in the play of the gods.[ . . . ] The musicians please and entertain the deities – in the shape of men or in the shape of objects – by playing their respective tune(s) (called paR). The result is an unbroken line of melodies played on the shawm, using a circular breathing technique, and accompanied by specific rhythmic patterns on the kettledrums [the nagara]” (Prévôt 2008: 77-78)

In the former local princely state of Bastar, the god’s market devbajar, respectively the “god’s play” (devkhel), is linked to local spirit possession rituals where various kinds of spirits (bhut, duma), gods (devta), goddesses (devi) and other entities (anga-s) may be embodied either by a ritual specialist and trance medium (sirha) or by anybody susceptible and sensible to the ritual musical tunes played by the ganda musicians. Varying from the specific gandabaja ensembles of the Bora Sambar region, the devbajar ensembles from Bastar consist of two or three Ganda musicians: the leader, often the elder, plays a shawm called mohri and is accompanied by a pair of kettledrums called nagoR, and an optional smaller kettledrum called turbuli (Prévôt 2008: 79).

Even if the phenomenon of devbajar/devkhel includes slightly different musical instruments than those of gandabaja, a similarity between
the recently emerged baja bazaar and the traditional devbajar can be ascertained. On the one hand, both the tunes of the music of the devbajar and the musical ‘services’ offered on the baja bazaar mediate a communication with the divine sphere (Prévôt 2008: 86). On the other hand, in both cases the divine communication through music is intrinsically interrelated to a musical market, which takes place weekly in the case of devbajar or on special times of the year in case of thebaja bazaars. As Ganda musicians are always professional music makers, in both contexts their musical services have to be financially rewarded. The more recent phenomenon of baja bazaar thus seems to be embedded in a common local tradition of “god’s markets” where sacred music is offered in exchange for remuneration.

Generally, the weekly market (haat) plays a substantial socio-cultural and economical role in rural Adivasi regions. It is a meeting point of different local groups; a centre of exchange of commodities and information and a platform for personal networks. With the devbajar/devkhel, where ritual and religious “services” are offered, presented and exchanged, the sphere of the sacred and the socio-economic sphere of the commodities market become intrinsically entangled if not congruent.

The tradition of sacred music for sale during the social-ritual events of devbajar has been revitalized today through the governmental encouragement of baja bazaar musical markets based on the traditional yearly cycle of socio-ritual activities and on the fact that ritual music has customarily been a good traded on the market. The cultural revitalisation policy of the Chhattisgarh State thus seems indeed to work as an “in situ revitalization” where the new State “works around existing cultural landscapes, festivals and institutions, rather than create[s] new ones to replace them”.

Economic Empowerment and Cultural Politics

“Musicians always played for money and tried to get a prosperous call“, a musician explains. When receiving a “call” [the English term has entered the vernacular to designate a musical engagement] musicians might gain around 2000 Rupees. Even higher salaries of up to 5000 Rupees for one musician can be realized, as patrons are willing pay high sums for the best baja parties. For an engagement of about 8 days a baja party might gain a total of 22,000 Rupees.6

Musicians explain that their economic situation has remarkably improved in the last years since the government of Chhattisgarh started to support the emergence of baja bazaars through the initiation of musical contests and prizes for the best musical parties.

Since the cultural-political revitalisation of the baja music in baja bazaars, a new economic empowerment of the marginalised musicians has taken place. The cultural policy of the government of Chhattisgarh Ministry of culture to treat Chhattisgarh “as a living museum space” with the attempt “to provide a backdrop to the state’s efforts to promote community well-being and bounty” seems to have successfully incited the continuation of a
vulnerable musical tradition by utilizing the economic foundations of local traditions and through supporting them without an imposed intervention or re-invention of tradition. With baja bazaar a local tradition of sacred music for sale seems to have evolved into a self-dynamic socio-economic market of music.

Political discourse on indignity

The Chhattisgarh’s State politics of cultural revitalization, exemplified in this article through the case of baja bazaar, seem to be part of the self-fashioning of a “tribal” image for the newly constructed state. The “music markets” represent a part of the state’s “tribal” identity in contrast to urban Hindu forms of ritual and secular music, such as for example north Indian raga music or the Indian wide popular marriage brass bands called brass baja (Booth 2005). Contrary to these pan-Indian classical and popular musical traditions, Rautbaja or baja bazaar is embedded in the locally specific tradition of sacred music for sale, explicitly recognized as part of the Adivasi tradition of the state. Here, a political construction of identity through music becomes visible that may be compared with other global phenomena of ethnicisation and re-traditionalisation of music including the reconstruction and the revitalisation of marginalised, forgotten or vulnerable musical traditions.

The construction of a cultural discourse of indigeneity is a recent socio-political phenomenon in India (Karlsson 2003: 403-423; Devy/Davis/Chakravarty 2009), representing a socio-cultural result of the rising consciousness of Adivasi identity articulated in an Adivasi literature (Gupta 2009: 191-202), its expressions of orality (Narjinari 2009: 84-101, Shah 2009:130-137) and poetry (Patel 2009: 48-92; Tiwari 2009: 93-101), and addressing the problem of the cultural silencing and marginalization of subaltern indigenous groups (Devy 2006a; Devi 2003) on the subcontinent. The cultural politics exemplified by the “in situ revitalisation” of baja bazaar represent the state’s interest in supporting and thus reconstructing its distinct indigenous “tribal” or Adivasi identity through its musical traditions. The rural and urban traditions of the new state are often characterised as a socio-cultural continuum between local Adivasi traditions and urban pan-Indian Hindu influences.

Conclusion

The example of baja bazaar – the market of music demonstrates a contemporary revitalization and cultural Adivasi empowerment movement strongly orchestrated by local cultural politics. Cultural and musical performances are playing the most important role in the officially recognised expression of Adivasi identity. An official recognition of the particular regional and sacred musical tradition by cultural and political elites contributes on the one hand to the emergence of an Adivasi citizenship, on the other hand to the construction of a revitalized traditional market of music supposed to economically and culturally empower marginalised communities.

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Notes

1 An instrumental orchestra is understood as an ensemble of instruments, where the interplay of the diverse instruments has a choral character but which does not contain any form of human vocals. The instrumental orchestral tradition of South Asia differs fundamentally from the traditional (classical) form of Indian modal music. The classical Indian modal music is characterised by individual solo performers and solo compositions (Daniélou 2004:10-11, 1979). It lacks the choral character of instruments playing together as "voices". The South Asian orchestral tradition could rather be compared to the tradition of European orchestral performance (chamber orchestra, opera orchestra etc.), except for the facts a) that musicians belong to special social groups or ethnic categories, b) that the music is restricted to special occasions (Sachs 1923: 2-3) and c) that it represents specific regional traditions of ensembles of regional instruments (see Sachs 1923: 3-11), as for example the Naykhibaja of the Newar (Wegner 1986) or the Damaibaja (Helffer 1969a/b), also known as Pancaliba of the Damai (Tingey 1994), in Nepal.

2 The classification refers to the Hornbostel-Sachs scheme of a universal fourfold division of musical instruments: membranophones, aerophones, idiophones and chordophones (strings) (Hornbostel/Sachs 1914: 553-590).

3 Rhythms are recognised as the specific language of a goddess and accordingly named: Durga Par (the rhythm of Durga); Maha Kali Par (the rhythm of Maha Kali); Ma Mangala Par (the rhythm of Mother Mangala); Ma Tarani Par (the rhythm of Mother Tarani); Oila Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Oila); Subakesi Par (the rhythm of Subakesi); Tulsa Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Tulsa); Bontei Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Bontei); Chandraseni Par (the rhythm of Chandraseni); Ganga Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Ganga); Parvati Par (the rhythm of Parvati); Lakshmi Par (the rhythm of Lakshmi); Boiravi Par (the rhythm of Boiravai); Buri Ma Par (the rhythm of Mother Buri); Patneshwari Par (the rhythm of Patneshwari); Samleshwari Par (the rhythm of Samleshwari).

4 For comparison with the Pano in Koraput, see Pfeffer 1994: 14–20.

5 The complete statement of cultural intent by the state of Chhattisgarh runs as follows:

"The State of Chhattisgarh will not announce or impose any cultural policy. It will identify, recognize, document, revitalize, present and disseminate the continuing cultural traditions of local communities. The State will not set up artificial boundaries between classical, folk, tribal, visual and performing metropolitan and rural arts. It will recognize and respect the transitions and bridges among these. The State will promote
textual as well as non-textual traditions, collection and documentation of tangible objects as well as recollection of intangible traditions, their ex situ display as well as in situ revitalization. The State will try to work around existing cultural landscapes, festivals and institutions, rather than create new ones to replace them. The State will be a catalytic agent, to support and advance the traditional connection among communities, between their life and their arts, and between forms and functions of these arts. It will respect and nourish culture as essential to eco-specific development strategies of communities, geared to resource management and subsistence. It will recognize culture as an essential ingredient in development. Effort will be made to recognize, embed and develop the cultural component in the programs of all Govt. departments, as culture is a component of all departments of life. Culture will not be reduced to a mere song and dance act, or to an exclusive concern of the Department of Culture. Cultural impact assessment will be embedded as a component in the formulation and implementation of mega developmental projects. The State will further cross disciplinary dialogues, inter institutional networking and decentralized field activity to replenish community identities. The unique identity and polyvalence of the culture of Chhattisgarh will be promoted alongside its relationships and exchanges with cultural provinces and neighbourhoods of adjacent states of Chhattisgarh. The community cultural identity and landscape of Chhattisgarh will be presented in the national and global perspective. (…) Tourism will be developed as a non-invasive instrument of biological, ecological and cultural conservation, and not as a bread and circus affair. Chhattisgarh itself being treated as a living museum space, the in-situ and ex-situ exhibition and dissemination initiatives, will be designed as exercises in problem assessment and resolution, and not as passive displays. (…) (www.cgculture.in, retrieved, 20th February, 2010).

6 A daily wage is mostly around 100 to 200 Rupees; 2000 rupees can be considered an average monthly salary for a person without a higher education degree.

Abstract: Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Hindu epics, have influenced the folklore of Adivasis of peninsular India in diverse manner. Pandavani, the “Narratives of the Pandavas”, is a disjointed Adivasi theatrical creation based on singing, narration, music, partly dance and satire. Originally the Pardhan tribal community, the bards of the Gonds, had the hereditary custom of singing Pandavani. Pandavani and other folktales rampant in Chhattisgarh-Gondwana- Dakhin Kosal Bastar- Dandakaranya region tell tales of "Agyatvasa" (exile) of the Pandavas. Of the five Pandava brothers, it is second brother Bhima who emerges as the central figure in Adivasi folktales, as this article depicts, by citing three episodes of Danda – Dahori Play of Kanvora – Pandava, Treachery at Lakha Mahal and Kichuk Badha-Nagar Bairat Men, wherein Bhima plays crucial roles. The episodes are selected to show the Adivasi internalisation of an epic character in highly localised vernacular imagination, depicting Bhima as a cultural hero and a tribal deity. Protecting original legends, the Adivasis had embraced epical episodes and implanted them selectively in their memories, oral traditions, and folklore. This article stresses the genuine oral creativity and originality of Adivasis fables. It acknowledges the rich and vibrant folkloric traditions of Adivasis, as their ‘own’ creations, their narrations of their cultural –ethnic oral traditions and memories. The article argues that an Adivasi Mahabharata needs to be recognized as part of this indigenous creativity.

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Introduction

The Mahabharata is an epic narrative of great Kurukshetra War of India and the fates of the Kaurava and Pandava princes. The Mahabharata is the longest known heroic epic poem; its longest version consists of over 100,000 hymns (over 200,000 individual verse lines).

The core story pertains to the dynastic struggle for the throne of Hastinapur, kingdom ruled by the Kuru clan. The two collateral branches of the family that participate in the struggle are the Kaurava and the Pandava, represented by Duryodhana and Yudhishtira.

There is hardly a region in the country, which the epic heroes, the Pandavas did not visit; this fact is amply proved in multiple folkloric traditions of diverse culture regions, including tribal belts. Episodes of Vana Parva and Virata Parva seem to be much popular in the Adivasi and folk consciousness of Central India region (K.S.Singh, 1993). The native folk traditions and Adivasi literatures show that while wandering the Pandavas were in disguise concealing their actual identities in these regions. Folktales rampant in Chhattisgarh-Gondwana- Dakhin Kosal Bastar-Dandakaranya region tell tales of "Agyatvasa" (exile) of the Pandavas with Kunti and Draupadi. In parts of Chhattisgarh Bhimsen, is worshipped as a rain god (Elwin: 1950: 41). Undoubtedly Bhima remains the central figure in most Adivasi folktales, wherein he is called as Bhima, Bimma, Bhimsen, Bimai,
and Bhimul. In this culture area there are many sacred shrines, ponds, and hills, waterfalls named after Bhima in Chhattisgarh-Gondwana -Dakhin Kosal. In this article my main objective is to place Bhima as the focus of discussion and to demonstrate how Bhima emerges in this culture area as an ordinary Adivasi forest-dweller, as a personification of a Gond tribe, and as part of place-names all deep-rooted in origin myths, literature/vernacular verses, theatre traditions and religious practices of Adivasis. Several versions of Mahabharata are prevalent in Adivasi communities, where Bhima, the second Pandava brother, emerges as the central figure. Bhima appears as the mythical creator, rescuer, and the progenitor of many tribes of the region. Worship of Bhima as a hero in myths, legends, and folk epics is a subject of exhaustive study, as the cultural history and ethnographic scenario of this region remains fragmentary. Bhima is part of the cosmogonic myths of many tribes, which include a supernatural account or explanation that describes the beginnings of humankind and the earth. In these tribal communities Bhima is reinterpreted as a folk hero and as a rain god with many supernatural deeds to his credit.

The ethnographic context

This article is based on the author’s prolonged fieldwork in many parts of Chhattisgarh. The author had his schooling and initial university studies in Chhattisgarh districts of Bilaspur and Raipur where he had numerous occasions to witness Chhattisgarhi folk theatres and gain knowledge about them. The author’s interview with Habib Tanvir for example was broadcast by All-India Radio, Raipur in 1973 wherein the core discussion surrounded folk theatre. Intensive fieldworks were further conducted by the author in Tumgaon village of Mahasamund Tehsil (administrative block) during 1973-74 under the fellowship of the Ravishankar University, Raipur to study the Chhattisgarhi Mahabharata and its inclusion in local folklore. Further information was collected during the study of Satnami sect in Palari and Kugada villages in Raipur district during 1993-94 on behalf of Anthropological Survey of India (ASI). Materials pertaining to Dakhin Kosal were mainly collected during fieldworks in a Binjhal village of Ghess in the Bargarh district of western Odisha during August-October 2004.

The region and its history of anthropological research

The Chhattisgarh-Bastar-Dandakaranya region has a long standing tradition of anthropological studies; traceable right from the studies of Verrier Elwin conducted in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of his books contained ethnographic and oral narratives, myths and songs from this vast region. His works included Songs of the Forest: The Folk Poetry of the Gonds (Hivale and Elwin, 1935), Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal (Elwin, 1944), Folk-Songs of Chhattisgarh (Elwin, 1946), The Baiga (Elwin, 1939) and The Agaria (Elwin, 1942). He then published Myths of Middle India (Elwin, 1949) and The Muria and their Ghotul (Elwin, 1947) and Tribal Myths of Orissa (Elwin, 1954). Oral Epics in India, by Blackburn and Flueckiger (1989: 9) deal with women performing epic traditions. Chris A. Gregory concentrated particularly on anthropological studies of women’s oral epic traditions that exist in the Bastar-Dandakaranya region. In this region the women sing a number of different epics such as Tija Jagar, which is sung during the wet season; Lachmi Jagar, which is sung during the cold season; and Bali Jagar, which is sung during the hot season. These vernacular stories are episodic in character but lack however the unity of the classic Mahabharata narrative. Nevertheless, these epics tend to have a subaltern flavour in that they are grounded in the local history of the ‘little kingdom’ of the region [Chris A. Gregory, 2004]. They are also grounded in the
local ecology of the DNK region. The cross that divides India east/west into rice-growing and millet-growing areas and north/south into Indo-European and Dravidian speaking areas defines this plateau region. Surprisingly, the linguistic frontier does not appear to be of any cultural significance insofar as understanding the epics is concerned (Chris A. Gregory, 2004). Desiya and Pengo speakers (a Dravidian language) perform the Bali Jagar epic/ritual in south Odisha. At the completion of the ritual, wooden images of Bhima and Bhimin are installed in a sacred grove on the outskirts of the village. A village will host the ritual every twelve years and in meantime the images of Bhima and Bhimin rot, fall towards one another, and touch the earth. This ritual varies greatly over the western Odisha area but for those rituals that have Bhima as the central ritual focus one finds that it grew in areas where droughts occur. Bhima is thus always associated with drought-breaking rains in the mythology of the DNK region’ (Chris A. Gregory, 2004). Earlier the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) launched a Chhattisgarh area study project resulting - among others - in the volume on Bastar village study by Edward Jay (1961) and Bastar ethnographies by N.K.Das (1982) and Nandini Sundar (1999).

Gondwana- Chhattisgarh-Dakhin Kosal:
Bhima’s Contribution towards Universe Creation and Adivasi Origin

Situated in central India, the vast Gondwana (Chhattisgarh-Dakhin Kosal-Bastar – Dandakaranya) region boasts of a collective Adivasi legacy and its shared Mahabharata heritage. Chhattisgarh has been derived from the name ‘Chedisgarh’, the then political seat of the Chedis. Chhattisgarh, where Gond chiefs formed a good number of chieftaincies, was part of Gondwana [Garha Katanga]. The ‘Gondwana cultural region’, spreads today in states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and partly in Andhra and Maharashtra. The existence of Dakhin Kosala, inclusive of Chhattisgarh and western Odisha, can be traced back to fourth century AD. In the Hindu epics, Dakhin Kosala is described as a part of “Dandakaranya”. The entire contiguous region of Odisha and Bastar today form Dandakaranya, but this nomenclature is not in consistency with historical Dandakaranya mentioned in Hindu epics.

The term Gondwana was popularised in 1873 by Henry F. Blanford. Pascoe in 1959 claimed that the term is used after the ‘Kingdom of Gonds’. Fakhruddin Ahmad (Carey 1988:98) refers to the war of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and states that the vanquished group, the Kauravas, went south into India, conquering the lands of a native Dravidian tribe, whom they contemptuously called “Gowandawana” (bull’s balls people, from gow meaning cow; anda, testicle, and wana ‘belonging to’). Gondwana (Goindi Wana) was the region of several Gond kingdoms from the 15th century to the mid-18th century, till the Gonds started loosing their lands to intruding groups. The Gonds call themselves Koitur or Kur. The inheritors of the Dravidian Culture, the Gonds consist of several sub-tribes. The Pardhans, creator of the Adivasi Mahabharata Pandavani, or Pundavani, are the hereditary bards of the Gonds, who have now adopted agriculture as main occupation. Pardhans are regarded as ‘knowledge-keepers’ and narrator of Adivasi Rama Katha and Mahabharata tales. In their tales Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Bhim all travel together in a single episode. There is common a merging of Ramayana and Mahabharata Hindu epics in Adivasi folklore.

In Chhattisgarh, tribal communities such as Bhima, Pando and Korwa, tracing their lineages from Bhima, Pandava and Kaurava respectively live side by side. The Bhimas spread in the Mandala-Chhattisgarh region and regard Bhima as their progenitor. The Bhima, a small sub-tribal group of the Gonds,
like the Pardhans, the Gond-Bards, are musicians and dancers. The Pardhans play on the *kingri* (fiddle) and the Bhimas on the *tumas* (Elwin 1936: 230). The *kingri* is an elaborate multi-stringed chordophone and diverse tunes can be played on it. The *tuma* consists of a hollow piece of bamboo fixed horizontally over a gourd. On the *tuma* it is only possible to make a rhythmic strumming to accompany the dance. Lakshman made the first *kingri*, but the Bhimsen made the first *tuma* (Elwin 1936: 230). The Bhimas in the past lived in houses only during the rains, they had no fields, but they pointed to their *tuma* and said -this is our fields and bullocks (Elwin 1936: 231). The Bhimas worship Bura Dev, the great god of the Gonds. The Bhimas sing both bhajan and karma, which are important folkloric elements of the entire Gondwana- Chhattisgarh-Dakhin Kosal region. These folkloric traditions establish the cultural unity of the vast region.

Bhima’s presence in the creation myths and in imparting knowledge of agriculture to local adivasi groups in the region is spectacular. In the origin myth of the Gonds the supreme god of the Gonds along with the goddess Mother Earth were brought to the earth by Bhima. Kotma (Kunti) had helped Bhima in securing earth after deluge (Fuchs: 1960: 1-16). Further, in the myth of salvation of mankind from fire and hunger, and in the myth of the beginning of cultivation both Kotma (Kunti) and Bhima had assisted Bhagwan, the Adivasi deity. The Gonds, first children of Mahadeo and Parvati, state that Mahadeo created the earth after the deluge. Next he created nature, birds, animals and finally, humankind. They lived on roots, fruits and hunting of forest animals. Forest resources were not enough and thus they were always starving. Mahadeo could not provide them with sufficient food. So Parvati advised the Gonds to start the cultivation of paddy. They thus arranged bulls, made a plough, but they did not possess the paddy seeds. So they sent Bhima to Ku vera, the god of wealth, for paddy seeds. Bhima borrowed sixty ‘putis’¹ of seeds from Kuvera with the condition to repay him after the harvest.

Bhimsen was present during the creation of the world, as revealed in the myth of the Bhima Adivasi group:

> The great god sat in the midst of the primeval ocean and made a crow from the rubbings of his body. This crow, Karicag, went here and there over waters and at last found Kakramal Kuwar, the great tortoise. In his paw a tiny grain of earth was sticking. The crow picked it off and brought it to the great god who said, Sow it in the sea. In a few days, the earth began to sprout and grew all over the ocean. So god went to look at it, taking his wife with him, but the newly grown earth was unstable; it shifted here and there, you could not stand on it. So god sent for Bhimsen. He was as usual going about, bent beneath his cowar, and when god told him of his perplexity, he put down his loads, one on either side of the earth and balanced it. Henceforth, the earth became firm, it is stated (Elwin 1936:233).

Bhima Adivasi are indebted to Bhima, often called as Bhimasen, for many benevolent acts. Besides venerating Bhima as the god of strength, Bhimas also worship Bhimsen as the maker of the first *tuma* and the music *mohan baja*, which Sita was soothed with when once she was enraged with Rama.

The lands and territories of the entire region are full of tales where Bhima appears doing numerous adventures, such as recalled in the following myth: "Not far from Karanjia are two hills, one on each side of the valley. The
story is that Bhimsen, carrying a cow [pole laid across the shoulders, from either end of which hangs a basket for carrying loads] like any Gond, was walking up the valley, grew tired and dumped his two great loads on either side, whereupon they turned into two hills, Dhuti and Lingo" (Elwin 1936: 233).

The Adivasi communities of the region have definite connectivity with the territory, its physical-cosmological set up, its traditional polity, customs, language and religion. Adivasi culture, language and religious practices flourished for long and remained deeply regionally rooted. It is so much so that the penetrations of Brahmanical influences were negligible (Das 1988). Brahmanical influence/Hinduism was adopted by some Gond ruling families, who had adopted a sort of Khatriya (=warrier) status, at family level but not at lineage/clan levels, through refashioning family origin myths. Studies conducted by the author in western Odisha during 2004 reveal that ‘Hinduized Ruling’ families now disown their erstwhile Khatriya-status. In the past kingdom of Dakhin Kosal comprised of eastern and western parts, the Eastern part of South Kosal (Western Odisha) and western part of South Kosal (Chhattisgarh) were united and ruled by the Kalchuri rulers in the past. This historical region retains its strong Adivasi identity and Adivasi legacy of its folklore replete with the worship of Bhima. The later arrival of Hindu peasant and artisan communities led to co-existence of Adivasi and ‘Hindu influenced sects and Brahmanical cultures’.

Pandavani- The Gondi- Chhattisgarhi - Mahabharata: Bhima's Benevolences and Adventures

Pandavani, the “Narratives of the Pandavas”, is a disjointed Adivasi theatrical creation based on singing, narration, music, partly dance and satire. In the past it was a simpler presentation in sitting posture only. Originally the Pardhan Adivasi community of Gondwana including Chhattisgarh region, being the bards of the Gonds, had the hereditary custom of singing Pandavani. Later some other artisan tribal groups adopted it including the Devar people. In Pandavani one may notice a dominant presence of a three-stringed tambura (long necked lute/chordophone) with bells tied at one end and kartal (hand cymbals) also with bells at the other hand. Both are used as accessory as well as decoration during play when the actor-singer invokes and re-enacts the character, through his-her multiple moods, while sitting on knees/or standing/or moving around. The tambura emerges as the main instrument and a symbolic tool and thus it becomes Bhima gada, the mace of Arjun, or at times his bow or a chariot, while otherwise it becomes the hair of queen Dropadi thus helping the narrator-singer to enact various happenings of the mythical story. Other instruments, used mainly by supporter-singers/narrators, are tablas (membranophones) and manjira (small cymbals). Singing apart the singer-performer keeps providing explanations as it develops. Ragi, supporter-narrator, is a constant co-performer. Each singer adds his or her unique style to the singing, often adding own words, and invariably improvising and offering a critique on current happenings. The lead narrator/singer continuously interacts with the accompanying narrators/singers, who give continuous commentary, and enhance the dramatic effect of the Pandavani performance, which can last for several hours on a single episode of the Adivasi Mahabharata.

The full performance of Pandavani used to take eighteen evenings to perform, but such long performances could not attract people. To break this tedium, shorter versions of Pandavanis came into light wherein a few stories from the epic are taken up for depiction during one or two shows.
Pandavani was a village-level affair till early nineteen seventies, when it was male dominated mode of singing, describing the events associated with the Pandavas, their wife and mother. Bhima was the leading actor. Gradually it became popular among the urban people.

The Pandavani, mainly the Chhattisgarhi version, has two varieties- Kapalik and Vedamati. The Kapalik variety is an indigenous version whereas Vedamati is based on the ‘classical’ Hindu source. The former peripherally touches the broad scale of the epic, localises the Mahabharata within Gondwana/ Chhattisgarh region, and establishes Bhima as its leading and a highly vibrant character. The Vedamati variety, based on the original epic, is hardly practiced and presented. It is stated that in order to ‘refine’ or ‘sanskritise’ the Pandavani theatre, the legendary Pandavani exponent Jhaduram Devangan (born 1926), had initiated the Vedamati version, rather in dissent against the Kapalik version, which was seen as a vulgarization of the classical epic. The Vedamati form featured mostly a single performer who sang the couplets from the text, set to folk tunes, singing from a seated position. Vedamati style indeed was not acceptable to the folk-rural audiences. The Kapalik form of Pandavani, with its rustic vernacular narrative captivated the minds of local people. Gradually the new demands helped incorporating singing, dancing, and acting to create an ecstatic theatrical show through Pandavani. Narayan Das Verma, another legendary Pandavani performer, had helped Pandavani to be performed on the stage. Later the extremely energetic Kapalik form was mastered and popularized by performer Teejan Bai. It is mainly since around the 1980s that women entered the field of Pandavani performances, like Teejan Bai, Ritu Verma, and now Prabha Yadav and others. Women wear the sari in a style called kachhora. Jewellery worn includes baandha (a necklace made of coins) and suta (a silver necklace) around the neck; phuli in the nose; bali and khunti in the ears; ainthi (made of silver), patta and choora (bangles) on the forearm; kardhani (a belt-like ornament made of silver) on the waist; bichhiya on the toes. Men wear a koundhi (necklace of beads) and kadah (bangle), which in Chhattisgarh are put on during ceremonial occasions, including dances.

Bhima of Pandavani to a great extent appears as an antithesis, a character who displays a near opposite personality with native traits. Several examples of this contrast may be glimpsed in the following popular episodes of Gondi-Mahabharata.

A few verses from original Gondi Pandavani, mainly their translated versions, are reproduced below in order to portray the various acts of benevolence and adventure of Bhima and also how he gets a new identity and personality through Adivasi ‘internalisation/re-interpretation’. These verses are drawn from ‘Pandavani’, published by Tribal Research Department at Chhindwada, Madhya Pradesh (1957 & 1963). Remaining unnoticed for long time, they depict various episodes from the Mahabharata displaying native wisdom and indigenous vernacular perceptions, wherein adventures of Bhima, the leading performer and actor of Pandavani, are vividly narrated. The Pandavani is replete with divergences and local reinterpretations, which are specially chosen by author here. Divergence is acute in naming patterns too. Thus, Pandava mother Kunti of the Hindu Epic becomes Katama in Pandavani. Hastinapur is Hasna- Nagari. The Kauravas, who are Kanvaras, are hardly close in any manner to their classic counterparts; Kanvaras of Pandavani are just twenty-one brothers, as following lines depict:

‘Jait Nagari ma panch putur pandva,'
Jait Nagari had five Pandava sons and Hasana Nagari had 21 Kanvara brothers'.

Adivasi Episodes of Pandavani – the Adivasi Mahabharata

Pandvani performer Shrimati Prabha Yadav had informed the author in February 2011 that the episodes described below are most popular episodes performed by actor-singers of Pandvani. Discussion with Pandvani performer Shrimati Prabha Yadav of Jai Ma Kaushilya Pandvani Party, village Chandkhuri farm, Raipur district during February 2011 had clarified the significance of the episodes for Adivasi communities in the region. Shrimati Prabha Yadav herself had enacted these episodes in her performances (see Figures 1 & 2).

Figure 1: Pandvani performer Shrimati Prabha Yadav, Chhattisgarh, 2011 (credit NK Das)

Figure 2: Pandavi performance Chhattisgarh 2011 (credit NK Das)

Episode I: Danda – Dahori Play of Kanvara – Pandava

(This episode described below has no direct parallel in the Hindu Mahabharata and is a localised lyrical creation introduced in Pandvani (see also T.B. Naik (1964 ).

The Pandavas had a huge stock of cattle, eight lakh³ cows, nine lakh goats, and a big number of elephants. The Kanvara brothers and the Pandavas grazed their cattle regularly.

One day the 21 Kanvara brothers were playing Danda –Dahori under the shade of a huge Vata tree. They invited Arjun, who was at a
little distance, to play Danda –Dahori (acrobatic stick play in which a stick is thrown for measuring the distance of a throw. The Opponent is asked to collect the stick).

When Arjun came to play the Kanvara brothers threw the stick far off beyond 24 kosh. It was now Arjuna’s task to trek all 24 kosh to get the stick and return covering same 24 kosh. By the time Arjun did it he had become very tired. When he returned with the stick it was almost evening. When Arjuna returned to the playground, the Kanvaras were missing. Mischievously they had climbed the tree. As per requirements of the Danda –Dahori game Arjuna was to first touch them before they could reach to the stick. Arjuna now climbed the tree and started chasing, but he failed. Kanvaras cleverly came down and kissed the stick. Arjuna thus lost the game and returned home.

When Bhima came to know of this incident he became furious and decided to go for grazing the next day. Bhima tells Mata Kotama:

(The following lines, delivered by singer-performers, eulogise the promptness and self-confidence of Bhima to avenge the defeat of the brother. It also applauds the way Bhima –Mardana walks out).

Kaha thai bhim sen, sun le o mata, S s, Arjun bhya la dukhan dhari si ‘
Aaj man jahon gurban maa O Ss
Mola banaide o thola mori Dai,

Bhye hain tayyar more Bhimma re bhaiya,
Hay, hay kaise chale jathaie Bhima mardana ho Ss

‘O Mother, brother Arjun is tired, so I will go for grazing, so please do prepare my lunch and pack it for the forest’.

The story episode further continues:

Thus, the second day Bhima goes for grazing. But he cleverly hides his face. He pretends to be Arjuna and does not show his face to the Kanvaras. As per game regulation the Kanvara brothers again threw a stick 24 kosh away. They again challenge Arjuna to go and get the stick.

Bhima is recalled as a tall person with long legs. His each step is supposed to cover one kosh distance.

Bhima ran hurriedly and collected the stick in a little time. He brought the stick and kept it below the tree. He now challenged and alerted the Kanvaras that a huge storm is fast coming so all climbers should be watchful. Indeed, in no time clouds thundered and a hurricane started approaching. There was water everywhere. Bhima then uprooted the Vata tree and held it over his shoulder. He then settled down near the huge Karia stone and erected the tree there. He performed the ‘halus’, the declaration of victory. All Kanvaras fell down and accepted their defeat. As a sign they had broken their legs ad hands.

Bhima now roared that ‘yesterdays’ revenge had been taken, all Kanvaras were humiliated and the ‘problem’ solved.

Episode 2: Treachery at Lakshagraha or Lakha Mahal

(This episode pertains to the incident of Lakshagraha or Lakshagriha (the House of wax) which is a chapter (parva) from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Duryodhana plots to get rid of the Pandavas and tries to kill them secretly by setting fire to their palace made of wax. However, the Pandavas are warned by their uncle, Vidura, who sends them a miner to dig a tunnel. In this way they are able to escape to safety and hide).

Below is the altered Adivasi version of the episode.

The festival of Laxmi puja has arrived. This is the time of rejoice everywhere. An invitation is sent to the Pandavas also.
Ho, ho, Bolethain Kanvara,
Chalhe Ao re bhaiya pancho Pandava;
Mata Kotama, Dropadi Mata.

(The Invitation letter says) Welcome all five Pandavas, Mata Kotama and Dropadi Mata. Visit the Kanvara Laxmi puja.

The Kanvaras thus converse and plan to build a “Lakha Mahal”, a House of Wax, for the Pandavas. The idea was that during their sleep in the night the palace will be burnt down to ashes. With the help of trusted men the palace was readied and entire Pandava family was invited to a special Laxmi puja (worship of goddess Laxmi). The Laxmi puja is complicated as it involves several preparations. Having received the invitation mother Kotama became distressed, as there was a need for her to make an earthen elephant for the puja which is a difficult task. She complained: “the Kanvaras are 21 brothers. This is their strength. If each Kanvara gathers just one mutha soil (mati) one by one they may carve out easily a hill-size elephant. You are just five brothers. You cannot gather much soil. At last I will be worshipping a small elephant and Kanvara mother shall proudly worship a hill size elephant. It will be insulting”. Hence, she declined to go.

Bhima further consoled her and said: “Why you worry, don’t worry; I will get you a living elephant from Indrasen”. Indrasen has a huge elephant called ‘Bhauran Nand’. In order to communicate this, Bhima writes a letter while shooting the letter along with the arrow in the sky.

Indrasen immediately replies and sends a royal elephant ‘Bhauran Nand’. Now it was the work of Arjuna to use his ‘agni-bana’- fire-arrows –to burn the ashes so that the road can be laid for the convoy. Bhima requests Arjuna to proceed to bring ‘Bhauran Nand’. But Arjun failed. Hence it was felt that only Bhima could tackle the elephant. Bhima went and he first controlled the trunk of the elephant. As a result, the elephant became obedient. Bhima thus decorated the elephant. Mother Kotama also advised further decoration, and sat down atop the elephant. On the elephant she went to her sister Gandharnin’s house, in order to perform the Laxmi puja. Her five sons followed the elephant.

The Kanvara brothers made an earthen elephant for the puja of their mother. Mother and elephant were taken on their shoulder like holding a palanquin. On the way there was a river. Because of the ferocious water flow the earthen elephant of the Kanvaras got diluted and swept away. Mother of Kanvaras almost got submerged but Pandava mother Kotama held hands of Gandharnin and thus saved her timely. She brought her atop her elephant. It was a shameful event for the Kanvaras.

The Pandavas now reached at Lakha Mahal. Nice food was served which they relished. However the food was poisoned. The food for the Kanvaras was also served but their food was not polluted. Then came the time to rest. By this time the Pandavas had felt sleepy. They slept. By midnight however there erupted a huge fire from all directions. Lakha (=wax) also started melting and pouring over the Pandavas. All Pandavas now got up. Kotama started crying. Bhima now told: “nothing to worry. I will take all of you out from here”. Now Bhima, using his huge body size, inserted his mother and his brothers inside his clothes (jayamangal dhunti) and then he pierced his strong foot on earth – A crack and rupture emerged and this crack had opened a passage. Now Bhima tracked this route and took all of them to Patal Lok. Before leaving Bhima collected the bones of dead cattle and spread them in the Lakha Mahal.

The Kanvaras meanwhile were very happy thinking that their enemies had died in the fire.
Now the Kanvaras auctioned all properties of the Pandavas, Nine lakh cows, seven lakh goats, ‘Manat 64 Jogani’, Baithat horse, bannchat manuscripts etcetera. An agreement was reached at for the transaction, in a pital-patra (brass-pot). The king of Virata Nagar, Singram Singh, procured them through auction. As a result of this auction there was despair everywhere.

Episode 3: Kichuk Badha in Nagar Bairat - (Bhima’s killing of Kichaka in Virata Nagar)

(In the India epic Mahabharata, Kichaka was the army commander of Matsya, the country ruled by King Virata. Virata Parva, also known as the “Book of Virata”, is the fourth of eighteen books of the ‘classical’ Mahabharata epic. It discusses the 13th year of exile which the Pandavas must spend incognito to avoid another 12 years of exile in the forest. They do so in the court of Virata. They assume a variety of concealed identities. Kichaka-vadha parva is part of Virata Parva that deals with the killing of Kichaka by Bhima. In original epic maid Sairandhri (Draupadi) is humiliated in Virata's court by Kichaka in the last month of the 13th year. Hence Bhima kills Kichaka).

The Adivasi Pandava recalls this story differently, as the following episode sung by Pandvani performer Shrimati Prabha Yadav (in February 2011) shows:

After the successful arrangement of their marriage with Dropadi at Girdavali, all Pandava brothers decided to leave for the forest. Dropadi however also insisted to go with them. Leaving Girdavali, Bhima asked his mother Kotama ‘how long should we depend on begging. Let us go to a town’. His mother (mata) said: “Here is one side Parasawal on the one side, the other side is Suraj gadh, further there is Bundelia desh and then Kajali forest of god Hanuman (the monkey god). There is Bairat Nagar ruled by Singram Singh, I take you there”. After reaching Bairat Nagar they were resting, then, Bhima proposed to go for begging. Mother Kotama said to him: “you are an angry person, if a quarrel takes place we may all be in trouble”. Thus mother Kotama decided to go alone. She also instructed Dropadi to take care of Bhima and not to let him move around. At Bairat Nagar Kotama reached the temple of Chaunsath Jogan. There were many Jogin (female ascetics).

When mother Kotama did not return, Arjun went in search of her and also looked for some work. The king asked him ‘what work you can perform’? Arjun replied, I can draw five sher (pots) milk from an old ox or a cow. The king arranged for the old cow and ox. Indeed Arjun produced the milk. Having been impressed, the king employed him as a cattle herder. By influencing the king one by one the other brothers got employed by the king.

Now Bhima wanted to go searching for his brothers but Dropadi did not allow him to move. Used a trick he left the forest and entered the Shankar tal [tank]. After sometime, not finding Bhima around, Dropadi also moved towards the city and reached the temple. There she started living with mother Kotama there.

After sometime with a big bang Bhima emerged from the Shankar tank. His hammering of water created almost a flood like situation. Cattles got submerged in that water. People thought the boundary wall of the tank has collapsed. Hence they came forward with implements to repair the tank wall. Bhima then thought of a trick. He positioned himself upside down at centre of the tank. Some people went inside the tank but Bhima caught them between their thighs, and forced the villagers to conduct puja and offer food, only then he would leave the tank. Thus a puja and a good quantity food was arranged: it consisted of twelve goats, twelve cart rice, and twelve cart floor. Now Bhima emerged and showed his red eyes. These
frightened the people and they left the place. Left alone, Bhima enjoyed the food brought by the people.

Bhima now entered Bairat Nagar and started living with Dropadi. In Bairat Nagar Dropadi was often teased by Kichuk, the bother-in-law of King Singram Singh. Every one was afraid of Kichuk. Even the king feared him. One day Kichuk grabbed the hands of Dropadi. She wept and informed Bhima about this. Hearing this Bhima suggested Dropadi to go to Kichuk and tell him that at night she will meet him! At night time Kichuk was anxiously awaiting Dropadi. As per plan now Bhima readies himself in disguise as Dropadi by wearing her clothes ‘lahenga-phariya’. He also put on hard chudis made out of broken iron rods and went to meet Kichuk. Dropadi also accompanied him. Bhima went inside the house, but Dropadi was outside. Inside Kichuk was lying on a cot. Bhima went and started massaging his legs. Slowly he squeezed his legs one by one and then started smashing his hands. By now Kichuk apprehended something is wrong; he understood that this cannot be Dropadi. Soon a ruthless fight started between the two. Somehow Bhima was slowly loosing control. At that moment Dropadi challenged him from the rear: O’ Bhima, my Devar, what happened? Did you eat ‘aloni’ gram today? Or did you drink uncooked milk, why are you stepping backwards?

Hearing Dropadi’s irritated intonation, Bhima suddenly exploded in fury having procured 14 time greater power now and he smashed Kichuk by hitting him robustly. Kichuk died at once.

Discussion

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the great lyrical epics of Indian cultural history. Local vernacular versions of these epics are popular in all states of India.

In most cases vernacular versions are accurate renditions of the original version. Adivasi versions are however distinct in terms of the depiction of individual-characters and storyline. Pandavani, the lyrical folk ballad form that narrates the story of the five Pandava brothers of the Hindu Mahabharata, is one of the most famous lyrical forms of traditional theatre in Chhattisgarh and its neighbouring regions. Other forms of folk theatre and folk performances in Chhattisgarh are known as Gammat Naucha and Pandavani. Several plays represented by the famous local theatre personality, Habib Tanvir, are variations of Chhattisgarhi theater traditions consisting of Pandavani, Gammat and Naucha and other popular folk singing forms, such as the Dadaria songs of the Kamar tribal community also known as Ban-Bhajans or Salho.

Mahabharata stories have penetrated into the cosmogonic myths of Adivasis such as the Gond, Pardhan, Binjhal. Adivasis of the neighbouring regions such as Munda, Kandha, and Bondo too regard Bhima as their god, as equivalent of sun and sky god. The Baiga, Gond and the Bhunjia Adivasi communities regard Bhima as the forest cultivator and a ‘servant’ of Mahadeo (Big God). In Sanskrit Mahabharata Bhima, the second Pandava is portrayed as the personification of brute courage and strength, with a gigantic stature. In Adivasi folklore (Pandavani) too Bhima emerges as a man of strength with a massive figure, but he is more of rustic forest-dweller, exhibiting acts of benevolence and adventures, all the way through Adivasi imagery.

There is a strong postcolonial endorsement of indigeneity discourse and survival concerns of Adivasi and indigenous peoples around the globe, including their historical neglect, social exclusion and subjugation by ‘dominant’ societies. The current trend is to de-construct
what have been the distortions of Adivasi history and ethnography. The older Indic portrayal of the Adivasis of India is replete with odious and obnoxious expressions, such as Asura (demon). Many creations of classical literature and even early anthropological writings suffer from value-loaded explanations. Historical injustices done to Adivasis are revealed in their sideling in Hindu textual tales, such as the Ekalavya tale.

Protecting original legends, the Adivasis of the Chhattisgarh region had embraced epical Hindu episodes and implanted them selectively in their own vernacular memories, oral traditions, and folklore. Instead of appreciating the immense oral creativity of Adivasis, often the genuine originality of Adivasis is misinterpreted as a second-hand replica of classical Hindu epics.

This article tried to highlight the need to acknowledge the genuine rich and vibrant folkloric traditions of the Adivasis, as their ‘own’ creations, their narrations of their cultural, ethnic oral traditions and memories. Pandavani, the Adivasi Mahabharata, needs to be recognized as a part of indigenous creativity and of indigenous oral history of India.

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Notes

1 one ‘puti’ is equal to eighty Kilograms.

2 Sabal Singh Chauhan, who had recreated the Pandavani, making it matching with original Sanskrit Mahabharata, influenced Jhaduram

3 One lack=100,000

4 Kosh is an ancient Indian measurement 1 kosh covering approximately 2 and a 1/4 miles

5 Here the reader will notice that Dropadi is referring to Bhima as Devar, the (younger) brother-in-law. In the core text of the Pandavani, it is Arjun, who is lone ‘receiver’ and ‘winner’ of Dropadi. Dropadi was given to Arjun alone as he had killed Kilkila through his arrow. After receiving Dropadi the Pandavas returned home. In the narrative of Adivasi Pandavani Bhima treats Dropadi as ‘respected wife’ of his brother.
ARTICLE

DYNAMICS OF CHANGE AND RECONSTRUCTION OF A COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION: Bhopal’s Pardhan community between the ancient recited memory and a renovated ritual language

BY MONICA GUIDOLIN

Abstract: The role of music has always had a central place in the Pardhan community. In its etymology, the word ‘pardhan’ contains ‘pathari’, which exactly means “one who recites”. The traditional string instrument Bana is the “material translation” of this activity. The enormous oral production of narratives recited by Pardhan people is the perfect expression of their ancient role of “musicians and ministers” among Gond rajas, that ruled a large part of Central India from the 12th to the 18th century. The Pardhans’ function as official genealogists has allowed the preservation of the Gonds’ cultural heritage throughout time and has performed the duty of disseminating this narrative knowledge up to the present. Although today this relationship, and consequently the bardic institution, has necessarily changed, our enquiry wants to demonstrate how these myths continue to exist and sing the valour of heroic deeds with a glorious past, re-affirming the community identity in a social and economic fast, nonstop-moving reality. In a difficult, fragile social and economic transition between rural and urban environment, the reconfiguration of the music realm seems fundamental in order to reconstruct of a collective representation and offer a different way to identify as Pardhan in a new context. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted comparatively in rural areas of the Dindori district and in urban areas of Bhopal, this paper explores these renovated perceptions, engaging in a constant process of ritual language identity and social belonging.

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“Come over O Bara Deo, sit in the dense shade of the Saja tree. Come, create the world, create it once again”.

Introduction

This paper discusses dynamics change and reconstruction of a collective representation through an examination of oral tradition among the Pardhans, an adivasi group in eastern Madhya Pradesh state and it is based on a long ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2014 in the Upper Narmada Valley (Figure 1). This topic is part of a larger work of a doctoral thesis that analyses the imaginary of death in the practices and experiences in a Pardhan community of central India.

The ethnographic materials used in this research have been collected in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh state and in the small Gond and Pardhan villages of Sanpuri and Garkamatta, in the Dindori district, the eastern part of Madhya Pradesh, close to the Chhattisgarh border (Figure 2). Crossed by the Narmada River, this land gravitates around
the territory between Amarkaṇṭaka, a holy village located in the Maikala Mountains (Anuppur district), and Karanjia, a small trade junction (Dindori district). This place is an access door to the Vindhya Mountains in the north and to the Satpura Mountains in the south. Conducted comparatively in two sites, my study on the relationship between imaginary and funeral ritual reflecting the cosmological and thanatological conceptions of a community intersects with the caste/tribe connection in contrast to urban-rural environments. From this contrast, the concept of "glocalization" emerges with the re-distributions that it directs. The division of fieldwork in urban-rural environments lays this kind of reciprocity in perspective. As a whole my research takes a look at the social implications put in motion during the notion of "final refinement"\(^2\), in the last moment of life, where the concept of "imaginary" passes through a symbolic sphere that articulates and constructs the way to remain in the world as members of a society.

The pardhan tradition is strongly connected to the Gond’s cultural universe at a social and ritual level. This ancient association and their symbiosis are broadly shown by the sacred elaborated mythology involving the two communities. The hereditary bard and chronicler occupies an important position in many Indian communities and in this relationship, the presence of music is the evident expression of their ancient economic connection ("patronage link"). During Gond rulership, the Pardhans had the responsibility to keep the collective memory of the whole community alive, in answer to this activity of genealogists and minstrels, the Pardhans received different kinds of rewards (dāna) both in the form of money and in natural product.\(^3\) With the downfall of the centralized Gond kingdoms the Pardhan economy has suffered a great transformation and this is reflected in its religious life.

How do Pardhans remember and narrate the process of identity re-affirmation within the ādivāsī context of the area? How does the reconfiguration of the music realm reconstruct a collective representation and offer a different way to identify as Pardhan in a new context?

Historical context and etymology

In the history of Central India, the region that once was called Central Provinces was
inhabited by the Raja Gonds for a long time, a vast ādivāsī group whose numerical importance has had repercussions on this area up to now. Some 12th century Arab-Persian chronicles refers to these territories with the name Gondwana, indicating the region between the modern States of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh (B. H. Mehta, 1984: 58).

From the 12th to 16th century, Gond feudalism was influenced by the Rajputs in the first instance, and then by the Moghuls sovereigns. The Gonds were spread over a zone extending from the Vindhya Mountains to the point where the Godavari River runs into the chain of oriental Ghats. Nowadays they are concentrated over two important geographic belts: a large one formed by the central hills and forests winding up in the center of the State on the Satpura plateau with Chhindwara, Betul, Seoni, Mandla and Dindori districts; a large southern area including Chhattisgarhs’ chain.

Madhya Pradesh’s central position in the Indian subcontinent has encouraged and favored the communication between the northern Indo-European culture and the southern Dravidian one. This aspect has certainly enriched the history of this territory in which the substantial presence of the representative ādivāsī groups of central highlands is a significant element of cultural and social development. Among aboriginal populations, the Gonds (with the Bhils) occupy the first place both in number and in geographical extension. Inside the Gond society, we can identify a number of socially separated groups, but having an important connection with the Gonds. Among these, the Pardhans are considered as the traditional genealogists and bards of the ancient Raj Gond, the dominant social group and landowners.

The Sanskrit word "pardhan", a corrupt form of "pradhān" whose primary meaning is "above all", or "the greatest among all" entered later in the common language to translate "minister". Next to this first meaning, there is the gondi term pathāri which means "one who recites" or "reciting person", and it has in itself the other gondi term "pargania", as well, which means "who makes pūjā", paraphrasing the priests’ role in the Gond society. Regarding the distinction between those anthropologists who admit the function of pūjāri for the Pardhans (see V. Elwin, 1949) and those who, instead, narrow down this relationship only to the bards’ activity (see von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1950; 1979), our inquiry has underscored that the greatest part of the consulted informants in the villages identify themselves in primis with the priestly function, which flows into the singers’ role, as a sort of corollary. In most cases, in the course of time, the scholars focused on the sensitive, musical and religious side of Pardhans, omitting their social and ritual function inside the Gond society in accordance with an anthropological perspective.

**Figure 3**

Gonds and Pardhans, an ancient relationship

To the eyes of the Pardhans of Garkamatta’s village, the activity of bard not only has an aesthetic or pleasurable connotation. The
sound of the bana, the main instrument of Pardhans of Dindori district, is a tangible demonstration of a divine implication, but it is also the main instrument in order for the pūjā to take place (Figure 3).

The close link between the Pardhan and its adopted instrument is well described by the myth of the origin that, despite several variations typical of oral cultures, maintains and preserves this firm point.

There were seven brothers⁷. The eldest among them had some land. He decided to call the other brothers to work this land, in particular to divide the chaff from the rice seed after the harvest. In order to obtain some help, the brothers used a cow to grind the rice⁸ so as to permit the getting out of the seed and the division between the product and the debris. The seeds had to remain inside the circle made by the cow and not to be spread outside. To succeed in this operation, the eldest brother understood that he needed a stick able to round up all the seeds of the crop.

He went to the forest and cut a piece of wood. This piece of wood came from the Saja tree⁹. Once he cut the branch, he drew out a sound by a stratagem. So he asked the other brothers if they had heard the sound, but they answered negatively. Only the youngest brother remarked: “Yes, of course. I can hear the sound”. Attracted by the sound, the youngest brother started to play, while the others kept on reaping up the seeds. When the youngest brother started reaping, he harvested only a small quantity, which he put in a sūpa¹⁰. Displeased for the scarce work, he was very embittered. But the eldest brother reassured him saying that he would have had the same treatment as the other brothers, but before that he had to make the pūjā playing. At the end of the pūjā he would have received a reward.¹¹

This story well explains the origin of the cooperation between these two communities, where the eldest brother (Gond) and the youngest one (Pardhan) are the foundation of a traditional economy of reciprocal exchange¹². The myth tells us about the birth of the musical activity of the Pardhans and the instrument that only they can play and touch, because they have perceived the divine sound that reveals itself from the very beginning. It is not audible to the ears of the other brothers (Gonds), if not thanks to the intervention of the Pardhans.

The identification between the musician and the played instrument allows the Pardhans to obtain a social and economic status inside the network of the relationships with their neighbours, the Gonds.

Behind this mutual dependence, the Gond society is structured in an elaborate way and any aspect of the social and ritual life of the Gonds is inexplicable without understanding this structure.

At the basis, the tribe is divided into exogamic patrilineal phratries known as saga (agnates) on which the matrimonial relationships and the ritual appointments depend.¹³ While the phratries are the principal pillars of the social structure, the clans ("gotr" in Hindi, "pāṛī" in Gondi) provide for the visible architectural structure and they form the setting for the organization of several ritual activities. Related to every Gond clan there is a pardhan lineage. It is described by the clan members as "house pardhan". The Pardhans take the name of the clan of their Gond patrons, they adore the same protecting god of the clan and they preserve the oral tradition with myths
and legends of the clan of affiliation. In a ritual dimension, therefore, the Pardhans are active members of the clan although socially they do not enjoy the same social status. Behind this kind of conception, we can see how the gift-exchange institution emerges.

The most evident aspect of this relationship is translated in the ancient and traditional "mangteri" institution, solid in the past, less frequent today, but not entirely disappeared: every year, especially in the months of January and February, a few Pardhans make an appearance at the households of their Gond patrons and sing the stories about ancestors’ heroic deeds and about glorious sovereigns of the ancient Gondwana.

Despite Pardhans and Gonds are classified as Scheduled Tribes by the Indian Constitution, they are separated indicating the different origin. On this subject, von Furer-Haimendorf underlines their different origin and defines their relationship like an "historical accident" (Haimendorf, 1950: 183). On the traces of Haimendorf, S. H. Ahmad as well speaks of historical coincidence more than of a real identity, since the anthropometric studies reach the conclusion that the Gonds and the Pardhans belong to two different ethnic groups, even though they live in perfect symbiosis.14

As for the Charans in the former Rajput kingdoms in Kacch and Saurashtra, in North-West India 15, the Pardhans occupy an interesting position in the tribal organization of central India since they have the remarkable Hindu features but they are very close and more connected to the Gonds than to other tribes of the region. This historical association seems to need a placement in the Indian ethnology or, rather, in the Deccan ethnology (Haimendorf, 1950: 243).

This is a task that seems of difficult resolution due to the absence of a linguistic, cultural and racial homogeneity that characterizes the wide Gond society and the relevant extensive geographical area.

Figure 4

**Ritual system and worship of the Bana**

In my inquiry, the direct observation of musical activity has been fundamental and necessary in the attempt of describing and understanding the Pardhan ritual system, especially with reference to the function of sung recitation in funeral practices (Figure 4). In this social and cultural context, the Bana is the means to celebrate the transmission of memory, to affirm the devotion to Bara Deo, literally "Great God", the main deity in the Pardhan pantheon, and to accompany the most important ceremonies during the main stages of life. The Bana is a sort of portable temple. It is the real birthplace of the Pardhans and the seat of Bara Deo. This reverence is a relevant element that binds together the whole Pardhan community. On a religious level, the animist element of Gond roots predominates the traditional gods which were not represented by physical objects in the natural environment; subsequently, they began to gradually take meaning and form, including sex attributes, functions and qualities.
Bara Deo lives in the Saja tree and is worshipped in every village through the cult of the Bana, of which the Pardhans are the promoters and absolute protagonists. For the Pardhans, Bara Deo is mukti deva (= head/main deity) that protects the village from all calamities and helps them to handle life’s difficulties. The hereditary component of the singer’s activity and the subsequent cascading of this tradition testify to the public function of the Bana not only as a religious component, but also as a social dimension within the community structure. Bara Deo can be evoked only by a Pardhan, no one else. The God keeps sleeping in the Saja tree till a Pardhan comes and wakes him up: only through the sound of the Bana, given to the Pardhan by the god’s will, Bara Deo comes down the Saja tree and can manifest himself.

The texts and the myths of the tradition have always been transmitted from father to son and the recitative modality based on the frequent repetition has facilitated the ability to memorize.

One of the most interesting aspects is that the performer of Bana has the principal scope to transfer the mythical knowledge to the community, an action requiring the precious presence of two assistants (sometimes only one) that accompany the recitation.

The resulting evocative triangle takes the dialogue form among its protagonists: apart from the principal singer becoming "human vehicle" of the divinity, there are some additional voices repeating between a strophe and the other. The assistant figures, usually the Bana player’s son or brother, intervene by adding rhetorical questions, thus playing with the bard and stimulating the communication and the stories. Their duty is to activate a complete involvement of the listeners, allowing the performance to assume an educational meaning. During the show, the attending people can put few rupees at the feet of the chanter as a sign of appreciation.

The Bana is a simple instrument but at the same time it is fully decorated with bells, peacock-feathers and balls of coloured wool (Figure 5). Its manufacturing is part of an ancient skill that implies a precise sequence of actions and a particular attention worthy of every "creative" and devotional ritual. Before cutting the wood that will constitute the base of the musical instrument, the Pardhan has to ask for the permission to the predestinate trees and plants. The ritual continues with a purifying pūjā of the house that will welcome the sacred Bana and finishes with a ritual bath of the future performer. In the pūjā,
some rice is offered to the tree and a cock is sacrificed at its feet. The Bana is the mūrti of Bara Deo. The following day the necessary wood is gathered to make the Bana, then it is brought home in order to begin the manufacture of the instrument. The one who plays the Bana is also its manufacturer. From the moment when a Pardhan "receives" his sacred seal, the instrument is kept, wrapped in a cotton bag, inside the house in a hidden place corresponding to the most sacred part.


At present, their stories, their songs, their Bana could no longer sustain them totally. The extension of Hinduism in central India is translated as a case of union where a number of Hindu divinities have entered into the Pardhans’ pantheon: new legends are being invented to connect the tribal and Hindu gods and goddesses. Nevertheless, this type of transformation has contributed to produce an adaptation proceeding for Pardhan people, where the Bana has become less an instrument to play, and more an object to worship, also a result of a significant process of acculturation.

The musical function, although changed, has not vanished, preserving its presence in the rituals of life, in the village festivals, at the expense of the traditional bardic institution. This can still be witnessed in a few villages of Dindori and Mandla districts.

In a social and economic fast and nonstop-moving reality, new myths were born and have been elaborated to try and assimilate the tribal and Hindu beliefs. The result is that the Pardhans have started to develop new aspirations and other means of maintenance taking advantage of the government’s policy of allocating land to tribals. The change has not been uniform and, according to the geographical area, it has taken different forms of achievement: In some regions, many Pardhans have come into possession of land and have started to cultivate it, while others have embraced salaried jobs as laborers or farmers and roads builders. For few families, where the transmission of the songs is maintained in time, a bardic occupation keeps on surviving, even if the level of poverty is very high.

Figure 6

My research in the Dindori district has been a consequence of a meeting with some Pardhans currently living in the city of Bhopal. After they migrated in the late eighties, many of them are employed as guards inside Indira Gandhi Manav Sangrahalya, the Museum of Mankind of Bhopal, a reality that mixes tribal cultures and village living (Figure 6). The new occupations show a relationship with the needs related to an emerging urban development. It seems that the major part of the traditional economic structure to act as pūjāri and bards was incompatible with the economy of the present needs of a sedentary means of sustenance. Certainly, in the past the nomadic pattern of life of the Pardhans did not take into consideration attachment to the land. Cultivation and agriculture as new economic activities seem to have provided an opportunity for many members of the tribe to integrate themselves with the neighboring village areas. The economic ties with the outside world may be attributed to their participation and expansion in the range of
economic relations. Nevertheless, despite this bardic practice continued to wane with the weakening of the Gond kings, and with the process of impoverishment of the Gond tribe, their art somehow remained alive within them. A new generation of artists was born, as a result of an important migration process, which aimed to reformulate their social role and position in the contemporary ādivāsī scenario. Their paintings (until then on village’s walls - Figure 7) seem to want to translate those stories and myths that once were only sung.¹⁷ When the bardic tradition of the Pardhans either lost the means to express themselves through musical notes, or had fewer occasions to do so, it chose to express itself through colours and visual forms. The Pardhan musicians began to nurture their tradition in painting, and not much time has elapsed since the occurrence of this unique event. The stories, instead of finding expression through songs, were manifesting themselves now on canvases (Figure 8).

The aspirations of new generations want the myths to continue to exist re-affirming their identity in a changeable social and economic reality. Nevertheless, at the same time, the Pardhan musician is able to realize that he himself is still member of a particular community and a constituent of an all pervading entity, like his music. This transformation gives materiality to the otherwise immaterial element called time: from the evocation’s vehicle to the visual representation, Pardhan musicians have contributed to renovate the vision of their reality, reinforcing their natural universe as well.

In the ancient Gond-Pardhan relationship, Pardhans remain the custodians of tradition and in the most important occasions, they continue to sing, narrate, hand down and keep alive the collective memory. For the fundamental importance that the Gonds have always attributed to oral transmission, the presence of the Pardhans is required in rituals and sacred ceremonies. In the social texture where the Bana could be heard, and where the Pardhan song found a resonance, the ritual function has intensified its presence. This music, sustaining itself in a difficult and fragile equilibrium, communicates loudly its collective memory and its sense of belonging to a religious and ceremonial universe of Bara Deo. During this process, myths continue to exist and sing the valour of heroic deeds with a glorious past, re-affirming the community’s identity in a social and economic fast moving
reality. Myths are giving visual form to their deities and through this act they are protecting them from the very real danger of oblivion. By way of transformation of the artistic means and language, their position among the ādivāsī traditions and cultures are reaffirmed and strengthened.

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Notes


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2 This action of "refinement" refers to the Sanskrit term of "samskāra".

3 On the general rule establishing a relation between the connection and which it articulates, M. Sahlins observed: "The social distance between the parties determines the mode of exchange". (Sahlins, 1976).

4 The Gonds went northwards toward the Vindhya Mountains after crossing the Narmada River, probably after the 15th century. They especially played a significant role in India’s history between the 15th and 18th centuries. (Behram H. Mehta, 1984, p. 13, p. 59).

5 We can find this reference in Shamrao Hivale’s monography, 1946. Hivale’s work is the first attempt to provide a complete description of this community in the years preceding India’s independence.

6 Gondi is a language of Dravidian origin and, according to W. Grigson (1991), it is closer to Tamil and Kanarese than to Telugu. This observation implies that Gondi speakers lived in zones near to the linguistic areas of Kannada and
Tamil. Nowadays, in Central India the Gondi language remains almost undamaged in the southern part of Chhattisgarh state, especially in Bastar.

7 My inquiry has revealed that the number of Gond brothers can vary from 5, to 6, to 7.

8 For the Pardhans and Gonds, rice is the gift of nature to man. It is a vehicle of divine wishes.

9 Botanical name: *Terminalia Tomentosa*.

10 It is an agricultural traditional winnowing basket.

11 This myth has been reported by Gariba Tekkam, a Pardhan painter, one of our interlocutors during the first ethnographic fieldwork.

12 On this point, we refer to the article of G. Pfeffer, “The Scheduled Tribes of Middle India as a Unit: Problems of Internal and External Comparison”, 1997, where he writes: «The tribes recognize the value of primogeniture, not the purity ordering the caste hierarchy», pp. 3-27.

13 For example, during weddings without agnate relatives of the bridegroom, each couple of adequate age belonging to the bridegroom’s phratry can take the parent’s ritual role.


16 The assistants can be the *Bana* player’s eldest son or brother, or whoever is a kinsman in the male line.

17 Jangarh Singh Syam was the first Pardhan painter. His art took a magical turn when he went to Bhopal in 1981. Jangarh participated in many national and international exhibitions and workshops. He was the model and the source of inspiration for the successive generation of Pardhan artists. (Vajpeyi Udayan and Vivek, 2008).
**ARTICLE**

**DESires of the REcently DEAD: PREliminary OBSerVations on POST-MORTEM POSSESSION AMong the Adi of the Eastern Himalayas**

**BY CLAIRE S. SCHEID**

**Abstract:** Among the Adi of the Eastern Himalayas, the event of a human death is endowed with the potential to violently transform the nature of the ait (‘soul’). While it is hoped that an ait will proceed to the land of the uyu (‘non-human’) and beyond, it is common that the ait will instead become an urum, an unwelcome ‘spirit’ that attempts to continue his participation in society by possessing the bodies of the living. The urum manifests to request material goods, to communicate information, or to claim retribution for perceived injustices. Burial practices that involve corpse mutilation, body isolation, and bone exhumation function as attempts by humans to demarcate boundaries meant to discourage the dead from returning. Urum possessions serve as a supernatural-social space in which it is acceptable for community members to articulate guilt and to acknowledge murder. Adi conceptions of selfhood, social structure, and natural order are elucidated by community enactment of – and response to – articulated desires of the recently dead.

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**Introduction**

The Adi are indigenous to the Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India, a terrain that comprises the tropical Himalayan jungles and the beginning of the high Tibetan peaks. One of a larger network of tribes collectively called the Tani, the Adi have remained in relative isolation and still follow various articulations of a historical religion generally called Donyipolo (‘Sun-Moon’). Donyipolo is a nature-based system of worship with a rich corpus of metaphysical oral narratives (Abang) that trace all existence to a source of nothingness (keyum, kero), from which all natural beings of the universe have descended. Practice of the faith varies significantly among communities and even households, but the shared articulation is an exaltation of the sun (Donyi, female energy) and the moon (Polo, male energy). Donyi and Polo exist in a perpetual divine synthesis, forming a union of complementary powers that is representative of the source of creation. Multiple benevolent tutelary deities function as personified versions of Donyipolo. The most commonly invoked of these are Doying Bote, the deity of wisdom; Dadi Bote, the deity of animals; and Ki:ne Nane, the deity of agriculture.

However, it is the uyu that truly govern Adi habitus. Uyu is an Adi-language word meaning ‘non-human power’, a term that can most simply (though perhaps problematically) be equated with ‘spirit’. Various types of uyu are woven into the fabric of the earth, populating the forests, rivers, mountains, and fires; other uyu inhabit the inanimate, such as hearths, rice grains, and stones. Prominent uyu are understood to be fully engaged in communal lives that are parallel to those of humans, complete with families, dwellings, and genealogies. This is
the case with uyu such as the Epom, the rulers of the jungles – who kidnap, enslave, and kill humans; and Dimu Thaying, the uyu of the high snowy peaks – who, lacking feet, fly through the air to catch Northern travelers. Multiple varieties of uyu populate the Adi world, and much daily life revolves around attempts to propitiate, avoid, or deter these uyu, as they are perpetually prepared to harm humans who incur their wrath. While Donyipolo narratives sometimes attribute the design of one’s ‘fate’ to the superhuman couple Kongki Komang – along with the creator of the Earth, Sedi – these deterministic concepts generally remain abstract; it is, in practice, the uyu that are viewed as the active source of one’s difficulty and fortune.9

At the moment of death, the human ‘soul’ – ait – also becomes an uyu. This uyu then either travels along the ait bedang (‘soul road’) to the next realm11 or becomes an urum uyu, an ait that remains in the land of the living, often enacting the possession12 of human bodies.13

In my community, we believe that people who die – young people who die because of accidents, people who die of unnatural causes – they come back and they torment. They walk around and they do all this nasty stuff. Sometimes they come in dreams, or sudden attacks of the spirits, like this, or if someone falls very ill. They are unsatisfied souls. They are unsatisfied spirits. They come to torture someone. They come to [tell the future].14 It depends upon the spirit. ... One year ago, my best friend died of a car accident with my brother. They both died. Front seat and driver’s seat. After they died, their spirits [possessed] so many people in our village, especially girls. Because the girl’s spirits are littler than boy’s spirits.15

The girls act like how the spirit acted [in life]. And they described how they died and how unsatisfied they are in the world. They used to cry and then go. ... We don’t have any crime investigators, detectives, no? Because those who die narrate their story by coming into another body. So we don’t need any detectives. They just tell who killed them, or how they were killed.16

This article, based on ethnographic material collected on the author’s fieldwork in the Siang districts17 of Arunachal Pradesh in 2013, 2014, and 2015,18 examines graveside rituals and possession narratives in relationship to the communal Adi concepts of selfhood, social structure, and natural order, allowing a progressive exploration of Donyipolo theology. It gives particular attention to the idea of urum possession as the creation of a supernatural-social space in which it is acceptable to articulate guilt and to acknowledge murder.

Urum, The Returning Dead

There is not one codified concept among the Adi pertaining to the constitution of ‘the land of the dead’. All non-human entities (uyu) are understood to exist on a plane that is congruent with the realm of the humans, sharing the same geographical space yet remaining somewhat separated, two ‘layers’ that occupy the same area. This uyu realm is somewhat conflated with the ait’s first destination after death – that of Uyu Among (land of the uyu), itself synonymous with Ait Among (land of the ‘soul’). Sometimes Ait Among is considered to be a particular location in the mountains that is associated with one’s clan – a ‘second level’ to extant geography which members of a given clan are not meant to physically visit while alive. There exists also the concept that each human has an uyu wife or husband in this other realm, the temperament and actions of whom determine one’s welfare in this life. Yet certain religious specialists assert that the ait is ultimately meant to travel on to Donyi Among – the ‘sun place’, an idea that seems to be synonymous with Taleng Among – the ‘sky place’.19 In historical scholarship, such as Roy (1960) and Elwin (1958), there is found
the suggestion that an *ait* becomes the property of the *uyu* who has taken its human (or animal) life and that the land of the dead, therefore, is divisible into realms governed by various *uyu* inhabited by the *ait* of the lives they have claimed. However, many Adi in the present day do not attempt to define the *ait*’s destination after death: ‘Where they go, it’s not very sure’ (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

The particular cause of an unnatural death determines which form of *urum* an *ait* will become. The *ait* of a woman who dies during childbirth – killed by *Nipong* possession or malice – will therefore also become a *Nipong urum*. The *ait* of a human killed by murder or accident – experiencing a *taleng* death – is very likely to become a *taleng urum*. In some communities, even a natural death that is punctuated by incomplete or inadequate burial rituals may transition an *ait* into *urum* form. However, there is also an understanding that behaviours taught to an *ait* during life may impact the same *ait*’s behaviour in the afterlife, should that *ait* eventually become an *urum*. Therefore children are told to follow rules, so that their *ait* may learn the expected social behaviours, ensuring that in the event that they become *urum*, their *urum* will also behave appropriately. It is only on the occasion of an *urum*’s transgressions – not the event of its appearance – that the *urum*’s bones and skull will be exhumed.

An *urum* possession impacts the human in certain stages: 1) irritation in the body parts (particularly between the fingers, toes, or behind the knee); 2) mental agitation; 3) a re-living of the method of death; and 4) complete mental and physical possession, in which the human body begins yawning as the *urum* assumes total control, temporarily displacing the *ait* of the living. The *urum* will identify him- or herself, adopting the mannerisms of the deceased and speaking in the dialect or language of the dead. The *urum* will sometimes describe previous unsuccessful attempts at claiming the body, referring to the possessed human in the third person – ‘when he [the possessed person] was on the bicycle, I tried and he fell off’. He or she might also request specific things that were enjoyed in life, such as certain foods or cigarettes – ‘[I saw them] buying some biscuits and I was hungry’. Sometimes the *urum* want to communicate with their beloved ones or to convey information about their belongings – ‘if my friend wants some … penalty [for his hat that I lost while alive], then I will give that [compensation] in small amount’. Other *urum* seek retribution for perceived injustices, returning with the intent to name their murderer or enact revenge – ‘I was murdered. Those people killed me. I’m not going to leave them. I’m going to kill them.’

Whether or not a given human is likely to be possessed is determined by the strength of his or her gordung *rai*. A ‘strong’ gordung *rai* is equated with the idea of having a strong charisma, an inherent quality that makes it difficult for *uyu* to visually ‘see’ humans.

> If your gordung *rai* is weak then the *urum* can possess you. Also, personality is important. Some people have [charisma]. People like that don’t get possessed. One of my friends, very good friend, his mother – she fell in love. This guy … he died in a bicycle accident. Some people say he was killed by the spirit of another guy. One [ritual specialist] said that this spirit pushed him over the cliff; he killed himself on a big boulder. On his bicycle. So my friend’s mother and this guy – they were going out. After he died, my friend’s mother was very sad, but then slowly she had to carry on [with] life. So one day … the [ritual specialist] told that this guy, who was very influential, he came back and was trying to hit her and kill her. Because she fell in love with this other guy. [So he was trying to kill his ex-girlfriend and possess the new boyfriend.] But [the *uyu*] couldn’t see [the
In the event of possession by an urum, a number of strategies are employed in the hopes of sending the urum away: early attempts often aim to appease the urum by meeting any demands for material goods that they may have. The family of the possessed person may also attempt to make the living body an undesirable host by burning or harming it or by exposing the urum to things or people that the urum disliked during life. Among the Bokar Adi, a piece of grain is pressed into the skin by a nyibu, which is expected to cause the urum to leave. Mass possessions, wherein multiple people within a village are overtaken by a number of different urum, are not uncommon; a given urum will also often shift from one person’s body to another within a community. However, urum can also possess one particular person for an extended period of time, entering and leaving the body repeatedly for many years and thus rendering the person’s life obsolete. When an urum will not leave despite human attempts to appease or dispel the urum, the kebang (village governance council), a miri (ritual specialist), or the relevant families will initiate the exhumation of the bones of the deceased. Depending on the sub-community, this may be followed by the burning of the bones; the public display of the skull, facing towards the sun; or both. Possessions usually cease after these steps have been taken to rid the village of an urum. These exhumations – as well as various burial rituals – are intended to deter the urum. The following section explores Adi rites surrounding the grave.

**Rituals surrounding the Grave**

Adi communities consistently make a distinction between natural death and unnatural death, and it is this division that determines appropriate burial practices. Natural death is primarily considered to be death due to old age. Unnatural death is understood to be death due to childbirth, possession, murder, accident, or any event that leads to the permanent separation of the ait from the body of a human in his youth or prime. Rites surrounding unnatural death are often further divided into Nipong burial (for deaths in childbirth) and taleng burial (for accidents and murder). The corpses of those who die unnaturally are very rarely granted entrance to physical land reserved for the living (i.e., the home) or the naturally dead (i.e., the common graveyard). It is necessary to note, however, that burial rituals vary greatly by sub-community, and the ethnographic data below is in no way inclusive. Following the formalization of the Donyipolo religion, for instance, local ganggings (prayer houses) have attempted to standardize burial processes regardless of cause of death, within one common graveyard. Among the Bokar in the Mechuka area, as well, burial rituals are routine and not determined by the event of death – yet it is the proper observation of these rituals that determines whether an ait becomes a yule (Bokar for urum). In Pasighat and the southern Siang areas, the growth of Christianity and the establishment of mixed religious households have caused tensions pertaining to these rituals (and Donyipolo eschatology in general). Thus, the observations included in this article are intended only to offer a blueprint of these practices and not a specific or exhaustive survey of them.

Following a natural death, the home is descended upon by the village community and the belongings of the dead are distributed to these visitors who call to claim
what they desire. The body remains in the house, often overnight, to be prepared for burial: this preparation begins with the bathing of the corpse. In some communities, the body is dressed in new clothes, in which a slit is cut; if the deceased had been wearing a biying thread then this is also cut. In other areas, the body is buried naked.

In either case, the prepared corpse is next wrapped in a gadu – a white cloth – with certain belongings of the dead placed inside it, usually small personal items like beads, a dao (knife), or a toothbrush. The corpse is next placed in a bamboo basket or frame. A Penge (lament) is performed by a female family member, a specialist, or the community. Sometimes the elderly will prepare their own graves, but generally a group of males who dig the grave in the communal area set aside to serve as the graveyard, located outside of the pator gate. The land around the grave is encircled with rope or thread prior to digging. The body is sometimes buried sitting up, in an L-shape, although in recent decades there has been a rise in the use of coffins. A stick is placed in the earth before burial and removed when the burial is completed; this is done so that the ait of the living men working near the grave will not become trapped inside of it. After leaving the graveyard area, the men wash themselves; this is in part intended so that the dead, while also trying to wash themselves, might realize that they cannot do so, and, thus, that they are dead.

Following this, various taboos are observed by those who interacted with the corpse. In most communities, death is followed by a particular animal sacrifice ceremony (dokgang), during which all community members will partake of meat from animals sent to the other world to be with the dead. Following this, various taboos are observed by those who interacted with the corpse. In most communities, death is followed by a particular animal sacrifice ceremony (dokgang), during which all community members will partake of meat from animals sent to the other world to be with the dead. At a specific point in the future – usually on the one-year anniversary of the death – there will often be a second dokgang. A burial hut is sometimes constructed on top of the grave, where the family will perform garam parnam (‘morning visit’) and bring food and apong (rice beer) offerings. This ritual is carried out for a period between ten days or a month. When the family eventually ends these visits, the door to the hut is sealed (ago payed) and certain rituals are performed for closure (pidey). Within the formalized Donyipolo community – which utilizes markers in a common graveyard near the gangging (prayer hall) – there are also practices meant to deter urum in burial: the printed regulations for the organization specify that ‘a stone 5 kg to 10 kg weight should be placed in the grave [above the] chest/head of the dead person … telling that [until] the stone [becomes] rotten[,] the spirit should not return or visit the living world’ (Rukbo 2002: 15.).

In instances of unnatural death, the body is forbidden from being brought into the household and is on some occasions not moved from the location where the death occurred. A rapid burial is desirable. The same rituals of cleaning, clothing, and gadu-wrappings utilized in natural death are often employed, followed by the smearing of siye (yeast used to ferment apong [rice beer]) over the face or eyes. The body is buried either on the outskirts of the graveyard or is somehow otherwise separated from the normal settlement. In cases of death during childbirth – attributed to Nipong uyu – in addition to the use of siye on the face, the corpse’s eyes are either gouged out or are covered by pieces of iron or by pehak (metallic lid used on a rice pot). The bones of the body may also be broken.

In some communities, there are no markers utilized for graves, thus complicating exhumation on the occasions that it becomes necessary to locate the bones of an urum. When communication with an urum does not successfully stop possessions, the process of digging up the bones – and particularly the
skull – of the deceased is initiated. It is thought that an ait is represented primarily by the head of a skeleton; certain markers on the skull are similarly understood to confirm that an urum has been active. These include hair and teeth remaining on the head and blood along the gum line.

Before digging the head out, we call out [to] all of the villagers in the nighttime, like [a distraction, saying] ‘we will dig some potatoes’ or something like that, not to let the spirit know that we are going to dig his head out. I was in class ten – I don’t exactly remember – but we dug out six or seven heads. [Possession had become] a routine thing; one [person] was [possessed], then a neighbor was [possessed]. ... Two or three neighbors and family members were caught simultaneously, then another one from another’s house. When [the urum] was gone it [came] at another’s house. It was rotating. At that time I didn’t know whose heads [we dug up], but it was found that their hair and teeth were still [on the skull]. We dug them out in the day and hung [the heads] on the bamboo. It is believed that if we let [the urum] know that we [plan] to dig heads, then we believe that the spirits will run away, and they will not stay in the head. We believe that the spirit [normally resides] in the head. ... The skull is kept in a public place.

Certain urum can enact harm without possession of a body, particularly those who had been ritual specialists (uyu miri) in life.

Just recently, in the village of Jongku, near Aalo ... kids were dying, falling sick ... and people believed that this miri was the guy. They saw dreams. They could make out that this was the guy who was doing all this stuff. He had been dead maybe four or five years. ... [A different] miri must have told the villagers [to dig up the body]. The villagers ... especially the youth, they ... dug up the whole thing. The skull. There was blood on the gum line, which shows that someone has been doing bad magic from beyond the grave. So they burned [the bones]. Where they dug out the skull, they place it on top of a bamboo pole, and keep it towards the sun, in the direction of the sun, where the sun comes up. I think it is to signify that Donyi is watching over you and you should be embarrassed.

Sometimes, it falls to the family to exhume the bones, following a general system in which a clan is expected to take responsibility for the actions of an individual. In these cases, the role of exhumation may fall to the kaki (maternal uncle) – the relative generally considered to be responsible for one’s spiritual well-being. If a human death is related to urum and it is particularly expected that one’s ait will become an urum, then the regular burial rituals are passed over and the family may decide that the body is instead to be burned immediately – ‘burning signifies that you are killing the soul also’.

There was a suicide. A young girl, she had some kind of breakup with her boyfriend. And that girl hanged herself. She was studying in class eleven, I guess. This February [2014], one guy from her same clan – he came to [our village in West Siang] to get all of her clothing and blankets and clothes. This guy was working in the army. He took some break and returned back and took some time to claim the baggage of this lady. Then the strange thing happened: this guy was possessed by the spirit of this lady. ... But I don’t think we should be talking about this! She must be listening, huh? ... Anyway ... at the miri ritual on the twentieth [of January 2014], when everybody was sleeping, he took the miri’s sword, and he stabbed himself [in the chest]. When the people woke up, they saw how this happened already. So his parents, of course, sad, but also very angry and embarrassed – a young guy, possessed by the spirit of a young girl – they burned him. Burning signifies that you are killing the soul also.
Graveside rites among the Adi are attempts to demarcate clear boundaries intended to remind the dead that they do not belong in the land of the living. This is made apparent through practices including: 1) gravedigger’s rituals such as washing after burial – intended to show the dead that they can no longer manipulate water, and, thus, are dead; 2) corpse mutilation – intended to damage the physical form so that the dead realize their body no longer functions when they attempt to activate it; and 3) skull display – intended to shame the dead in front of the community and Donyipolo, reminding them that they are transgressing by remaining in human society. This exhumation, in particular, is a final step that is meant to punish the urum – not only for behaving outside of expected norms by becoming an urum but also for violating the ‘acceptable’ behaviours of such an urum. Not all urum are considered to be equally malevolent: while some remain for many years, possessing multiple people, others return only once in order to convey a necessary message.

The following section will explore the various manifestations of urum possessions to examine how the urum function as regulators of social conscience: to settle debts meant to be paid; to communicate information about lost materials; and to allow for acknowledgement of – and even culpability in – violence and murder.

**Urum Possession as Social Conscience**

The person who died had gone fishing. He was alone at that time. He had taken one of his friend’s caps (dumlup) and he wore his local ornaments. After that, he put the hat and the ornaments inside a stone, inside a gap, after reaching the river. So, he threw the net and he slipped in the river. He drowned; the net got caught. The person was taken by the undertow. He died that way. After that, he didn’t come back from the river – and the whole village searched for him, the search party, but they didn’t find him. After two or three days he was found, his body. The ornaments were not with him. So, the villagers thought the ornaments were lost in the river. After one year, he possessed someone. A man was possessed by his urum. And he said, ‘I’m not coming to take anything from you, I’m here for nothing, but I want to tell the incident. I don’t need any meat from you, not even a bone from you’. The people asked him, ‘what did you do to your friend’s hat?’ And he said, ‘if my friend wants some fine, penalty, then I will give that [compensation] in small amount’. People asked, ‘where are your ornaments?’ And he said, ‘I wear my ornaments, but I wasn’t wearing when I was fishing. I put them in one rock in the gap.’ And he said, ‘you go and search in that gap. You can find that my ornaments are still there. You can go and take them.’ After that, the voice of the man left, and he left the body. The villagers went and found the ornaments. This is the proof of urum.

In this narrative, the urum returns only once, in order to convey to the community the location of his ornaments and offer to settle an outstanding debt to a friend for the loss of his hat. Similarly, in a narrative told in Upper Siang, 2015, a pre-teen girl was possessed, on only one occasion, by the urum of a woman who had died in a car crash from a village several hours away. Neighbors report that she immediately asked for a phone and dialed the mobile number of the deceased woman’s husband to inform him of the location of some money, a narrative presented, as well, as ‘proof’ of urum possession. Without attempting in this article to address the ‘authenticity’ of possession, urum manifestations within the community might potentially be viewed as a delicate, ritualized
method through which the living can talk about the dead and, particularly, the belongings of the dead. In the case of natural death, as described in the previous section, the deceased’s belongings are immediately distributed among visitors and very personal items are buried alongside the corpse. Unnatural death upends this ritual and therefore urum possession allows the community space to complete this process nonetheless.

Ururn possession also allows for individual community members to acknowledge murder, pointing out the location of corpses. If this scenario is viewed sociologically – as separate from any phenomena – the system would reveal itself to be a human admission of guilt, a concession that one within the society has knowledge of violence that he or she wishes to share with the public without repercussion. Ururn also possess with the intent to name their murderers.

In addition to serving as a supernatural space in which it becomes socially acceptable to admit information that would otherwise be viewed as incriminating, urum possession is also a way of communicating knowledge of murder that would be socially taboo to speak of in other scenarios. In an Upper Siang village – here, Village A – there was recently a man who was causing significant problems for the functioning of the societal system. It was decided that taking him to state court was problematic because it would take such a long time. So the collective village, via kebang (indigenous governance council), decided to recruit a relative to kill him by hitting him in the head. Soon, members of the neighboring village – here, Village B – came to say that his urum had possessed in their community, saying, ‘My uncle killed me with an axe to the back of my head. They had given me wine and then he hit me in the back of the head with an axe.’ Village A acknowledged that this had been the case. No action was taken on this matter by either village population, because Village A had made a collective decision to kill this man, which Village B accepted.

However, through this possession and Village B’s communication of this possession to Village A, Village B acknowledged that they were aware of the internal decision to kill this man that had been carried out in Village A. Therefore urum possession serves as a way to hold a group accountable for community
violence, as well, without direct accusation or the need to respond to direct accusation.

The recurring *urum* – one who continues periodically to possess – is often the victim of a tragic situation that is viewed as shameful. This is epitomized in the description of the *urum* of a student who was killed by his brothers and then, some years later, began to possess. This *urum* is considered to still be potentially active in Aalo; his actions never led to exhumation and thus it is understood that he might continue to possess. Below a young man discusses the possession of his grandmother. The first extract is from an interview taken while sitting with her, with the man describing her narrative in his words; the second is his description of the event of possession from an interview taken the previous year.

1. [My grandmother] knew this guy when he was alive. He was studying in a town forty kilometres away. He was studying there and going back to [his home village], so he could ask his elder brothers for some money to buy the school [books], because his exams were approaching. And he went there and everything [the murder] happened. Maybe [his *urum*] is still around [now]. ... The police came and interrogated the brothers. They didn’t say they did it, but then after lots of rigorous interrogation, they accepted. Then [the community] saw the dead body. It was down in a swamp. [The brothers] didn’t even bury the dead body. There was one guy – he came here once, almost crying, totally disturbed, along with his wife. They came here [to the grandmother’s house] – this *urum* [of this student] – had possessed his wife and he brought her here. So, maybe this was the first time that the *urum* saw [my grandmother]. ... When [the wife] started speaking, it was this guy, and this *urum* said that, ‘I was at Patum [bridge] and then suddenly I saw these people going to a shop, and they were buying some biscuits and I was hungry. They didn’t give me any.’ After a couple of days, the possession [of the grandmother] occurred.

2. My aunt’s son was sleeping [next to] my grandmother [when he was young]; my grandmother loved him very much. And this guy, he came out of the room, told my uncle and auntie, ‘Grandmother’s laughing very strangely’. [Expletive.] And then they went in. She was sitting on the bed. She had this strange look – she was laughing like anything. When I heard this story I got goosebumps. Still now I have, when I say this story. But, yeah, it was the spirit of this guy, he told that he was the guy, he’s this guy, and he was killed by the brothers in such and such a way. He wanted something to eat. This guy was hungry. My uncle gave her something.

When interviewed about her experience of this possession, the grandmother responded, ‘I didn’t know about it. People told me.’ (Interview, Aalo, 2015).

The manifestations of *urum* allow for the burial process to be completed, compensating for rituals that were not carried out because of the cause of death. They serve as an arena for discussion of material objects that belonged to the deceased. *Urum* possession, viewed sociologically, is also a cultural space in which a community member can admit knowledge of murder – culprit identity, body location – without being subject to personal scrutiny, as their body is not understood to be, at that moment, controlled by their own *ait*. The perpetually returning *urum* represents societal guilt for a tragedy that cannot be resolved, even by justice; in such cases, the *urum* is not driven away, as his or her ongoing possessions are a form of shared social penance for malignancy within the community. The variegated role of post-mortem possession among the Adi allows for a progressive exploration of Donyipolo theology, as it reveals otherwise inarticulated information about the Adi conceptions of selfhood, social structure, and natural order.
Selfhood, Social Structure, and Natural Order

Selfhood: Donyipolo is a religion with little to no belief in reincarnation that instead professes that each human is home to an independent ait. Donyipolo also espouses a solid continuation of an ait’s identity, whether that ait is in a state of life or of death. However, a continuation of identity (individuality) in the liminal urum state does not necessarily equate with a continuation of intention (one’s ‘human nature’; ‘inherent character’); the appearance of the urum is still usually considered predatory and threatening, however adored or respected its living counterpart was previously. In other words, the dead are rarely welcome back. Person X may return from the dead as an urum and still carry the identity trappings of his former living self (name, heritage, memory) – but his personality may be drastically altered: the urum of Person X may be viewed as the dangerous doppelganger or ‘evil twin’ of the Person X who once lived. In a lineage-centric society such as the Adi, that the construction of identity is primarily centered on clan is not unanticipated. But this epistemological separation between identity and intention in Adi comprehensions of selfhood should be noted. Simultaneously, a reliable ‘selfhood’ that connects the ait to the body is not guaranteed for the living, as one’s own ait may be uprooted from the body by an ait of the dead (urum) and is somewhat dependent on the strength of one’s gordung rai. Thus an ait within a living human cannot necessarily be secure within the physical form. The post-mortem ait (urum) holds active agency – it can claim the body that it chooses – but even in these cases, the ait is defined by its identity rather than its intention. The event of death has determined its intention: however kind a woman was in life, for instance, once she dies in childbirth, she will be a Nipong urum, and, thus, her ait has become malevolent; however friendly a man was in human form, if he dies a violent death, he may become a cruel taleng urum. Because, within Adi ontology, accidents and even murder are still viewed as the result of actions taken by uyu, the ait is always subject to the manipulation of the (super)natural world around it, and while identity may be continuous, it is ultimately still the uyu that determine an ait’s intention and character.

Social Structure: Even while the post-mortem ait (urum) operates separately from the body, after death the body still sustains unbreakable ties to the ait. Corpse mutilation and the exhumation of bones of troublesome urum are practices which are intended to wound or dispel the ait (that has become an urum) by damaging its corporeal mirror. At the same time, during life, an ait’s connection the body is tenuous; foreign urum have the ability to uproot someone else’s ait from their body in order to take possession. A contradictory hierarchy arises, in which the ait of the dead – exiled from the community due to their urum status – are yet considered to be more adept at controlling a random body than the ait usually encased in that body. Thus possessions are considered to be a source of shame, not only for the family of urum who are possessing the living (thus behaving outside of social expectations for the behaviour of the ‘peaceful’ dead) but also for the family of those who are possessed (reflecting that the ait of those being possessed are able to be overturned by the ait of those doing the possessing). Having found a suitable human body to possess, the requests of the urum are almost universally granted, and the ‘testimonies’ of those who return for retributory reasons – for instance, to ‘name’ their murderer – are considered legally valid. In this way, the transition from human to urum changes an ait’s social categorization from communally internal to external – they lose social status (as defined
by Pentikäinen\textsuperscript{88}) but gain social power (even counterpower, as defined by Graeber\textsuperscript{89}).

**Natural Order**: Adi rituals surrounding the grave attempt to demarcate the realms of the living and the dead, but consistently fail to do so, as the dead still return – highlighting the difference between ‘social expectations’ (that is, the way the dead are supposed to behave: not come back) and ‘natural expectations’ (that is, the way it is expected that the unnaturally dead will behave regardless: remain in the community).\textsuperscript{90} There are further expectations for the behaviour of the dead who do return, and, if these are transgressed, the only remaining thing tying the ait to its former humanity (the body) will be damaged or shamed (through exhumation and skull display). The ait is active independent of the body, yet the moment of death – upon which an ait becomes an uyu,\textsuperscript{91} either journeying on or remaining in this world – is a catalyst that can drastically alter the intention of the ait (though, as above, never its identity) – yet intention is always the result of the uyu to which the ait has fallen victim. Corpse mutilation, therefore, may be viewed as a secondary victimization of those who die unnaturally by falling prey to these malevolent forces. It is further understood that some urum\textsuperscript{92} will join with the (never-human) uyu to fight against humankind, engaging directly in the central battle of Adi existence: human versus non-human – which is equivalent in this context to human versus nature.\textsuperscript{93} Urum possession is a continuation of the core tenets of Adi ontology: Nature is threatening and humans are perpetually attempting to survive while living within a dangerous system that desires to consume them. Conversely, ‘human nature’ has little place in Adi conceptions of the ait: one may always have one’s name, in life or afterwards, but the body – while linked to the soul – is transient, and after one’s death very little of one’s selfhood remains. Selfhood and social structure are both defined by the manner of death – the way in which nature has, or has not, claimed an ait.

**Conclusion**

This paper has tried to approach urum possession through balancing two perspectives: one that looks at the ‘supernatural’ incidences of urum possession with what might be called ‘acceptance of phenomena’ – an academic neutrality towards the non-human that allots the dead, and their desires, space in which they can be considered intellectually valid; and one that proceeds with a prioritization of sociological analysis that aims to look through ‘supernatural’ events in order to identify the collective manifestations of human behaviour within a society.

It has addressed material with attention to the former with an eye towards the work of Nyce, Talja, and Dekker (2015), who have eloquently described the challenges facing the construction of informant and anthropologist reality when dealing with ‘non-existent things’ within the Western academic construction of reality; with attention to the work of Tafjord (2015, 2013) that illuminates the need to discuss indigenous cultures without creating false links between them as scholars; and with an awareness of the claims for a more inclusive, identity-specific call for site-specific ontology (following Descala [1992, 2013] and Viveiros del Castro [1998]). In doing so, it is has not aimed to place Adi systems of ‘mediumship’ or ‘possession’ in direct conversation with Tibetan Buddhist ‘oracle’ or ‘shamanship’ rituals in neighboring communities – and, in the author’s opinion – such parallel studies would only be relevant insofar as they might trace the transmission of praxis.
Sociologically, Adi post-mortem possession has been also analyzed as the cultural creation of a supernatural-social space that allows living people to voice their thoughts about death, the belongings of the dead, and the desires of the dead – particularly those who have been denied the appropriate rituals surrounding death. This can be seen as a system of compensation, perhaps, wherein these rituals can yet be completed: hungry urum compensate for the absence of burial dokgang by eating cookies; vengeful urum compensate for kebang governance systems pertaining to their method of death by naming their killers; recurring urum remind the community of a shared sense of shame, birthed from grisly family murder that impacts the clan and its extensions. It is also revealed anthropologically that ideas of Adi selfhood exist only within the trappings of identity: the intention or behaviour of an urum may yet turn against humans, contributing their own part on the side of nature against humans in the persistent, primordial battle. Among the Adi, rituals remain somewhat regulated for the dead: the ‘immobilized deceased’ are granted agency through the institutionalized space allotted for them to articulate their desires.

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References


Notes

1 Indigenous Adi governing bodies such as the Agom Kebang (the literary society) and the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang (the religious organization) utilize the term ‘tribe’ in official documents. It is not locally problematic as it is in some parts of the subcontinent. See Blackburn 2003 (p. 1, fn. 1) for a similar defense of this term in an Arunachali context.

2 Many Adi still live in rural dolung (‘villages’; ‘places’) across the Siang districts. However, today many cars and motorbikes are able to reach isolated dolung, and over the past ten years there
has been a large increase in mobile phone use. The influence of Christianity and Hinduism is strongly felt in towns such as Pasighat and Aalo. Missionary activity had different impacts in various Adi communities. As a response, Donyipolo has recently undergone a novel religious ‘formalization’ that has included the introduction of prayer halls, deity iconography, and religious texts (see Chaudhuri 2013 and Scheid 2015).

3 In this work, Donyipolo is approached as an indigenous religion warranting representation of its own ontology (following Descola 2013, Descola 1992, Viveiros de Castro 1998) and this paper proceeds from the position of vernacular theorizing (see Briggs 2008).

4 There is not one unified method of transcribing the Adi language. Here, I attempt to approximate basic phonetic representation and thus do not indicate double vowel sounds in Adi words unless necessary for clarification.

5 These three deities are the most prominent of the new iconographical depictions that have been born from the revival mentioned in the preceding footnote. There are multiple other deities that are also included within the Adi pantheon, such as Gumin Soyin (the deity of the home); Yidum Bote (the deity of wind); and Bomong Mone (the deity of song and dance), and others.

6 This was noted as well by Ramirez, who recalls Elwin in his assessment while making the point more generally about the Tani tribes: ‘the men hunt the animals, the wiyu [Uyu] hunt the men’ (Ramirez 2005: 4).

7 The uncritical equation between uyu and ‘spirit’ is non-specific: uyu is a stronger and more pervasive force in the Adi world than the Western term ‘spirit’ usually denotes. The word is used both for power (that one can hold) and for an ‘entity’.

8 Roy has referred to what he views as a distinction made among the Adi between the inert and mobile; the inert still harbor ‘the vital force is subdued by an inertia which makes them look like things bereft of life’ yet simultaneously hold a potential for activation (1960 [1997], 242).

9 The presentation of uyu can be divided into the categories of genealogical, natural, post-mortem, and companion, yet all have the same source and there is significant categorical overlap (Scheid, forthcoming).

10 ‘Soul’ is not truly an appropriate translation for ait: there is not understood to be an assured ‘essence of self’ within the ait as is generally understood in the Abrahamic comprehensions of ‘soul’.

11 There is not one generally accepted description of the ‘land of the dead’. This concept is further explored in the following section of the paper.

12 This article adopts Firth’s definition of ‘spirit possession’ as ‘a form of trance in which behaviour [and] actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of a control of his behaviour by a spirit normally external to him’ (1959: 141). Firth draws distinctions between ‘spirit possession’, ‘spirit mediumship’, and ‘shamanism’ based, in part, on the amount of control the possessed is able to exert over the possessing entity.

13 Possessions usually occur within a few years after death of the urum; almost always within one or two generations.

14 Urum who possess laypeople do not generally tell the future. This occurs mainly among uyu ko (uyu children), referring to uyu who are kept by uyu miri, one type of ritual specialist. In some cases, but not all, the term uyu ko refers to the urum of dead children in particular, but in others it implies only urum kept by miri, whatever the ‘age’ of the urum. Uyu miri may also have particular urum associated with them. However, the relationship between the miri and the urum is quite different from the generalized system of post-mortem possession (between laypeople and urum) that this paper addresses.

15 This concept is related to the idea that the strength of one’s gordung rai – an intangible quality of ‘charisma’ – determines a human’s susceptibility of being possessed or otherwise harmed by uyu.

16 Interview, Pasighat, 2014.

17 Field sites include the following places in the Siang districts: Aalo town, Ayeng village, Boleng
town, Boying village, Damro village, Jomlabori village, Jomoh village, Kinne village, Komkar (upper and lower) village, Mariyang town, Mechuka town, Mirku village, Napid village, Pangkeng village, Parong village, Pasighat town, Pessing village, Rani village, Riga village, Siluk village, Siying village, Simong village, Tebo village, and Tuting town. Fieldwork was also conducted among Adi communities in Doimukh, Itanagar, Naharlagun, and Rono Hills in Papumpare district.

Audio and/or video recordings exist as reference for this material; on the occasions that informants did not consent to recording, such participants can be located and consulted freely by contacting the author.

The term taleng – meaning ‘sky’ – is also a word used to refer to unnatural and inauspicious deaths that create taleng urum, an association that possibly has its origins in burial practices such as those still enacted in Northern communities. Among the Bokar Adi, it is still espoused that those who die young are compensated by being offered a direct passage to Taleng Among and are, thus, buried sitting up: ‘Since they died of an accident, they didn’t deserve to die. So now their life will be better there at Taleng Among’ (Interview, Mechuka, 2015). However, the exact link between the linguistic choice of taleng in the sense of ‘unnatural death’ and taleng in the sense of ‘sky’ is yet to be determined.

In the mid-twentieth century, Elwin (1958) documented that among the Bori Adi in the North, the ait was believed to travel in death to the realm of the uyu who had taken its human life, an idea revisited by Choudhury (1971), who writes: ‘For instance, when a man meets his end by drowning, his soul goes to the uyu [uyu] of the river. A man, dying in battle, goes to a place called Taleng [author’s note: telang means ‘sky’] in the sky. Children after death go to Dolie-among. The Boris have a strange belief that a man, killed by a snake, turns into a spirit-snake in the world of the dead. A man, killed by a tiger or bear, will turn into a spirit-tiger or spirit-bear in the other world’ (Choudhury 1971: 97). For a reproduction of a Bori myth recorded by Elwin about Awing-Kare, who was pierced by the long tusks of a dead pig and then lived among the pigs, see Choudhury (1971: 98; as originally recorded by Elwin in 1958). Roy (1960) observed a similar eschatology: ‘After death the soul of a man goes to the domain of the spirit who has been the instrument of his death. ... Those killed in forests become the subjects of Epom and Miris go to a special district ruled by Boki and Bogo’ (Roy 1960: 251). Further, Roy notes that animals who die in the jungle also stay after death as subjects of the uyu that claimed them; but animals who are sacrificed join the herd of the ait to whom they have been sacrificed (Roy 1960: 252-253).

The Nipong uyu, associated with plantain trees, target only females and are considered by some to be themselves urum.

Such as among the Bokar Adi in the Northern mountains (2015).

Regunathan equates these familial similarities with indigenous conceptions of genetics (2001: 145).

This is also the case concerning a group of tourists who supposedly died on their way to Mechuka in the high Himalayas. Different narratives told across the Siang districts describe how the group of tourists possessed the whole of an isolated Adi village to carry out this ‘post-death narration’. Other narratives describe how the ‘possessed’ can speak in foreign tongues: a man in Pasighat described witnessing a young Adi girl become possessed and speak excellent English (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

As recounted by a man who had interacted with an urum who was describing previous possession attempts (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

As recounted in the tale of a murder victim who possessed several people, discussed later in this paper (Interview, Aalo, 2015).

As recounted in the tale of a murder victim who returned only to give information about lost possessions, discussed later in this paper (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

As in the case of a young woman killed in Aalo who possessed in order to identify her killers, discussed later in the paper (Interview, Aalo, 2014).

Among the Adi, the word kaanam, meaning ‘to see’ [double vowel used so as the term is
distinguished from *kanam*] is used both to describe possessions and visual sight. It is understood that when an *uyu* sees a human first, then the *uyu* can cause harm.

30 Interview, Rono Hills, 2015.

31 This can include the throwing or tossing rice, *apong* (rice beer), or a cigarette, into the air or sometimes out the window. Describing his own experience with *urum*, a lawyer recounts that he had had a feast and he sent his brother to drop someone off at home. Enroute, his brother ended up in hospital. He then talked to this brother in the hospital and the brother was possessed by an *urum*. The lawyer calmly asked the *urum* what he wanted and he said a cigarette, so he threw a cigarette out the window. In the words of another man: ‘It’s not like we give something to you. We do a small ritual, maybe take some, most common thing I’ve seen is take some rice. Okay take this, *apong*, etc. I’ve also heard spirits who want to have this tobacco. People went and throw that out. ... [If I came back as an *urum*], I would ask for a chicken.’ The *urum* is then believed to smoke the ‘spirit’ of the cigarette – one gives them a cigarette ‘here’ and they take it ‘there’.

32 These can include burning with hot irons, hanging over a fire, covering it with human feces.

33 Sometimes to make *urum* go away, the community will try and surround the *urum* with people that the *urum* didn’t like in life. An Adi man based in Itanagar once visited his home town near Pasighat where there lived a man he used to scold. The visiting man went to someone else’s home and an unknown girl inexplicably said to him: ‘go away, I don’t like you’. He slapped her. The family explained that it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but rather the girl was possessed by an *urum*. The man said, ‘let me sit with her a time and maybe the *urum* won’t come’. It was believed to be the *urum* of the man that the visiting man used to scold. This method worked in getting the *urum* to leave.

34 *Nyibu* is a ritual specialist; the term is more commonly associated with the Tagin and Nyishi, but in this case, due to geographical location, was used to refer to the Adi *miri*.

35 ‘Sometimes they all possess together and there will be one leader. You target the head leader’ (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

36 ‘*Urum* possess many time at the school. The person who possessed my sister – he possessed [for] four or five years. [A victim] couldn’t complete his studies. Not continuously – after one, two months – the person will not be normally functioned for four years maybe. You never know what will happen’ (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

37 There are multiple types of *miri* and it is inaccurate to describe any as ‘shaman’. In the words of a Milang Adi academic: ‘Our society has very limited institutionalization of certain practice, even in terms of *miri*. If there is a possession, it’s not always like possessed [equates to] oh, go call *miri*. It’s not like oh, I’m sick, go call doctor. It’s not an immediate reaction. The question will start from the family and [they will] try to deal with [the possession] first, there. And if there is no help then [they] look for some other ways. And that’s where you look for *miri*. It’s not like possession, oh, *miri*. *Miri* is not an immediate binary of possession. ... It’s not [always] necessary to find the family of the *urum*. In fact, no one wants to go pursue them, because they are so sad that their family has turned into *urum*’ (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

38 For a description of ‘natural death’ as a ‘boon’ and its origins in Minyong narrative, see Roy 1960: 250-251.

39 Whether certain illnesses also constitute ‘natural death’ is not entirely clear.

40 On this topic, Roy writes that burials occur ‘a few days after death’ (to facilitate the arrival of relatives). He notes that the body is wrapped in a sheet and ‘is made to lie on one side with its knees touching the chin’. He adds that leaves and branches are used to line the grave, and wood planks are then placed on top of the corpse (Roy 1960: 251).

41 See Scheid 2015 for an overview of this formalization.

42 Donyipolo formalization material published by *ganggings* that includes a reference that natural
and unnatural death should be engraved similarly reflecting normal death (Rukbo 2002: vii).

43 As part of the recent DPYK revival, certain plots are sometimes set aside near ganggings for burial. These require now that the deceased was a DPYK member. Cement grave markers are still not used but ‘a small symbol of Donyipolo Yelam Kebang may be erected with wooden or cement plank on the spot. Temporary hut of leaf to cover the grave may be permitted. The graveyard of Donyiplo Yelam should be a free gift by the Kebang of the village unit’ (see Rukbo 2002: 14).

Prominent men (such as Rukbo) are often buried on their own land (as permitted; see Rukbo 2002: 15). Rukbo is buried in a concrete hut built his own property; as of 2014, the temporary leaf burial hut of his wife stood beside this.

44 In Northern areas, if burial ritual isn’t carried out, this is blamed for the reappearance of the urum. The proper Ramo Adi term is yule, used to describe the ‘most common’ urum who troubles everyone. The proper ritual following death is structured thusly: cut a mithun, at least one mithun, and feed the village; give apong (rice beer), on the day of death. If one doesn’t have mithun, then one pig should be sacrificed for food. If one cannot afford a pig, then the yule may return. Therefore, it is often the poor that return, those who led lives of poverty while in human form. Two categories of yule are gire (those who die while brothers are fighting) and rumle (the yule by default – one who becomes a yule due to inappropriate burial ritual). There is an additional category of rumtur referring to a living ghost, who may himself still be physically alive.

45 One Adi man in Pasighat told a story wherein his grandmother died. She had been a Christian and the Christian community was very possessive of the body; she had dug her own grave but they protested when the Adi (non-Christian) man tried to pick up and place flowers because he wasn’t baptized and thus wasn’t allowed to lay anything on the coffin. This man’s kaki (maternal uncle) was a former pastor and later that evening there was an argument between the kaki and the pastor with the pastor siding with the Adi man campaigning for his right to grieve in his own religion (Donyipolo) alongside the Christians (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

46 A story currently circulates in Pasighat about a Christian woman in Upper Siang who was possessed by the urum of another Christian Adi. She would possess and talk about how she cannot go to her Ait Among because her road is different (than non-Donyipolo converts). The family did not want to talk to anyone not Christian (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

47 Material presented here is based primarily on Minyong and Pasi rituals as enacted in contemporary East and West Siang.

48 Sometimes the body remains in the house longer. In the case of Talom Rukbo, leader of the Donyipolo reformation, his corpse was kept inside for several days following his passing (see O. Rukbo in Borang, ed. 2013: 17-19).

49 Here, in settlements in and around the town of Pasighat, 2015.

50 The biying is worn around the hip and is, in the present-day, most commonly worn by female children.

51 As in Adi areas around Aalo, 2015.

52 In the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang Directives (Notation 12), a human is also buried with a Donyipolo flag. Regunathan describes the burial of a Tani man who was buried with his car (2001: 146). He also describes how two ‘gatekeepers’ monitor human carriage of items and replace human clothes with ‘the soul barks of trees’ and plants (2001: 145).

53 In some Minyong communities, Penge consists of wailing at the graveside, with a female family member saying Person X was good at this – he left without doing y and z, etc. Divination is sometimes done (e.g., chicken liver) to make sure the ait journey is on its way. However, there is simultaneously the belief that the ait remains in his or her human nature for two to three days immediately following death, perhaps returning to his or her house; this, ritual, too, is included in Donyipolo Directives (12), understood ‘to help send the ait on its way through eatable offerings’ after its visit on the third day (Rukbo 2002: 12). Much has been written on contemporary lamenting; this article draws on the idea of lament as a tool to understand historical faith as in
It is the community in recent DPYK formalization (Rukbo 2002: 12-13).

54 Graveyard areas are not considered particularly ‘haunted’ in the Western sense of the word, although in Pessing Village boys dare each other to go inside as a rite of proving ‘manhood’ (Interview, Pessing, 2015).

55 On the way into and out from villages there are pator (gates) constructed like frames over the road to keep out uyu from neighboring villages. This pator is used for communication: different materials and/or dead animals will be hung on this gate to communicate to others that there is a certain type of uyu or illness within the village.

56 In many areas this is considered to be the ‘historical’ method of burial; this is also still the case among the Ramo Adi near Mechuka and in some Minyong communities.

57 This is related to the idea of gamsi: if a child drops something in a hole, then this can make him sick and waste away until the hole is dug up and the thing taken out. Gamsi is also caused when someone loves someone very much yet is separated from him or her (e.g., a grandmother longing for grandchild).

58 This seems to follow a Membas tradition of the far North.

59 The front door won’t be entered in but rather people will go around to the back of the house (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

60 Animals wandering in jungle go to the uyu that killed them; sacrificed animals go to the herd of the human for which they have been sacrificed.

61 See Roy also for description of the small ‘hut-like structures’ that are erected and filled with rice and apong (rice-beer) and remembrance fires and tabooos for gravediggers (Roy 1960: 252). Rukbo’s Directive Principles of Donyipolo says: ‘... the grieved family members visit the burial [hut] of the dead person with food items to offer at burial hut for 10-30 days’ (Rukbo 2002: 12).

62 In the case of a student from West Siang studying in Delhi, a young man around 25 years of age suffered an unnatural death after being returned to Arunachal due to illness. There was speculation that he had upset the river gods; he fished often with dynamite. When he was ill he kept asking for his mother and saying ‘we still have two dynamite left’. Usually when someone dies in this manner, they are not taken into the house but in this case he was, because of his mother’s grief. Locals anticipated that he because of this man’s disturbing death, coupled with the unorthodox burial methods, he would come back as an urum.

63 Because of their gruesome nature, the witnessing of Nipong burial rituals is cited as one example that causes conversion away from Donyipolo. Sometimes it is believed that the Nipong has entered the body of the newborn baby. Burial rituals for babies – who are understood not yet to have achieved ‘personhood’ among the Adi – vary from those of adults and often involve hanging the baby in a basket on a tree branch. See Scheid forthcoming.

64 Understood to imply, along with blood on the gumline, that the urum is actively possessing or causing harm.

65 Interview, Pasighat, 2015.

66 Some miri can separate ait from body during life, ‘switching’ bodies with animals, or traveling on the Uyu Bedang (‘non-human road’) through Uyu Among (‘non-human place’).

67 Interview, Itanagar, 2014.

68 According to a young Milang Adi female, the clan takes on the responsibility for the actions of the individual. For instance, if a person continues to steal, then perhaps the clan would cut off his hands because they are causing ongoing damage to the clan through the constant reimbursement required by the clan (Interview, Pasighat, 2015.)

69 Interview, Rono Hills, 2015.

70 Interview, Rono Hills, 2014.

71 Adi fishing nets are bound to the human at the wrists.

72 Adi fishing nets are heavy, weighing seven or eight kilograms.
In this manner, the urum was offering compensation for the item his human counterpart lost during life.

Milang narrative (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

This follows Oring’s second type of ‘rhetoric of truth’, in which an event is described anecdotally but it is understood that the reader will place in order the (often-supernatural; ‘beyond-fact’) pieces of a story to provide veracity to a narrative (see Oring 2008: 125).

Interview, Aalo, 2014.

Interview, Pasighat, 2015, about Upper Siang. (It is unclear what became of the urum.)

No one seemed to remember the exact dates; this is a repeated narrative with a shifting time-frame.

Interview, Aalo, 2015.

Interview, Itanagar, 2014.

Regunathan (citing Haimendorf) seems to explore some idea of ‘rebirth’ among the Adi, but this is not widespread in contemporary Adi viewpoints. The exception is among miri – uyu miri – who might ‘keep’ the deceased relatives of spirit helpers of previous generations or may view themselves as incarnations of previous powerful miri (as in Pasighat and Mechuka, 2015).

Choudhury (1971), drawing on Fürer-Haimendorf, suggested that there may be a concept of multiple ideas of ‘essence’ among the Adi; however, contemporary ethnographic data casts some doubt on this point and this may be due to multiple possible interpretations in older transcriptions (e.g., Fürer-Haimendorf’s recorded miri chants, 1958).

In his seminal work on rites of passage, van Gennep divided the stages of separation from one world to another as preliminal rites; liminal (threshold) rites; and post-liminal rites (21).

There are select occasions where the urum seem to appear with the soul purpose of balancing their own ‘karma’ or with good intentions for the family (i.e., describing where to find lost objects; sending good wishes to relatives).

Discussing the difference between the self in life and the self as urum: ‘there may be a good [Person X] here; a bad [Person X] there.’ (Interview, Pasighat, 2014) / Even a good ait – through its manifestation – might become an urum. Urum behaviour, when they possess somebody, and their account, defines if their urum is more harmless or more dangerous.

Particularly as it exemplifies the dangers of conflating unique indigenous ideas such as ait to their rough ‘equivalents’ in Western academia. That is to say, in a Judeo-Christian context, a man’s ‘soul’ is not assumed to become malevolent if he dies in a car crash, whereas an Adi man’s ait may be considered to do so under the same circumstances. The term ‘soul’ is imprecise in this academic usage.

Pentikäinen (1969) defines the ‘dead without status’ as ‘those among the dead whose admission to the community of the departed has for one reason or another been unsuccessful. Such dead persons are thus lacking a position or status in the twin community of the living and the dead and are in a permanent transition phase’ (which Hanvio, as cited the same article, refers to as ‘placeless souls’) (Pentikäinen 1969: 92). Working in a Scandinavian context, Pentikäinen writes that the ‘exceptional character of these dead [without status]’ is characterized by 1) a burial that is without normal rituals or includes the isolation of the body; 2) a lack of community interest in assisting the dead who has ‘died badly’; and 3) a comprehension that one who has experienced a ‘bad death’ will not succeed in his attempts to reach the land of the dead (Pentikäinen 1969: 98).

In typical revolutionary discourse a “counter-power” is a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias. ... All societies are to some degree at war with themselves’ (Graeber 2004: 24 -25). The urum are understood to have their own governmental and university systems that seek, in part, to bring harm to the living.

Hence, a two-tiered understanding of ‘expected behaviour’: one in which urum are not expected to return; yet one in which urum are nonetheless expected to return. Further, once within society,
there are ‘expected’ behaviours for the *urum* as well as the potential violation of these expectations, further behaviours which override these norms.

91 ‘Ait and *uyu* are not the same. When a person dies, his *ait* becomes *uyu*. When you go to sleep, your *ait* will activate, roam here and there. Although you may be sleeping here in Boleng, in your dreams you will be going back to Ireland, on the flight, something like that. Your *ait* is going to visit there’ (Interview, Boleng, 2015.)

92 *Nipong urum* join other *Nipong urum*; some *taleng urum* are thought to join *Epom*.

93 A state of indigenous ‘animism’ is therefore not solely defined by the ‘showing of respect’ to nature out of awareness, as some current definitions may suggest (e.g., Harvey’s *Animist Manifesto*); it may be done, as well, out of fear.

94 The author’s term for the construction of a social space wherein the ‘supernatural’ is acknowledged as valid, as are the claims of those make claims within this space.
**The Gendering of Possession in Eastern Gujarat**

**By Gregory D. Alles**

**Abstract:** According to oft repeated anthropological truisms, possession phenomena are characteristic of women more than of men and the prevalence of possession among women is attributable variously to their social marginalization, particular psychological makeup, or even biology. Through an examination of the “act” of being possessed among the Rathva, an adivasi group in eastern Gujarat, this essay argues for an alternative account. Being possessed among the Rathva does in fact vary systematically by gender, but it occurs normatively among men, and as a result the truisms fail to explain the variation. For that explanation, the article looks to the place possession occupies within the broader practice of ritual communication. It is a communicative mode that utilizes the entire, embodied person to add intensity in circumstances when more common communication strategies, limited to auditory and material means, fail. Local features, such as indigenous ontologies and the positions of agents within the communicative field, determine how this communication is structured, including the gendering of being possessed.

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**Introduction**

It is a dark January night, an hour or two past midnight. The moon has set early, and the temperature is bitterly cold, as it can sometimes be at this dry time of the year in eastern Gujarat. I am in a rural village with roughly 2,000 inhabitants. In the middle of a field, perhaps twenty to thirty people, mostly men, dance energetically. They are led by men beating time with drums known as dhol and others playing reed instruments known as sarnai, and as they dance, they circumambulate, counterclockwise, a line of fresh-cut tree branches, perhaps six feet tall, set upright into the ground. On the ground in front of the branches are parallel rows of offerings: patla, miniature platforms or benches, marked with orange-red dots known as tipna, atop which sit lighted shallow terracotta oil lamps sit; matla, clay pots, all made with tipna, sitting atop piles of paddy and with thehebara, thick, circular, deep-fried cakes made of adad (urad) dāl; bottles of mahua liquor; another row of oil lamps. The branches and the offerings, illuminated by the dim glow of the lamps, stand out strikingly against the darkness.

I, however, am not in the field. I am standing in a rambling, mud-plaster wall residence on one side of it. To my back, across a walkway of beaten earth, various farm animals are resting under the shelter of a lean-to. In front of me is a courtyard, enclosed by walls on three sides and covered with a roof. Over the last two days, the walls have been freshly decorated, the side walls with rows of painted horses, the far wall with a traditional painting depicting the wedding procession of Bābo Piṭhoro. I am patiently waiting for what I hope— I know— will happen. At occasional intervals a baḍvo, a ritualist, sits on the ground facing the painting with two assistants. The assistants beat time with small drums and sing. Each time, my anticipation builds, and
then I am disappointed; the singers stop, get up, walk around, smoke a cigarette.

After some time, I see the baḍvo tighten the knots on the wrap-around that hangs from his waist. Now, I think, is the time. The baḍvo and his assistants sit down and sing. His limbs begin to shake, his head begins to move up and down, he flings his turban off and his long, uncut hair flies in all directions as his head continues to move. The dev has entered him. Now I am crushed in a crowd of people; the dhol and śarnai music is loud, the players close by. The baḍvo – or the dev – lets out occasional whoops as his head continues its incessant movement. He wriggles out a sword planted upright in the plaster ledge in front of the painting and, brandishing it, dances back and forth along the courtyard. Then, his head continually shaking, he points the sword at the various images of the painting and comments on them. He squats with groups of two or three people and he – the dev – speaks with them. Between conversations he dances. For the last dance he – she – dons women’s clothing, puts a pot topped with an oil lamp on his – her – head, and dances. Then the baḍvo’s whole body trembles. He utters a muffled cry, jumps up, and collapses. The dev has left.

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It is a bright, warm February day, around 11:00 on a Thursday morning. I am sitting in a white, plaster cube of a temple, roughly 17 feet wide, 13 feet high (from ground to roof), and 14 feet deep. I do not know what to expect. I have crossed the riverbed that sits to one side of town and walked a scant mile to a place at the foot of a small mountain. Here, I was told, dākan, “witches,” gather on Thursday mornings, but everyone looks perfectly normal to me. About 100 yards away, at a dargāh, a grave of a Muslim pīr, a mujāvar is busy blessing people with his fly-whisk, splitting open and distributing coconuts, and handing out pieces of red yarn. Meanwhile, in the temple, a local brahmin, assisted by a tribal man, has cleaned up, decorated, and performed pūjā (acts of devotion) to five painted, terracotta images – three yellow tigers flanked by a red horse on either side. After him, two elderly tribal women have performed their own pūjā. Now, for my benefit, a baḍvo from a nearby village – not the same baḍvo as in the incident above – is leading a small group of people in singing a bhajan.

Suddenly, the right hand of a woman sitting on the floor across from me begins to shake rapidly up and down. She is perhaps in her late 20s or early 30s. After several seconds, she begins large, sweeping gestures with her left hand, then puts both hands on the temple floor and, bending over, shakes her head vigorously up and down until she passes out, falling sideways with a light thud. She gets up, adjusts the waist of her garment, repeats the shaking of her head, and once more falls sideways. With each thrust of her head, onlookers hear light bursts of sound – grunts and whoops. She gets up again, adjusts the end of her sari over her head, exhales, and just sits, exhausted. No one but me has given her any attention.

Meanwhile, devs have entered other women at the dargāh. One of them, a thin woman perhaps in her 40s, approaches the foot of the pīr’s grave. With her hands joined together at her chest, she calls out, “Salaam,” and then raises her hands, still folded, over her head, which begins to shake from side to side. What follows is a series of full-body gestures which seem to be brought on by extreme distress. Still shaking her head back and forth, she lifts her right arm straight up, moaning, “Aah! Aah!” She paws the air in front of her with both arms, then covers her face with the crook of her right arm and gives a prolonged shout, “Ra-a-a-a-a-a-y.” Moaning,
she shakes her head and claps her hands above it. Turning her back to the grave, she thrusts her head up and down, grunts loudly, and makes broad, clockwise circles with her right hand. Slowly, she turns counterclockwise: now her back is to the grave, now her left side, now she is facing it. She stops circling her arm, claps her hands above her head, and turns another ninety degrees; now her right side faces the grave. She beats her chest lightly with her right hand, and calls out, gesturing toward the distance with her left hand. Exhausted, she pauses for a moment, and as she does so, she turns to face the grave. Again her gesturing and cries begin. She swings her left arm up and down, grunting in rhythm. After a few moments, she turns to her right, swings both arms up and down, and walks about ten or eleven yards to a second, subsidiary grave. There she turns, kneels, and faces the main grave. As she is kneeling, she sways from side to side, then beats her chest. She gets down on her hands and knees and twirls her head, her hair flying. Then she stands up and dances, hopping in a circle and clapping her hands, grunting loudly with every breath. Once again she returns to the pir’s grave. She puts her hands on the low wall that surrounds it and shakes her head vigorously up and down. Then she walks off, gesturing with her arms; the volume of her grunts increase with the distance from the grave. In the background another woman has been calmly intoning her prayers the whole time.

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According to an oft repeated anthropological truism, possession phenomena are more characteristic of women than of men. The confidence with which scholars have made this claim seems to have increased over time. In 1981, in an account heavily influenced by Clifford Geertz’s notions of thick description and culture as text, Michael Lambek noted, referencing I. M. Lewis’s classic (1971) account of Ecstatic Religion: “In many societies possession is largely a matter for women” (M. Lambek 1981:7). Almost thirty years later, Emma Cohen, operating within the rather different conceptual framework of the cognitive science of religion, wrote, "The preponderance of women in possession cults is a widely acknowledged fact among anthropologists" (E. Cohen 2007:196; cf. M. Keller 2002; and for India, among many others, P. Vitebsky 1993; F. M. Smith 2006:xxvii).

This fact has been so widely acknowledged that the important question about the gendering of possession has seemed to be not whether but why: why do women get possessed more than men? I cite only the most standard, well-worn sources.

It was once popular to assume that it had something to do with women’s marginal position in society. In 1976 Erika Bourguinon (1976:31) wrote, "Where individuals have little opportunity for achievement and little control over their daily activities, possession trance is more likely to occur." I. M. Lewis tried to be more sociologically precise. Distinguishing between peripheral and central cults, he associated women’s possession above all with peripheral cults. If possession were found in central cults associated with men, that must be because men have co-opted the cult from women’s religious practice (I. M. Lewis 1989:155). Where such co-optation had occurred, Lewis imagined it as having been done by entire societies who were, within their larger contexts, in a position analogous to marginalized women; they occurred, as he wrote, “in societies whose members are, in their total eco-political setting, under acute pressure” (I. M. Lewis 1989:155, 186). At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that in Michael Lambek’s rich ethnographic account, possession is a system of communication in which, among other things, women are able
to express what they would not otherwise be able to say, and to do so in a voice that, being reserved for men, social conventions would not permit them to use (M. Lambek 1981:77). In this context, possession alters social relations between men and women, and husbands and wives, not necessarily in the direction of greater equality but certainly in the direction of greater complexity.

Others have sought to explain the preponderance of women in possession behaviour in terms that were not social constructionist but biologically or psychologically universal. In an article that appeared in the same year as Lambek’s account of possession in Mayotte, Alice Kehoe and Dody Giletti quite imaginatively ascribed possession states to dietary deficiencies that tended disproportionately to plague women more than men. To quote the abstract of their article:

The preponderance of women in spirit possession cults is linked with the likelihood of deficiencies in thiamine, tryptophan, niacin, calcium, and vitamin D in women in Old World traditional societies in which poverty and/or sumptuary rules restrict women’s nutrient intakes more than those of men. The higher nutrient needs of pregnant and lactating women may exacerbate the inadequacy of their diets. It is postulated that involuntary symptoms of deficiencies affecting the central nervous system and muscles have been recognized in these societies as manifestations of spirit possession and institutionalized as a means of reducing victims’ anxieties and restoring their ability to function normally. (A. B. Kehoe and D. H. Giletti 1981:549)

More recently, Emma Cohen has invoked women’s distinctive psychological makeup to explain why women get possessed more frequently than men. She cites Simon Baron-Cohen to the effect that while males have a higher Systemizing Quotient (SQ), females have a higher Empathy Quotient (EQ) (E. Cohen 2007:200–201). Then she draws the implications of this observation for possession behaviour:

From this perspective socialization hypotheses, predicted social-role causes, and women’s sociability factors may have identified important patterns, for which the adaptive advantages of empathizing tendencies and sophisticated ToM in females is a possible causal source. ... the ToM differences between males and females in their ability to understand and predict the behaviors of others is a causal factor in the high incidence of female sensitivity to the actions and intentions of supernatural agents. We should therefore find that, all else being equal, [high EQ] individuals, of whom the majority are female, predominate in religious activities in which spirits, gods, and other supernatural agents also participate, and with whom intimate relations are developed through prayer and devotion. The ethnographic data on women’s participation in spirit-possession activity appears to attest to this claim. (E. Cohen 2007:202–203)

As one can perhaps guess from my opening vignettes, I do not find any of these ideas particularly helpful. My interests in indigenous religious traditions center on a group of people who live in eastern Gujarat, India, specifically, in the eastern part of Chhotaudepur taluka. Known locally as “tribals,” they constitute a minority in the two “cities” in the area, Chhotaudepur town, with a population of just under 26,000, and Kavant town, with a population of about 9,500 people. But the vast majority of the people who live in this area – 89.3% of the people in Chhotaudepur taluka and 95.5% of the people in Kavant taluka – live in rural villages, and the rural people are overwhelmingly tribal (according to the 2011 Census, 95.2% and 96% tribal, respectively). Among them a community known as Rathvas is the clearly dominant group, and it is
common to refer to the culture of the area as Rathva, as I, too, will do.

In this area men’s possession, or better, the possession of particular men known as *baḍva*, is normative. As my second vignette indicates, women’s possession is not unknown, but it is unusual. This gendering of possession is not limited to the eastern Chhotaudepur area. In her book, *In the Belly of the River*, Amita Baviskar examines opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam among the Bhilala, a community related to the Rathva living across the border in Madhya Pradesh; some consider the Bhilala to be the same community as the Rathva, just known by a different name. In the course of setting the opposition to the dam into a rich ethnographic context, Baviskar notes that “possession is usually limited to Bhilala men” (A. Baviskar 2004:98). In describing women who became possessed in the course of an itinerant *mata* (mother-goddess) cult that was making its way through various villages of the former princely state of Mathvad during her fieldwork, she writes that the ability of women to become possessed was “a significant departure from Bhilala practice” (A. Baviskar 2004:100).

Among the Bhilala, then, as among the Rathva, possession is primarily a male affair. There is no indication that possession is a practice that men have taken over from women, nor is there any indication that it is a practice adopted in response to acute pressure from the outside. In fact, when Rathvas feel outside pressure, they significantly modify their possession practices. Many, like their Bhilala counterparts (A. Baviskar 2004:101), have become *bhagat*; that is, they have joined any one of a number of Hindu *sampradayas* and rejected the practice of possession altogether. Other *baḍva*, who deserve more study than they have received, have “bhagatized” possession practices, for example, by substituting coconuts for sacrificial animals, giving up meat and alcohol, and performing rituals that involve possession in conjunction with a Hindu temple or a *pir*s grave.

Understandably, then, accounts which presume that possession is a woman’s practice, whether now or in the time of its origin, and that seek to explain why this should be so, provide little help in understanding the gendering of possession among the Rathvas. Let us look at that practice in a little more detail before venturing an alternative account.

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The more I read accounts of possession, the more I become convinced that it is not a singular phenomenon in need of a singular explanation but a collection of practices in need of a variety of explanations. Underlying my approach to the explanatory enterprise is a methodological assumption that work in the study of religions needs to steer a course between universalizing and particularizing strategies, at this moment in time between cognitive and cultural explanations, an approach that I see shared, with different emphases, by Ann Taves (2009) and Thomas Tweed (2006).

What generally unites the practices that we call possession under a single category is the effect that these practices have on the operation of what many cognitive psychologists call “Theory of Mind,” that is, on our identification, from behavioural hints, of a personality, complete with mental attributes, that is inaccessible to empirical observation. Rather than taking the people whom we encounter to be robots or zombies, as the available evidence might allow (cf. D. J. Chalmers 1996, 2010), we generally attribute to them a rich, conscious, unitary mental life. Possession – at least the kind of possession that interests us here, which Emma Cohen
has called “executive possession” (E. Cohen 2008) – consists of practices or behaviour that defy our ordinary expectations of the person in question to such an extent that we – or more properly, the people who identify them as being possessed – attribute these practices or behaviour to the operation of a personality that is extraneous to the person whom we ordinarily associate with the body that we are encountering. (Otherwise, we would just think of the person as having undergone a personality transformation of one sort or another.) Mary Keller puts her finger on the extraneousness of this personality with her term “instrumental agency.” In terms of Keller’s metaphors, an external agent may either use the body of a possessed person as a hammer or play it as a flute (M. Keller 2002).

I want to stress that a wide variety of practices can have these effects on our attribution of personality. Consider an example that is fresh in my mind: the possession that Michael Lambek has described in Mayotte. Lambek focussed on possession by a certain kind of spirit known as a patros spirit. Most of the people whom Lambek described as becoming possessed by patros spirits were women, and the spirits who possessed them were mostly male (M. Lambek 1981:41, 58). Upon becoming possessed, they made various demands and behaved in ways that were outside the norm. For example, they drank and ate substances that ordinary people did not drink and eat, at least not in such great quantities – cologne, blood, heaps of sugar, raw eggs, chicken, goat’s liver, and cake. At the same time, patros spirits avoided common dietary elements such as rice and salt. The underlying characteristic of patros possession, Lambek stresses, is “the spirits’ self-indulgence, indiscrimination, and want of a sense of proportion” (M. Lambek 1981:36–39). Patros spirits also have extended conversations, often in private, with the husbands of their hosts – “man to man,” so to speak – addressing them and other people with a freedom and at times a sense of superiority that would never be tolerated in ordinary life. In addition, patros spirits at times articulated complaints that their hosts had hesitated to articulate themselves (77). Whatever doubts one may have about Freudian analysis – and I have a great many – something of what is going on here seems to be captured by saying that, at some level and in some way, the patros spirit is a manifestation of what Freud called the id. We might also say that the possessing spirit provides the woman with an alternative social persona, one which provides her with access to behaviour and goods that are normally closed off to her.

Possession among the Rathva in eastern Gujarat is much different. As already pointed out, under normal circumstances, possession is the prerogative of male ritual specialists known as badva.5 I have most often seen badva become possessed at various forms of a ceremony known as Ind pūjā. My opening vignette describes a case of possession during a ritual that is often celebrated in conjunction with Ind pūjā: a well-documented ritual at which a wall painting known as a Pithoro is dedicated (cf. H. Shah 1980; J. Jain 1984; V. Pandya 2004; A. Tilche 2011; S. Ishai 2015). More generally, Ind centres on the erection of a line of cut tree branches, six to ten feet tall, in a fallow field, before which various offerings are placed in straight lines. The branches are cut and erected on a Wednesday around sunset, and they remain in place until somewhat before noon the next day. At intervals throughout the night, the badvo sits with his assistants in front of the branches, beating on a drum and singing gayna, songs about the various Rathva deva and devīs. Toward dawn, as he is singing, his limbs begin to twitch, he loosens his turban, and he twirls his head vigorously up and down
in an act that, following David Hardiman (D. Hardiman 1987), I call “dhuning” (from the local verb for the activity, dhūṇvum). Dhuning signals the entrance of a dev or devī into the badvo’s body, and it continues with more or less vigor as long as the badvo is possessed, sometimes an hour or more non-stop. In this condition the badvo whoops, makes various gestures with his head and arms, gives advice to various groups of two to three people as appropriate to the particular ceremony being celebrated, walks lengthwise through the tops of the branches (his assistants help keep him upright), and joins dancers who have been circling counter clockwise around the branches all night long. When the dev or devī leaves his body, the badvo trembles, jumps or hops, and then collapses with exhaustion. In other words, much the same activity takes place in front of the branches as takes place in front of the Pithoro.

Like possession by the patros spirit that Lambek describes, these sets of behavior trigger effects associated with Theory of Mind in such a way as to suggest that another personality – or series of personalities – has entered the badvo’s body. There is, however, nothing that suggests that the badvo is acting out urges that are otherwise repressed by his marginal position in society, for he is not marginal. Nor does the badvo develop a rich, alternative social persona, as one finds in patros possession. For example, the consultations are not extended conversations but brief moments – a minute or two at most – in which the dev or devī relays instructions to the parties concerned while they squat with him and listen respectfully. His other activities involve a small set of scripts that, with minor variations, badvo are expected to perform when possessed. A certain amount of gender-bending does take place when the badvo adopts the dress of a woman and performs the Rani Kajal dance, but since his location in the Rathva gender hierarchy is different from that of women in Mayotte, the effect is not one of usurping a position that is normally reserved only for people higher in the social hierarchy. Instead, it is humorous. In March 2013 I saw one very old badvo perform this dance. Unexpectedly to me, and apparently to other by-standers, he – or the possessing devī – took his or her shawl and pretended to wash it, beating it against the floor the way women beat clothes against rocks when they wash them. The audience, especially the children in the audience, found this to be quite amusing.

Possession among Rathva women is quite different. Badva become possessed in public; their possession is meant to be viewed by an audience. Rathva women become possessed “in private;” bystanders generally pay little attention to them. Badva get possessed in domesticated spaces – houses and fields – but women become possessed in remote areas. Badva get possessed generally in the middle of the night or early in the morning; women become possessed from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. A badvo’s possession is the central focus of the ritual in which it occurs; if women become possessed during a ritual, their possession occupies a marginal place. When a badvo recites mantras and sings gayna in conjunction with possession, he invokes the Rathva “intangible cultural heritage,” that is, the traditional treasure of stories about devs and devīs in which he himself is (supposed to be) the local expert. Possessed women utter ad hoc phrases, beseeching for healing in particular cases. The possession of the badvo is a state chosen at will; in fact, it is the consequence of singing certain gayna (A. Baviskar 2004:12–13). Women’s possession seems to come on spontaneously in the course of intense entreaty. Finally, the social valuation of the possession of badva and of women is diametrically the opposite. To me as a scholar of religions, what Rathva see as women’s possession simply seems like a
perfectly acceptable religious practice among small groups of women. The majority of Rathvas, however, women as well as men, see it differently. For them baḍva are respected religious professionals, sought out for their services in leading rituals and healing the sick. 6 By contrast, women who become possessed are generally avoided. They are seen as dākan, witches. 7

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Over the past couple of years I have been working on an account of traditional Rathva ritual. What James Clifford says of diaspora discourse in a very different context is equally true here: “No single analytic language can exhaust what is at stake” (J. Clifford 2013:83). Nevertheless, I have increasingly come to see traditional Rathva ritual in terms of a series of exchanges – symbolic and material – across boundaries that separate the world in which we live from the world that devs, devīs, and ancestors ordinarily inhabit. For the Rathva these exchanges are crucial to maintaining the well-being of the human and natural community. If for any reason devs, devīs, and ancestors feel hurt or annoyed, they have the ability to inflict damage on the human beings with whom they stand in relation and the worlds that these human beings inhabit. This damage particularly takes the form of sickness – whether of people or domesticated animals – and crop failure. If, however, these beings are pleased, they aid in promoting human and natural flourishing.

So far as I can tell, these exchanges are not connected with, nor do they particularly require a full cosmological account of either our world or the other. For example, they do not presuppose that healing, even natural healing, is the restoration of some sort of overarching cosmological order. I say this because the Rathvas I know who participate in ritual practices seem to do so quite successfully without being able to provide an account of any such cosmological order. Instead, their rituals center on the construction and utilization of means of crossing the boundaries between the two realms, sometimes called darvaja or gateways – “portals,” to use a word that is probably too resonant with the connotations of contemporary science fiction. One way to say this is that among the Rathva we encounter sacred places – spots where human beings have access to devs, devīs, and ancestors – but not sacred spaces. Elsewhere (G. D. Alles forthcoming) I suggest that when Rathvas construct such portals in ritual space – for example, with branches at Ind pūjā and the Pithoro wall painting – they can be seen as primarily manipulating elements of two of the image schemata in terms of which, according to Mark Johnson, human beings come to understand their worlds, the container and the path (M. Johnson 1987, 2007; cf. also G. Lakoff 1987).

I see no reason in principle why this account of ritual practice should be limited to Rathvas. What is important here, however, is the manner in which this account defines the context for explaining Rathva possession, including the gendering of Rathva possession practices. Specifically, it excludes explanations like the one Mariela Bacigalupo gives in her book, Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power, and Healing among Chilean Mapuche. In that book Bacigalupo summarizes the gendering of possession as follows:

To help prevent or repair [social disruptions or illnesses] machi [i.e., shamans] use gender ... categories to link the human world with spiritual realities. By mimicking and manipulating the gender ... categories inherent in the fourfold deity Ngünèchen, machi unleash cosmic powers in an effort to convert illness into health, disorder into order, and scarcity into abundance. (A. M. Bacigalupo 2007:44)
I am in no position to comment on shamanic practices among the Mapuche; Bacigalupo’s account is certainly plausible. But I would approach the gendering of possession among traditional Rathva differently.

Possession, I would suggest, occupies a place within broader practices of ritual communication and exchange. On the material level, these practices include the various offerings, starting with liquor and meat – generally the livers of chickens and goats – that are offered to and somehow received by the devs, devīs, and ancestors. On the symbolic or semantic level, they include the various gayna, mantras, and prayers that are sent in the same direction. Since, however, communication is a reciprocal process, communications presumably come – as traditional people perceive it – from the other side as well, at least in the form of material benefits associated with social and natural well-being.

At times the force of these communicative exchanges is muted and routine. A good example is the bit of food that is set aside before eating or the few drops of liquid that are let fall to the ground before drinking. The common view is that these bits and drops are set aside for devs, devīs, or ancestors – sometimes for a specific ancestor. On other occasions the force is greater, as when, at the beginning of planting, the head of the household presents food and drink offerings, accompanied by mantras, at the housepost or when, in the course of a wedding, a ḍvo presents – or guides others in presenting – similar offerings and mantras at posts that mark the boundary of a faliya (a subdivision of a village). The communicative force is greatest, however, at large communal celebrations, such as Ind pūjā and Pângu, which in principle involve entire villages and interested parties from other villages.

The manner by which the ritual actions acquire this force is determined by local features. To explain these features, I would point to both indigenous ontologies and the positions of agents within the communicative field. Although there are a number of ways to interpret the kind of behavior that one encounters in Rathva possession practices, the local ontology treats the body as a darvajo or, so to speak, a portal. It is a site at which the boundaries between the world of human beings and the world of devs, devīs, and ancestors are porous or permeable. The corporeal boundary is not, however, equally permeable in both directions. Although human beings only cross over into the space of devs, devīs, and ancestors at death, the latter have the ability to cross over into the space inhabited by living human beings. They do so most powerfully when they enter a living human being.

Regardless of whether the possessing being is male or female, the body that they normally enter is male – and not just any male body, but the body of a ḍvo. There is nothing particularly “natural” about limiting possession to male specialists in this way. As we know, women’s possession is quite common around the world, including in other parts of South Asia. Furthermore, although certain men may feel themselves particularly suited to becoming ḍvo, I do not see any reason to attribute to them special cognitive or emotive abilities or a certain personality that all other men and women lack, such as Simon Baron-Cohen’s “high emotion quotient.” Being a ḍvo is often something of a family business. Instead, the limitation of normative possession to ḍvo reflects and reinforces, as it helps to construct, the various positions of agents within the ritual communicative field.

It is customary, both in the Rathva area and in the scholarly literature more broadly (cf.
recently M. Moodie 2015:112–113), to contrast the relative equality of women in tribal society with the subordination of women in caste Hindu society. This may be the case in some respects, but it should not be exaggerated. In ritual life Rathva society is unmistakably patriarchal, and all communal rituals, including those in which communicative exchanges are developed with the most force, are male prerogatives. In keeping with this androcentrism, male specialists have the privilege of being entered by devs and devis. 9 Their privilege is reinforced by cultural practices that associate the quality of a badavo’s possession with stereotypical demonstrations of masculine strength, as in the ritual of the golpheriyo. On special occasions hooks are inserted into the back of a badavo who is dhuning and so presumed to be possessed. He is then tied to an elevated cross-beam, given a chicken whose head he must bite off, and spun around several times both clockwise and counterclockwise (an older but still useful account is J. Haekel 1968). In the community this ordeal is generally seen as a demonstration of the badavo’s power, and in my experience it is not unusual for badavo to back out of it. Those who do undergo it, however, gain respect and higher standing.

Women’s possession represents a very different position in the field of communicative action. When women become possessed, they do not manifest a dev or devī in front of the entire community. Reflecting their subordinate role in Rathva ritual practice, their possession is personal, and it is supplicative. Not every supplication is, of course, equally urgent, but when some women find themselves in situations of extreme distress, their supplications are accompanied by physical behavior, such as dhuning, which is ordinarily taken to be a sign of possession. Their behavior is viewed by many as a violation of social norms, and as a result the women who engage in it are assigned, by women as well as men, to the most negative social position a woman can occupy. They are considered dākan, witches.

The gendering of possession among the Rathva, then, runs counter to much anthropological wisdom, first of all because possession is a male phenomenon. A long line of theorists has sought to explain possession phenomena by appealing either to women’s particular biology, psychology, or social status. Whatever advantages these explanations may have in other contexts, in the Rathva context they are premature. In that context it seems to me better to see possession as a set of particularly forceful communicative acts within a system of ritual exchange. The gendering of the agents – or, to follow Mary Keller, the instruments – of these acts reflects, reinforces, and helps to define the distinctive positions which these agents or instruments occupy within the ritual communicative field.

Of course, this does not make other interpretive strategies irrelevant. It may still be the case that a consideration of women’s particular psychology may illuminate what leads them to become possessed, despite the patriarchal definition of the ritual field that is common among the Rathva and the social stigma that is generally associated with a woman who becomes possessed. Indeed, in a recent essay, Marine Carrin (2014) has usefully applied just such a strategy in discussing normative and extranormative possession in regions further to the east. As far as possession among the Rathva is concerned, however, such a discussion must wait for another occasion.

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References


Notes

1 The incident I am recounting took place in 2009, but it was not until January 2012, when I and a friend were the only ones present, that I was able to measure the temple.

2 The term “tribe” is admittedly problematic. Shereen Ratnagar (2010) argues for its applicability in the eastern Chhotaudepur area, but for more general difficulties, see now Guha 2015.

3 According to 2011 Census figures as reported in the Primary Census Abstract Data Tables for

4 This restriction is found elsewhere in South Asia, too. For example, Marine Carrin (2014:90) notes that Santal women are not permitted to become possessed, although they still do so in exceptional circumstances.

5 Harald Tambs-Lyche has asked in conversation whether this preference for male ritualists parallels a preference for male sacrificial animals. The topic deserves more investigation, but to judge from rituals for which I have photographic documentation, the structural parallel is not tight. Although in major celebrations the preference is for offering male goats, even at such celebrations the chickens offered are often female, although they may also be male. One informant has told me that before the ghahari, that is, the housepost, Rathvas offer female animals, but this practice is not universal, inasmuch as I myself once was requested to provide a rooster to be offered to a ghahari.

6 Baviskar’s comments (2004:169–174) on the relation of traditional medicine to modern scientific medicine apply in this context, too.

7 A topic deserving more investigation than I have been able to give it is the ideology of the possession of these two groups, specifically, to what extent do people conceive of women who become possessed as possessed by bhuts, “ghosts,” rather than devs, “gods;” for this contrast in Maharashtra, cf. Stanley 1988. Nath 1960 is an older but perhaps still insightful account of witchcraft accusations in the Ratanmal area, just northeast of the area I am writing about. Among other points worth noting are his suggestion that witchcraft accusations may be a rationalization of affinal conflict (202) – for which, however, I have no evidence among the Rathvas – and the parallels drawn between conceptions of “priesthood” and “witchcraft” (198–201).

8 This permeability is also a theme in Frederick Smith’s discussion of possession on the basis of South Asian literature; cf. Smith 2006.

9 My choice of verb reflects local usage – the dev “comes into” the body of the baḍvo – but although I hear an intimation of sexual penetration in this expression. One might also seek to establish some sort of formal parallel between the manifestation of the most prominent Rathva dev, Babo Pithoro, in the possession of the baḍvo and the common story of his mother, Kali Koyal, becoming pregnant with him when she was raped. While I can fairly easily imagine such interpretations and parallels, I have never encountered them among the Rathva, who are otherwise quite open about human sexual behavior. For example, Pithora paintings occasionally depict human couples copulating and more frequently depict bestiality in the form of a male human being penetrating a bear from behind.
Dr. Ranju Hasini Sahoo: How do you think an emerging Adivasi and indigenous Studies focus in the Republic of Ireland could shape the global and Indian research on indigenous cultures worldwide?

Prof. Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri: It will be premature to build up a grand narrative on the basis of the recent initiatives taken up by UCC, Ireland to study Adivasis and indigenous people of India or other nation-states. But looking at the history of the institutions and the people involved, this gives us hope that these attempts might lead to new research strengths and finally also lead to a positive impact on the lives of Adivasi and indigenous communities as such. An international focus on Adivasi and indigenous peoples is crucial as it raises a critical consciousness in regard to various developmental interventions in tribal regions of India and the world and it also addresses issues of culturally diverse local resource management and livelihood patterns. In order to establish a remarkable impact in this research area, both India and Ireland need a clear communication and commitment between governments so that institutional initiatives and the exchange of Indian and Irish scholars can be facilitated on a mutual level. Then only the research on Adivasi and indigenous peoples will expand and grow with a clear and futuristic vision to serve the cause of the marginalised Adivasi and tribal communities of India or Asia in general.

RHS: Your work on Adivasi and indigenous peoples in India connects particularly anthropological research with museums. After recently becoming Director of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalya (IGRMS) in Bhopal, which is the greatest anthropological Museum in Asia, you have started an internship programme for Anthropology students in the country. What is your vision behind this initiative?

SKC: After having taught for 19 years in a university and after becoming then involved in IGRMS - famous for having initiated the new museum movement in India and based on the ideas of community participation, inclusion and indigenous representation - I strongly felt that there are immense educational possibilities for students through museum participation, such as internships. In
this process not only students gain new academic insights, but internships may also open up multiple new carrier opportunities for anthropology students. Moreover, their involvement may represent a new face of anthropology museums in our country.

**RHS:** Many Anthropology departments in India like the University of Delhi and Ravi Shankar University, Raipur, the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, the Antarashtraiya and Hindi Viswa Vidyalaya, Wardha – to mention only a few - have rich anthropological museums mostly established by students through collections of museum specimen done during their field work. Still much is to be done for the improvement of the anthropology departmental museums in terms of documentation, display, design and periodical exhibitions. Do you have any suggestion on this?

**SKC:** I fully endorse and appreciate your concerns, which reflect on the valuable roles museum can perform in articulating local history or displaying the local cultural heritage. Unfortunately, museums of anthropology departments of Indian universities did not initiate many steps to explore the potentialities of their existing collections. They also not link their collections to source communities in order to facilitate their socio-cultural inclusion - as happened in many other parts of the world. However, increasingly other national museums of India initiated significant steps to involve graduate and post-graduate students of anthropology and other relevant disciplines to expose them to the many fold potential resources of anthropological museums, such as archive work, curating exhibitions or audio visual documentation.

In this vein, IGRMS introduced some annual programmes (largely in the form of workshops) on issues such as local history, cultural heritage; preservation and promotion of core human values involving teachers, students, and staff of various universities. This hopefully will lead to a comprehensive understanding of the journey of mankind and the acknowledgement as well as celebration of cultural diversity of India. I think all departments of anthropology or new centres/institutes, like, departments of tribal studies, centres for Indigenous Culture studies etc. need to relook on the issue of anthropological museums as crucial tools for education, academic and career development in the discipline of anthropology.

**RHS:** With your experience as post-doctoral fellow in SOAS, London and a five years (2002 to 2007) collaborative work with British museums, how these involvements helped you to shape your vision and mission for Indian ethnographic and anthropological museums which eagerly work for the safeguarding of the cultural heritage of tribal, Adivasi and indigenous communities?

**SKC:** Having been the core member of a research team which included Richard Blurton of British Museum, Michael Taar (ethnographic photographer from USA), Moji Riba of CCRD, Arunachal Pradesh and Stuart Blackburn from SOAS (our team leader), I had a chance to work in close coordination with all of them during these years and with museums, such as the British museum, the archive and library of SOAS, the British Library, and the Pitts Rivers Museum’s archive under university of Oxford. We started our collaborative project entitled “Tribal Transition in Arunachal Pradesh” at the Rockefeller’ institute in Milan, Italy, with a rigorous academic discourse. This project perhaps changed my whole academic orientation and Stuart became one of my continuous mentors. Subsequently, I came in close contacts with many eminent international scholars of our time and could
visit distinguished anthropological institutions across the world. This has collectively enriched my understanding about the strength of anthropology as a discipline and the potentiality of museums as public space in a global and digital world where we live our lives through various kinds of negotiations. I firmly believe that anthropological or ethnographic museums can play a very meaningful role by allowing the self-representation of tribal communities, Adivasi or indigenous people. In this way the strength of tribal and folk culture can be understood in the larger context of Indian civilisation going beyond the illusive domain of the so called ‘little tradition’ and ‘great tradition’ invented by Robert Redfield to insert an interpretative frame for the understanding of the multitude of Indian societies at large. IGRMS, as a national museum stands for a new thinking where the ‘centrality of community’ is having a paramount importance in every activity. As such, perhaps, it is the only museum of the world where one can find the existence of living “Sacred Groves” nurtured by various local communities. This vital inclusion of local knowledge of Adivasi and indigenous communities teaches us values of sustainable ecological systems in the context of an emerging global consciousness of the climate change.

**RHS:** Would you explain why research on indigenous and Adivasi societies in India is important for the world’s understanding of ecological sustainability?

**SKC:** In the context of India, research has shown that even the so-called ‘Post-modern’ world has a lot to learn from Adivasi or indigenous communities, especially in regard to the sustainable use of natural resources. Above, I have given the example of the very idea of the ‘Sacred Grove’ which is essential for an ecological awareness and consciousness especially needed in a time of global climate change. But there are plenty of other examples such as various customary laws linking the management of natural resources, food culture or food preservation techniques with sustainable ecology, life styles and value ideas. To learn about these local knowledge traditions will surely have a huge meaning for our contemporary world where ‘globalisation’ and ‘liberalisation’ became pass words to understand the human progress, but where the link to ecological sustainability is missing. It has however to be kept in mind that today Indian tribal and Adivasi communities are also subjected to various vices of modernization which are gradually eroding their collective ecological values or ecological concern. It may be a pointer to such complex emerging realities that the Supreme Court of India had to impose a ban on the timber operation in Arunachal Pradesh, which is essentially a tribal state (!) and where tribal people in general traditionally nurtured various sustainable ecological systems. So while exploring the strength of alternative worldviews regarding man-nature or man-animal linkages, one has also to be alert about changing agencies, politically contested ecological terrains and the growing inequalities among tribal communities, especially within tribal states where state craft is run largely by the tribal people themselves.

**RHS:** Do you have a message how best to study and research tribal, Adivasi and indigenous communities in the contemporary world scenario with the aim to safeguard their cultural heritage on the one hand and on the other hand to safeguard the world through the local knowledge of indigenous peoples? What would that mean for the discipline of anthropology?

**SKC:** The discipline of anthropology has grown tremendously and anthropologists are...
contributing today to diverse areas of human progress, pleasure and pains. Anthropology is not any more confined to the study of one segment of human population though we have a historical commitment to the marginalised communities of humanity. Anthropology as a global discipline helps us to instil a sense of deep respect towards every culture: indigenous, tribal, Adivasi or urban. Because of this value of respect and our curiosity for local knowledge systems, perhaps anthropology helps us to become a better human being and a better global citizen. In this sense I am very much obsessed with Ruth Benedict’s suggestion that: “The purpose of Anthropology is to make the world safe for human difference”.

ARTICLE

ANTHROPOLOGY, FEMINISM AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY: IS ACCEPTANCE OF A BIOLOGICAL BASIS TO BEHAVIOURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN COMPATIBLE WITH A FEMINIST POLITICAL STANCE?

BY ANNA POLONI

Abstract: The essay investigates whether acceptance of a biological basis to gendered behaviour is compatible with a feminist political stance. After examining the opposition between biological and cultural explanations of behavioural differences, especially in the social climate of the 1970s, the essay will argue that it is necessary to move beyond the nature/culture dichotomy. Evolutionary biologists have demonstrated that biology is not a static given. A developmental systems approach to evolution argues that the information for the development of an organism is within both the genes and the environment. The implications of this approach are that new evolutionary analyses of human and non-human behaviour open up the debate and may, in fact, be valuable tools in the feminist fight for social equality.

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Introduction

Traditionally, most feminists have rejected biological explanations of behavioural differences between females and males as detrimental to the fight for social equality, seeing biologically deterministic theories as implicit justifications of the oppression of women. This rejection stems from the perception that biological theories propose that male dominance (and ensuing human behaviours such as the control of female sexuality) is a natural, adaptive function: a product of human evolutionary history. (Tang-Martinez, 1997:117) Feminists have generally preferred to seek a basis for behavioural differences and female subordination in socio-cultural constructions. That being said, some feminists have entered the realm of sociobiology and argued that its failings are due less to its evolutionary basis than to its pervasive androcentrism, suggesting that if this is corrected a sociobiological approach may be legitimate. Feminist evolutionary biologists have radically changed what used to be a male dominated field, rendering the debate considerably more complex than during the early days of sociobiology.

By examining

1) biological approaches to sex and gender;

2) feminist critiques of biological arguments (along with their contrasting cultural analyses) and

3) the work of contemporary feminists working within the fields of biology, the essay will argue that that to accept the possibility of a biological basis to social difference while upholding a feminist political stance it is necessary to reconsider the nature/nurture dichotomy and look beyond the
opposition between biological determinism and social constructionism. As Oyama argues, opposing biological determinism with social constructionism “endorses that the only positions available to us are that our behaviour is either a biological or social product” (Oyama, 1985 quoted in Gray, 1997:386).

I will suggest that a developmental systems approach including an awareness of variability between individual human beings may allow us to escape the constraints of a dichotomy that has saturated the debate between feminists and sociobiologists for far too long.

The publication of Wilson’s *Sociobiology* in 1975 sparked fervent debates in the field of behavioural evolution and attracted fierce criticism from anthropologists and feminists who saw his work as an attempt to reduce human behaviour to the effect of genes. The “central theorem” of sociobiology rests on the ideas popularised by Dawkins: animals (humans included) are expected to behave in such a way that as many as possible of their genes are passed on to future generations. (Tang-Martinez, 1997:116). The gene-centered view allowed all animal and human behaviour to be explained in terms of the selective competition of genes. If humans had evolved culture, seemingly an opposing force to nature, they must have done so because it was evolutionarily advantageous. As Ridley (1993:10) puts it: “even the emancipation from evolution that we so fondly imagine we have achieved must itself have evolved because it suited the replication of genes” (Ridley, 1993:10).

Biologically speaking, the essential difference between males and females is that male sex-cells or gametes are much smaller than female gametes. As Dawkins explains, there might have been an evolutionary trend towards larger gametes which enabled exploitation by smaller ones: the advantage in producing small, fast gametes is that they would be able to move rapidly and produce more offspring. These ‘exploiters’ became sperm, and the more ‘honest’ gametes became eggs (Dawkins, 2006:143). The implications of this biological theory for anthropology are that males and females must behave differently, in ways that benefit their different gametes, if they are to reproduce successfully. Biological discussions of male-female interactions, therefore, often start with the “coy” female and “aggressive” male paradigm, which argues that natural selection favoured sexually assertive males, a trait that did not need to evolve in females as they were already breeding close to their reproductive potential (Hrdy, 1981:132). Napoleon Chagnon was a controversial figure who sought to apply this paradigm within anthropology in his (1968) ethnography of the Yanomami, indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest in Northern Brazil and Southern Venezuela. Chagnon described Yanomami violence as being primarily caused by disputes over women. In the chapter on social organization, Chagnon (1968:81) described male alliances between villages as kinship based with the ultimate goal of attaining wives. For cultural determinists, by calling the Yanomami “fierce” and explaining their behaviour through a Darwinian model of competition and sexual selection, Chagnon’s work implied that all human beings are innately violent and warmongering, and perpetuated the notion of women as passive objects in the creation of biological kinship ties between men (Shermer, 2010: 78).

Many feminists, therefore, opposed sociobiological explanations and sought a cultural basis to explain the origin of female oppression. The social climate of the 1970s opened up important questions concerning the role of women in evolution and whether
there is such a thing as a female or male nature. Feminist writers at the time focused on women’s domestic roles and sought to change the perception and treatment of women as nothing more than passive sexual objects and dutiful mothers and wives (Lamphere, 1995:97).

Patricia Draper’s research on !Kung women is an example of a cultural constructivist approach to gendered behaviour, critiquing the stereotype of the passive, vulnerable mother and challenging the “man the hunter” hypothesis of human evolution. Draper (1975) details the complex foraging skills of !Kung women, and how these contributed to their autonomy. Because of the changing political climate in southern Africa during the 1960s, some !Kung groups had to give up a nomadic foraging lifestyle for a sedentary one based on livestock, dramatically transforming the everyday lives of !Kung women and children. Draper observed that in these groups, girls and boys were socialized into their gender roles and led separate lives from a young age: the boys working with livestock and the girls helping with domestic tasks. From this example, Draper concluded that the relatively egalitarian social relationships and gender roles prevalent in a foraging way of life could change completely in just one generation, arguing, therefore, that it is culture and not nature that makes women sedentary and dependent upon men. (Zihlman, 2005:164)

In her attempt to explain the universal oppression of women from a cultural perspective, Sherry Ortner (1974) drew on Simone de Beauvoir to argue that in all societies culture is valued more highly than nature, and because of women’s association with biological realities such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth (strictly “natural” processes”), they are universally subordinated. Yet, even though Ortner (1974:71) rejected a biologically deterministic approach, she did not suggest that men and women are not different, “but that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems.”

Michelle Rosaldo similarly explained sexual asymmetry as resulting from the opposition between a domestic sphere associated with women and a public sphere associated with men, resulting in men’s higher status. Rosaldo and Ortner both see woman’s role as mother as playing a central role in the explanation of universal female subordination. Summarising such approaches, Lamphere writes that “theoretical dichotomies like domestic/public and nature/culture helped to make sense of women’s roles...those who were influenced by materialism had a clear sense of how to build a framework that suggested an economic explanation for social and cultural phenomena.” (Lamphere, 1995: 98).

A socio-biological approach to understanding behavioural differences between men and women minimizes the role of culture and the interactions between culture, phenotype and environment. At the same time, many cultural constructivist explanations such as Ortner’s or Rosaldo’s inevitably fall back on biology – woman’s inescapable role as child bearer. I will argue that biological and cultural explanations of behavioural differences between men and women need not be mutually exclusive. Contemporary feminists have approached biological explanations of gendered behaviour in different ways. Most interesting are the arguments of feminists who work within the frameworks of socio-biology and evolutionary biology. In the 1970s, Sarah Hardy was among the primatologists who began to remark upon the absence of data on primate female-female interactions. She and other feminist primatologists opposed the notion that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’, and set out to
reinterpret data removing female primates from “the maternally nurturant ‘dyad’ relationships in which they had previously been embedded”. (Knight, 1991: 34) In her critique of the “coy/assertive” dichotomy, Tang-Martinez (2007:143) writes that “scientists influenced by the sexual dynamics (coy females; sexually aggressive males) of modern, Euro-American societies apparently could not imagine that females in other species (and cultures) might behave differently. They, therefore, erected a theoretical framework (costly egg and cheap sperm) to rationalize their biases. Hrdy presented evidence that primate females are far from passive, but may be as strategically assertive as their male counterparts.

Fausto-Sterling describes two significant feminist critiques of evolutionary biology. The first, exemplified by Hrdy (1981) and Zihlman (1997) argues that it is necessary to correct the male bias that pervades the field as well as exercising great caution when applying findings on animal behaviour to human behaviour. (Fausto-Sterling, 2007: 57) The second, more radical approach, typified by Haraway (1989) and Fausto-Sterling herself, suggests that biological claims about social difference are scientifically invalid, because scientific knowledge is socially constructed and therefore embedded in “a power struggle which is fundamentally social, not biological in nature” (Fausto-Sterling, 2007:58). What is necessary, according to this view, is to create new, more self-conscious theories of scientific knowledge.

Whilst mainstream feminists have dismissed biology as a static given, evolutionary biologists have shown that it is no such thing: it is therefore necessary to challenge the nature-nurture dichotomy upon which the debate has rested for so long. Gray (2007:391) suggests that this can be achieved through a developmental systems approach to evolution holds that “all phenotypes, be they physiological, morphological, or behavioural, are jointly determined by both genes and the developmental context.” Phenotypes are thus constructed, not transmitted. Gray draws upon Oyama’s (1985) argument that developmental information is not in the genes or in the environment, “but rather it develops in the fluid, contingent relation between the two.” Thus, what an organism initially receives from its predecessors is not only the genes but also the environment within which its form develops. During this process, the organism also contributes to the development of the environment and thus of future organisms. As Tim Ingold (2000:387) explains, in human beings this process is known as history. Organisms, he argues, are therefore not passive products of a natural selection mechanism but are active, have agency. Genetic change can occur without anything changing in form or behaviour, and vice versa, form and behaviour can change without any change on a genetic level. According to this understanding of the development of genomes, the dichotomy of biology and culture, and between evolution and history, is obsolete.

Viktoria Sork, a quantitative geneticist, gives an account of the principles of variance, heritability and natural selection and argues that genetic arguments do not necessarily oppose a feminist political stance. In particular, the concept of variance may be liberatory when confronted with claims that certain genes inevitably differentiate men and women’s behaviours and social roles. Variation in traits occurs among, between and within individuals. Whilst gender differences are often essentialised, Sork argues that “until appropriate experiments and statistical analyses are done, knowledge of the variance, in and of itself, reveals nothing about the extent to which the variation is due to the genotype or the environment” (Sork, 2007: 94).
Patricia Gowaty similarly challenges the idea that evolutionary biology is irrelevant just because other forms of analysis give similar answers, and argues that natural selection ideas may actually be a tool in the fight for social equality, as “they structurally place the blame not on the victim (i.e., not within the individual), but within the environments in which individuals find themselves.” (Gowaty, 2007:12) It follows that if the environment is changed, behaviour and other phenotypic expressions will follow. Within the supposed biological constraints there are many possibilities – from a developmental systems perspective, one does not need to choose between biological inevitability and socially constructed contingency (Gray, 2007: 407).

The assertion that some differences between men and women are innate goes no further than obvious differences such as menstruation or pregnancy. Gowaty thus argues that selection pressures and the interaction of these with traits from past environments “allows for more variable expectations, not the least important of which is that it may account for the existence of men who - perhaps facultatively - exhibit traits usually associated with women and vice versa” (Gowaty, 2007:7).

Conclusion

This essay has shown why simplistic applications of evolutionary biology to human behaviour in approaches such as Chagnon’s are problematic. Traditional, genetically based sociobiology has many inherent dangers. Tang-Martinez writes that “when sociobiologists argue (overtly or covertly by developing “plausible” genetic scenarios) in favour of a genetic basis for particular human behaviours, social structures or institutions...they are developing theories for which there is no credible evidence.” It is therefore extremely difficult to show a genetic basis for differing traits between men and women, because of the huge role culture and socialization play in the development of human behaviour. (Tang-Martinez, 2007:134). That being said, too heavy a reliance on cultural explanations may prove just as short-sighted – by letting go of the nature/culture dichotomy, it may be possible to take biology into account in the study of human behavioural differences without abandoning the political commitments of feminism. This is possible if the very understanding of what is biological is reassessed. According to Gray, this can be done by taking a developmental systems approach. The old models are limiting, but new evolutionary models of the nature of social behaviour of human and non-human animals which consider variation in the lives of females (Gowaty, 2007: 16) avoid the forced choice between culture and nature in the analysis of human behaviour. To conclude, the goal of feminism is social equality. Evolutionary science, far from being a hindrance, may actually provide valuable insights into gendered behaviours and the tools to change the environments within which they develop.

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ARTICLE

TERRITORIAL DEFENCE THROUGH SHAMANIC MEMORY:
THE PILGRIMAGE TO WIRIKUTA AS A FORM OF HUICHOL RESISTANCE

BY HÉCTOR ADRIÁN SÁNCHEZ GARIBAY

Abstract: The Huichol territory is one of the most complex ethnic geographies in Mexico. This territory is made up of various areas along the west side of the country, in which countless sacred spaces and Huichol communities can be found. The territory’s spatial characteristics make communication between communities and sacred spaces vulnerable. However, pilgrimage practices within this culture shorten distances and sustain tradition. This paper intends to explain how these ritual journeys (specifically the journey to Wirikuta, the most important site in this area) help to preserve the collective memory as a form of cultural resistance.

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Introduction

In a multi-ethnic society like Mexico, the exercise of historical memory illustrates the presence of complex and diverse world views. One such world view is that of the Huichol people or wixárika (virrarika). They use the reproduction of collective memory in order to face life difficulties and more specifically to tackle the problem of their sacred territory being located far from their communities. The problematic distance between sacred territory and that of Huichol communities is addressed either through pilgrimages to sacred points or through the reproduction of such spaces in ritual activities taking place within the community.

This paper will specifically explain the case of Wirikuta, the most important site in the sacred landscape of the Huichol people. This is the place where, according to Huichol belief, human life originated and the sun shone for the first time. It is also the site where the psychotropic cactus hikuri or peyote grows - the driving force of their culture and of the reproduction of mythological and collective memory performed through yearly pilgrimages.

There is a good reason to deal with this place as my main topic: the Huichol sacred space has faced major difficulties over the years, starting with the fact that the peyote, that grows there, is the subject of disputes between the Mexican State and the Huichol people whenever the former go on a pilgrimage to Wirikuta to consume it and to take it back to their communities. Also in recent years, various mining concessions were handed over to foreign companies by the Mexican Government without consulting them. This affects both the Huichol people and the people living in the surroundings.

Evidently, Wirikuta presents the contradiction of a sacred site/disputed site, such contradiction allows us to see two issues that are currently of great importance to the Huichol culture: The pilgrimage as an action
that reproduces their cosmology and thereupon their collective memory, and the territorial defense by means of the ritual action that works within the symbolic logic of the Huichol resistance.

It is organized in the following manner: First, I will give an overview of the Huichol community (cultural characteristics, geographic location and social organization). This will include a geographical description of this sacred territory since there are a multitude of sacred spaces scattered throughout diverse geographic areas. I will limit the locations to those related to the action of pilgrimage, that is the West (Haramara), and the East (Wirikuta). Second, I will briefly describe the pilgrimage to Wirikuta. Finally, in the conclusions, I intend to state why the pilgrimage can be understood as a way to defend their territory.

Huichol geography: A network of dreams and visions.

The Huichol are an indigenous people located in the cultural area known as "El Gran Nayar", in Western Mexico, in the States of Jalisco, Durango and Nayarit. This area is in the so-called "Sierra Madre Occidental," a mountainous region that presents a rugged landscape. The inhabitants of this area are located in two different terrains; while the seats of the communal governments are usually found in the mountain peaks, the ranches are in the deepest canyons. The use of the various ecological strata increases during the rainy season, a time in which the majority of people remain close to their coamiles, in the area of the cliffs. Coamiles is the Huichol name for agricultural areas where they practice the traditional system of "slash-and-burn" to grow crops like corn, beans and squash. Agriculture goes hand in hand with the ritual calendar, developed from the so-called "dry season" and "rainy season." The dry season is devoted to ritual activities (including pilgrimages), while in the rainy season corn is grown and attention is devoted to the "dreams" or visions of the shamans or mara’akate, which relate to the harvest and the development of the rituals of the following season.

The coamiles are kept within a family through inheritance or Xiriki. At these ranches, members of each family join to perform the ceremonies of the annual ritual cycle corresponding to the growth of corn. Despite the scattered nature of the ranches, they serve as social units to bind different families into broader and more complex social organizations known as the ceremonial centers or Tukite².

The Tukipa is the most complex social organization of the Huichol people, different lineages belonging to a community are intertwined within it. The 'sistema de cargos' (system of offices)³ is particular to the Huichol culture. It works by assigning the titles/the names of deities from Huichol mythology to members of the community who are believed to be the most suitable people to fulfill the responsibilities of the position. Those who gain titles are called 'jicareros' or xukurikate (rukurikate), since they carry a xukuri, a sort of gourd bowl. This object represents the mythological title granted to an individual. Xukurikate responsibilities are to carry out pilgrimages to Wirikuta each year in order to gather hikuri or peyote for use in ceremonies of the annual ritual cycle; to make offerings in all the different places of the Huichol sacred territory; to participate in all ceremonies related to the growth of corn (see picture 1); and finally, to watch both the lands and the Tukipa which represent them as a ritual group (Manzanares Monter, 2009: 40).
Such offices are assigned by a group composed of the mara’akate or shamans, also known as Kawiterutsiri, or Council of Elders. This is the most respected institution in the community since it is made up of individuals with the greatest knowledge of mythology and rituals. The Huichol people are a society that self identifies with a sacred territory. The meaning of the sacred spaces is based on the manner in which the people are organized around a geographical zone where they constantly make offerings. By means of clarification, I understand the concept ‘sacred space’ in this context as the search for hierophany (manifestation of the sacredness). It is the place where at certain times humans can approach sacred beings and find an infinite source of knowledge. It is where the hierophany takes place over and over again (Eliade, 2000 [1978]: 329).

The sacred geography is organized in principle by the number 5, which represents the cardinal directions: North, South, East, West and Centre. While there are many sacred places for the Huichol people, these cardinal points are the most important. Each sacred place in a cardinal direction shares a common mythical context. This geography makes a rhombus shape, or, in Huichol language, tšikuri (see picture 2). The structure is the squaring of the duality: above and below, combined with left (utata, also North) and right (tserieta, also South). This conception of space is also complemented by the notion of tikari and tukari, or the opposition between night and day. The territory and in general all the Huichol worldview is based on this opposition: above and below, day and night (Neurath, 2003: 55-64).

Places of worship are deities in and of themselves. To understand the Huichol religious system it is necessary to see it as an interaction between humans and kakaiyarite⁴. That is why Huichol people do not refer to their deities with a conception that distances deities from humans, as their deities are human ancestors, humans who were petrified during mythical times in certain places (which are now sacred). We may even say that the translation of the word kakaiyari does not refer to a god, but to an ancestor, a human being who existed prior to present times.

In the West is Haramaratsie (see picture 3), a white rock located on San Blas beach, Nayarit, in front of La Isla del Rey. Haramaratsie is considered the gateway to the Underworld, which separates the world of the living, the Earth, from the world of the dead, under the sea. As the place where the Sun hides, the
West represents darkness and night, called *tikaripa*.

To the East lies *Wirikuta* (see picture 4), the most important place within the geographical complexity of this culture. The most relevant site in this area is the “Cerro Del Amanecer”, *Reu’unar, Reunari* or *Paritekia*, where “Father Sun” shone for the first time. *Wirikuta* is located in the municipality of Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí. In *Wirikuta* the cactus peyote grows, and its harvest is the goal of the pilgrimages performed throughout all the ceremonial centers of the Huichol people.

The myth that describes the connection between this place and the West, its counterpart, is based on the emergence of the ancestors or *kakaiyarite* from the sea and their relocation to the desert. One source described to me this mythical passage in the following manner:

"Previously, I don’t know how many years ago, according to the story of time in the Underworld, the forefathers came out from the sea, searching for a heart (*iyari*), because something was needed then, and they came on a fast, step by step. There are five steps before arriving in Wirikuta. Then they asked "How are we going to do it? Where are we going to find our heart? What are we going to do?” they thought. And they walked, I don’t know how long, until they finally came to Wirikuta where they found the hikuri. And well, after that, all the ancestors assembled there because they had found their heart. They gathered and left their belongings, their gourd bowls, and knowledge. And then there were the gourd bowls related to Wirikuta, connected with the sacred places. That is why it is important, because the center of the Universe, of the planet, is there".

Neurath (2003) explains that, the first one who came out from the sea was the deer, ‘our oldest brother, the one who walks into the dawn' *Tamatsi Paritsika*. The other gods followed him. Some versions of the myth say it was a deer-hunt, others are based on the idea that the ancestors were looking for 'the place where the Sun rises'. Finally, according to this passage, peyote was created because hunters were tracking a deer. When the deer got to Wirikuta, he voluntarily surrendered to the first hunters, and due to his self-sacrifice, he turned into peyote. Hunters devoured him, and by doing so, they experienced the effects of this psychotropic cactus and underwent a shamanic initiation. Thus, they became *kakaiyari*.
with Haramaratisie) is regarded as the Tukaripa, the light and the day, the place inhabited by the souls who followed the traditions and knew how to teach them to their communities.

picture 4. Wirikuta, desert where the ancestors live

In order to understand the preservation of memory and the conflicts in this land, it is necessary to use the example of the pilgrimage to Wirikuta to explain why the quest for visions, by means of peyote ingestion, is a way of cultural resistance.

The pilgrimage to Wirikuta: Memory and cultural defense.

To discuss a ritual event as a way to preserve memory is to transfer the mythological context to the lived social reality. The pilgrimage, as I already explained in the previous section, is the recreation of the mythological past by means of a step by step journey that follows the path ancestors traced until Reu’unar, where the Sun reaches its height.

Recreating this journey is not only to comply with ‘the custom', but to face the everyday difficulties that can arise. Thus, not only does the territory become a ritual space but also a space of resistance. In the following lines I will briefly narrate the development of such a journey from my experience as a member of the pilgrimage to Wirikuta, emphasizing what I think are the key points of the pilgrimage and the moments that demonstrate the exercise of collective memory through ritualty and quest for visions, or nierika.

The pilgrimage is carried out in the dry season, between the months of March and April, by the tukite. The journey begins in the Sierra Madre Occidental and reaches the so-called 'Altiplano Potosino'. The end of it is in the Reu’unar or Cerro del Quemado, in the municipality of Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí.

It was one day before the beginning of the pilgrimage. This evening is devoted to performing a ‘purification ceremony’. All pilgrims confess their sexual excesses, since they must enter the wilderness of Wirikuta completely free of ‘sins'. If even one of them is impure at the onset of the pilgrimage, it is probable that the full pilgrimage is going to fail. It is from this moment that each xukurikame ceases to have a human condition. They acquire the name and personality of the deity that he or she represents. That personality is represented by the fact that in each day of the pilgrimage they are named with the title of the office they are carrying out. They ‘go to’ the mythical time of creation. When all have obtained a distinct personality the pilgrimage can be considered started.

The next day, all the attendees were summoned by the kawiterutsiri. The Nauxa devoted this time to give a speech about the beginning of this journey and the danger that pilgrims or community members might suffer if the journey were to be unsatisfactorily fulfilled. Afterward, all the pilgrims formed a circle with the Nauxa in the Middle. He pulled a long rope and passed it among the pilgrims,
tying together the participants to close the circle. At this moment in the ceremony, the following prohibitions were established: each participant must fast during the days of the pilgrimage; avoid consuming salt, and abstaining from sexual acts. ‘A sense of “communitas” begins to be felt among the pilgrims’ (Kindl, 2003: 112).

The prohibitions are representations of the removal from human life and the personification of purity. Salt is not consumed because since historical times it has been associated with the sea in the Haramara, where life began. They practice sexual abstinence because it is necessary to stop procreation. Lastly, fasting represents self-sacrifice, a cornerstone of Huichol culture (Gutiérrez del Angel, 2002: 174).

That night we slept in a place close to the entrance of the desert. The ceremony was similar to the previous ceremony, since before they enter the desert they must carry out gradual purification ceremonies. The following day was devoted to visiting various sacred places before actually entering the desert of Wirikuta. Almost all these sacred sites are springs or places where the female deities related to water and fertility live.

At the end of this first day, the pilgrims arrived in the town of Las Margaritas, in the municipality of Real de Catorce. The pilgrims rested here, since the following day was going to be one of great significance. It was going to be the day when the peyote hunt would take place. It is called the peyote hunt because, like the deer, peyote allows people to hunt it in order to share its wisdom with them. It introduces humans to the nierika, a vision that goes beyond what humans can see. Not only do they harvest peyote, but they also have a meeting with one of their most important deities.

Very early in the morning, two groups are taken separately to go peyote hunting. Each group must find a ‘family of peyotes', that is, a group of peyote shoots or sprouts. There must be at least five sprouts in the peyote family. In each hunting group there must be a mara'akame that guides the pilgrims and knows where to find the plant. By means of the mwieri they locate the place. When the hunting groups are in front of the peyote family, they dramatize the hunt by sticking an arrow, in the center of the group of peyote sprouts they identify as the 'iyari of Kaayumari'.

After this dramatization each pilgrim continues to look for peyote on their own, in order to take the cactus back to their communities. At the end of the search they return to the place where they found the family of peyotes, bringing with them all the collected ones. They present their peyotes to the mara'akame so he can bless them. The mara'akame looks towards the 'Cerro del Quemado' and thanks all the ancestors who live in the place for allowing the Huichol to meet them through the peyote. All the xukurikate pray and they even cry. This is the moment when they establish a reciprocity relationship with the ancestors who live in Wirikuta. The mara'akame blesses each peyote presented by the pilgrims with his mwieri. Then he touches the pilgrims' cheeks with the peyote and finally all the pilgrims split the peyote into sections and consume it. After this event, they paint their faces with uxan. They draw figures that represent many mythological beings (see picture 6), and; spread the same paint on their ceremonial objects.
Painting mythological figures, particularly on the face, has to do with the concept of the nierika in the ritual action. After having eaten peyote they are in the state of nierika. In this state they can see and communicate with their ancestors.

Well into the night, the xukurikate dance around a bonfire, representing the mythical moment when their ancestors created the universe. The atmosphere is between ceremonial and festive, and it marks the fact that the pilgrims have changed personalities. It is a decisive night that establishes the gap between before and after the consumption of peyote. From now on, its consumption becomes a true communion.

When arriving at the Tukipa, all the pilgrims are received by their relatives, to whom they distribute small pieces of peyotes. This is a moment of satisfaction for all: the pilgrims share the object that brought them close to the world of their ancestors. It is a festive day, and one would expect no less, since the completion of such a journey means these men now have the well-being of their culture in their hands. At last, everyone abandon their sacred identities and rejoin the habitual life of the community.

At the end of this section I want to briefly relate the issues that this culture has faced on recent years along its sacred territory to the ritual performance stated before. Since 2005 the Mexican Government has given mining concessions to Canadian companies (at least 22, all around Wirikuta area and surroundings). Thanks to the political mobilization of Huichol people and its
alliances with civil society and human rights organizations, in September of 2013 the federal courts detained all the mining work over this territory. It is necessary for this article to highlight that, during these mobilizations; rituality was the main point of why Wirikuta is defended. While this movement was happening, on the communities was spreading the word that Huichol people “cannot allow the pilgrimages to be stopped”, and that if they keep on doing them, probably ancestors would tell them what resistance measurements they could take to defend Wirikuta. Basically this article is aimed to that point, to show how rituality could be a way of defense and turn into an ideal for indigenous cultures.

Conclusion: Resistance from the indigenous perspective

The pilgrimage described above is not only a ritual for Huichol people, but it is also a way to endure difficulties and other adversities that may come. The nierika is what allows them to endure. When I asked the pilgrims what nierika means they told me "it is the gift of seeing." They explained: “When you eat peyote you feel dizzy, but if you’re a good person the kakaiyarite help you, they guide you and tell you many things you need to know." The nierika is indeed a result of peyote consumption; therefore, the peyote is the Huichol communion that allows the reproduction of the mythical memory in each individual who consumes it.

As we may also observe the ritual action generates resistance and peyote consumption leads to defense. Ritual action is the resistance of the Huichol people because it is the medium they consider effective to protect their territory. This territory is understood as a "devotional region" where the sacred spaces are a symbol of self-identification, and pilgrimage means the reproduction of their culture in its entirety. If they cease to perform the ritual action, they would lose what is sacred to them. As they say: "without the pilgrimage, without the peyote, we simply do not exist. We need it to be healthy, to have a good harvest, to pass on the wisdom of the ancestors on our children and grandchildren." Peyote consumption is their defense, because they receive dreamlike revelations originating from ancient wisdom; it is the wisdom that is transmitted to the mara'akate shamans and the initiates; it is the wisdom that allows them to carry out what their forefathers told them for their own good. In all, it is truly important for this culture, to defend the territory through sacred traditions against any adversity that may come, so communication with the ancestors would be the source of knowing what to do.

Finally, with this paper I would like to convey that through the indigenous perspective we can find different ways to live. We can find different forms to defend life in the face of oncoming adversities.

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References

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Notes

1 In this work the terms sacred territory, sites, spaces and sacred geography are used interchangeably.

2 Tukipa in plural. Name assigned to the Huichol Ceremonial Center.

3 For 'sistema de cargos', or system of offices, I understand that a number of trades are chosen, in this case, by the Council of elders. It is taken in turns among the members of the community for specific periods of time. The offices are arranged hierarchically and are associated with two areas: one political and the other religious. Every 'cargueño' must comply with certain specific tasks assigned to them. To carry out these tasks involves a huge economic and physical effort, but at the end of the time in that office the person who occupied it will be greatly respected in the community.

4 Word referred to deities or mythical beings.

5 A Huichol concept where the notion of a person is usually translated as heart or memory.

6 A mara’akame, that is part of the Council of Elders. He coordinates the deposit of offerings at the sacred sites.

7 A small rod, with feathers of an eagle or turkey fastened to its tip. It is the main instrument used by the mara’akame for achieving communication with the ancestors.
Yellow paint used to mark the faces of the 'peyoteros' who have consumed peyote on the pilgrimage. It comes from a wild root located in the holy place of 'Uxatikip, in the vicinity of Wirikuta.
This book argues for the vital importance of the concept of liminality in the theorisation of modernity and as a paradigm that helps us to understand the link between transition and the gestation of new cultural forms, and in particular, the genesis of modernity itself. Not only does the author argue for the centrality of liminality in historical socio-cultural processes and in the history of subjectivity, but, following the work of Arpad Szakolczai, he argues that permanent liminality is at the very core of modern life, and that this liminality without limits also configures many of the more destructive excesses of modernity. The workings of liminality are illustrated through an effective and lucid analysis of social forms from ancient times to the present, from bungee jumping and gambling to social revolutions. In addition to this, and of particular note, is the author’s passionate engagement with the work and life of Arnold van Gennep, the founding father of studies on liminality and a most marginalised figure within the French academic establishment during his lifetime. Possibly one of the most important of the many achievements of the book is the interest it will renew for the work of this great foundational thinker.

Since the publication of the works of Victor Turner, whose exploration of the concept of liminality as initially formulated by Arnold van Gennep facilitated a huge interdisciplinary engagement with the concept, liminality has interested scholars from many different fields, from folklorists, to anthropologists, to performance theorists and beyond. Most notable in the Irish context is possibly Pádraig Ó Riain’s engagement with van Gennep’s work in his analysis of Suibhne Geilt (1972), and Angela Bourke’s analysis of the liminality of both the keen and keening women (1980), followed by Joseph Falaky Nagy’s seminal work on Finn as a liminal figure (1985). Thomassen’s work is of relevance to all of these fields, from Celtic studies to anthropology to performance studies, as it marks one of the most significant theoretical (re-)engagements with liminality and the work of van Gennep in recent years.

Thomassen’s account of the life of van Gennep makes for almost compulsive reading – as indeed it is a tale that needs to be told – for van Gennep, a prolific scholar of immense capacity was an outcast of academia, literally ‘taken out’ by his formidable rival Durkheim. Indeed, Durkheim’s success in apparently eradicating van Gennep as a threat or a rival during his own time had serious consequences thereafter for the reception of van Gennep’s work within sociology, and it is this imbalance that Thomassen hopes to redress. Thomassen has certainly succeeded in defending van Gennep’s honour long after
the fact, clearly arguing for the superiority of van Gennep’s life work to that of Durkheim. Part of the tale of van Gennep’s ‘expulsion’ from sociology is of course the blossoming of his role as the founder of Folklore Studies in France, although the author importantly notes that ‘the turn to folklore was not an abandonment of anthropology and sociology for van Gennep never perceived these to be entirely different disciplines’ (42). This attests to the sheer integrity and resilience of van Gennep as a scholar, of course, who, despite his remarkable work never held even one academic post within France during his lifetime. The rebellious and astute van Gennep emerges as a heroic though tragic figure in Thomassen’s account, and the field of sociology emerges as what it is: human, political, fallible. Thomassen here succeeds in no small way in humanising the culture of thought and academia reminding us of what we know all so well –that academic culture is not neutrally objective, and that the course of a discipline is determined as much by politics and human interaction as it is by great ideas. The tale of Durkheim and van Gennep is one of the established and the outsider.

Thomassen succeeds in his argument for the relevance of van Gennep’s ground breaking work in our conceptualisation of modernity and its genesis. Here van Gennep’s tripartite structure is applied to the emergence of both modern political forms and modern forms of thought. The author proposes an interesting analysis of Kant, a figure synonymous with the birth of modern philosophy, as responding to the cataclysmic liminal disorder of the Lisbon Earthquake (1755) resulting in ‘a stern belief in technology’s promise to liberate man from the destructive power of nature’ (98) and a pre-occupation with ‘world-mastery as a path of salvation’ (99). The very core of ‘rationalist’ Western thought is seen here by Thomassen as responding directly to the dissolution of order, and furthermore that the fluidity of liminality enabled the development of these new modes of thought. These ‘critical liminal junctures’ also figure in his analysis of the work of Hobbes and Descartes and in his reading of the ‘transcendence’ so characteristic of secular thought in modernity. For the author, this ‘transcendence’ is considered to be a combining of the sacred and the secular, a ‘reorganization of Christian Theology into the worldly realm of politics and thought’ (116). He thus argues that both Hobbes and Descartes responded in their thinking to what Voegelin termed an ‘age of great confusion’ and which the author terms ‘an age of great anxiety’ (114). The role of liminality in our conceptualisation of the history of thought is here analysed, revealing how histories of experience are linked by Thomassen both to histories of the state and histories of the self: ‘The concept of liminality has its relevance to political and social theory precisely here, as it was developed by anthropologists to make sense of human experience and processes of subjectivication during moments of dissolution, in other words, during social and political crises...’ (118). This concept of axial moments and of these wholesale liminal experiences that can generate new forms of subjectivity, thought and political organisation is further developed by the author in the chapter entitled ‘Liminal Politics: Towards and Anthropology of Political Revolutions’ (191-213) in which he ultimately argues for the liminal origins of political modernity.

The implosion of liminality in modernity is described by the author himself as the guiding idea of the book: that limitless liminality which is now so central to the modern way of life in which ‘limit experiences’ turn into norm, a frenzy that never really cools down’ (11). In this sense, Thomassen has succeeded in renewing the dialogue between anthropology and social theory, a holistic
approach initially championed by van Gennep himself. This homage to van Gennep is most acutely felt in the concluding chapter in which Thomassen proposes the concept of ‘feeling-at-home in the world’ (in contrast to the impetus toward constant transformation in modernity) as a key consideration for contemporary thinkers. Indeed the importance of the third stage of the ritual process as initially outlined by van Gennep is reiterated here whereby it is argued that liminality should provide a ‘rhythm’ to life rather than engulf it. His concluding remarks indeed give much food for thought: ‘the role of human beings in the universe is not to erect order, create schemes, concepts and models and then impose these upon an unstructured chaos, to “build the world” from scratch. … Instead, our role in this universe and on this planet – the only one we have – should rather be to humbly ‘tune in’ to the beauty of the world. Or, as van Gennep put it, join the great rhythms of the Universe’ (229).

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BOOK REVIEW
THE DOMESTIC, MORAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF POST-CELTIC TIGER IRELAND: WHAT ROUGH BEAST?

KIERAN KEOHANE & CARMEN KUHLING

REVIEW BY TOM BOLAND

This is the third book in a series from Keohane and Kuhling, on each occasion mixing anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic and philosophical styles of analysis to illuminate the broader transformations of Irish Society, taking in larger processes and specific impacts. The subtitle cites Yeats’ The Second Coming, which signals not just a sense of impending cataclysm, but also suggests a new direction of interpretation, the use of literature and mythology to make sense of the contemporary world, and the transformations of our domestic, moral and political economies.

While many analyses position the contemporary crises, the great recession, social fragmentation, neo-liberalism, growing inequality and such like as unprecedented challenges, Keohane and Kuhling read these as a recursive eruption of historical currents. Present dilemmas are specific, different and unpredictable, yet they are not wholly new. So, following Vico, Benjamin, Joyce and others, the authors suggest that literature and mythology contain intellectual resources which have been tested over time for understanding acute crises and transformations. Indeed, the authors even gently suggest that many present-centred, positivist, post-modern and even critical approaches lack historical depth in thinking through the present.

The authors deploy a transdisciplinary arsenal of concepts, drawing strongly on anthropology – particularly Turner, Girard, Bateson and Mauss – and historical sociology, from Weber, Foucault and others. Plato is discussed at length as an analyst of crises analogous to our own age in Ancient Greece, particularly the endless circuits of desire. However, it is the use of myth which marks this book as most innovative; there is some tendency to focus on Greek and to a lesser extent Roman myth, but Irish myth features also, as does contemporary popular culture. The book opens by reading the contemporary financial crises in terms of zombies, vampires and Frankensteinian monsters. Noting that the term ‘monstrare’ means to show – as in ‘to demonstrate’ – the authors illustrate how contemporary popular culture attempts to understand the mindlessness, bloodsucking thirst and mechanisation within itself.

How does this engagement with mythology enrich our understanding of the contemporary world? The first section engages with housing and the market, picking up on the obsession with property in contemporary Ireland, but making connections to financial institutions and the transformation of the home into a market asset for self-seeking individuals. These are commonplaces of social commentary, but the authors turn to anthropology to demonstrate how the home is a quasi-universal seat of value and security. Yet, market forces and
imitative individualism – akin to the Greek messenger-god Hermes – disrupt the home, leading to a contagious spiral of desires, not only the continuous art of ‘trading-up’ but also in the proliferation of desires which leads to the disintegration of the domestic family unit. Even the hearth of reciprocal gift relations – the domain of Hestia, goddess of the Hearth who represents measure, balance and care – cannot withstand this whirlwind of desires.

While completed in early 2014, the book anticipates the growth of the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland, and suggests it could be palliated by the anthropological gift of the hearth, re-distributing ghost estates and NAMA houses to those in need. Beyond this, the authors then enlarge their focus to the collective household of the EU, and the state-level question of the gift of redistribution via tax, which is increasingly problematic in the face of the growing power of rootless international companies. Again, the authors turn to mythology, the Roman cult of Vesta and the founding of the city, a primordial ‘Treaty of Rome’ which indicates the primordial importance of gift relations, and the preservation of the ‘mundus’ – the collective resource of the polity, a treasure or resource which is often the cause of war, but ultimately can only be preserved by peace. Yet, outlier states, bandits and rogues resist the obligation to con’tribute’ to this collective resource, just as Ireland becomes an off-shore pirate cove for low taxes, low regulation or even no taxes and diverting taxes justly due to other states.

So, the mythological framework sheds light on both the micro and macro level in equal measure. Mythology becomes a method of interpretation. For instance, in their most conventionally ethnographic chapter, the authors gather stories of the Shell Oil pipeline in Rossport, but rather than following straight-forward discourse analysis, perhaps with the focus on resistance and social movement formation, the authors re-read the story in terms of the Tāin, as a war over resources, which not only tramples ordinary people under companies’ pursuit of profit and state imperatives for development and jobs, but ultimately as degrading the bounty and fertility of the land through pollution and global warming.

Besides being a fascinating interpretation of many more topics than can be listed here, this book contributes a challenge to how we do interpretation. It suggests that contemporary thinkers need to avail of the great gifts of tradition that are preserved in myth and literature. Perhaps the standard riposte might be that these are merely narratives, which will occlude and override the genuine lived experiences of those whom we are trying to understand. Yet, such a claim presumes that when we think and interpret, we can do so on a ‘blank slate’, merely registering and recognising the stories that people tell about themselves. Like Bataille, the authors realise that ‘the absence of myth’ is the only ‘true myth’; that there is no neutral intellectual position devoid of traditions of thought. Indeed, the next step in the discussion should perhaps be to attempt to provide a mythologically inspired interpretation of how intellectuals, academics and theorists position themselves as objective, rational and critical.

At the very least, Keohane and Kuhling provoke their readers to rethink core contemporary concerns through illuminating myths. Such an approach may not tell the ‘whole truth’ in the sense of an exhaustive and transparent account, but it does make room for the much more important quality of interpreting and recognising. Returning to myth is an important part of remembrance, restoring connections to human experience and resisting the post-historical account of
the exceptionality of the present moment. Memories of transitions and crises in the past can help us to see that the present is not the inevitable and permanent reality.

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