

Tina Otten & Uwe Skoda (Eds.)

# **DIALOGUES WITH GODS**

Possession in Middle Indian Rituals

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Cover photo: ©Tina Otten, photographed by Sunny Suna. A medium embraces an idol during a *bali yatra* in Nabarangpur.

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## NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Marine Carrin**, Director of Research emeritus, Centre d'Anthropologie Sociale, Toulouse, France. She currently works on ritual and power in Central Eastern India and Karnataka. Her recent publications include *A Peripheral Encounter, Santals, Missionaries and their Changing Worlds* (with Harald Tambs-Lyche, 2008) and *Voices from the Periphery* (with Lidia Guzy, 2012). A book on Santal Ritual Discourse is in press.

**Lidia Guzy**, currently Lecturer in Contemporary South Asian religions at Study of Religions Department, University College Cork, National University of Ireland, is a social anthropologist, scientist of religions and South Asia expert. Her research focuses on ethnomusicology, Adivasi religions and marginalised and endangered worldviews. Her recent publications are *Marginalised Music. Music Religion and Politics from Western Odisha* (2013) and *Voices from the Periphery. Subalternity and Empowerment* (with Marine Carrin 2012).

**Katherine Hacker** is an art historian teaching historical and contemporary South Asian art and architecture at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Her research interests focus on the intersection between visual culture and cultural politics in colonial and contemporary India. She has published articles in the journals *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* and *Museum Anthropology* and her book *Crafting Bastar: Visual Culture in Rural India* is forthcoming.

**Roland Hardenberg** is Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Head of Department at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. He presently focuses on ritual economics and leads a research project on religious resources and the conversion of values in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and Iran) and India (Orissa). His recent publications include *The Renewal of Jagannatha's Body. Ritual and Society in Coastal Orissa* (2011).

**Beatrix Hauser** is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Alpen-Adria-University of Klagenfurt, Austria. Her current research interests include changing aesthetics of Indian Ramlila performances, visibility and political performance, translocal cultural flows as well as the intersection of health and religion in anglophone postural yoga. Recently she edited “Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective” (2013) and authored “Promising Rituals: Gender and Performativity in Eastern India” (2012).

**Cornelia Mallebrein**, Indologist, Anthropologist and art historian, affiliated with the University of Tübingen, concentrates her research on the living traditions of folk and tribal India. Her recent research discusses the present religious and cultures change and the questions of conversion. She has organized important exhibitions in India and the West on rituals and art of India. Her publications include *The Divine Play on Earth. Religious Aesthetics and Ritual in Orissa* (2008) and *Die vertauschten Götter. Religionswechsel in Indien* (2011, in German).

**Tina Otten** is Lecturer at Ruhr University Bochum and affiliated researcher at the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where she is presently involved in a project about rural change and anthropological knowledge in post-colonial India. She has worked on medical belief systems, oral epics, rituals and social and political-economic changes in rural Odisha.

**Nicolas Prévôt** is currently a Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology of the University Paris Ouest Nanterre and member of the Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie (CREM-LESC, CNRS). He has conducted fieldwork in Middle India (Bastar, Chhattisgarh State) and in the Southern Balkans (Macedonia). His research focuses on the ontology and the power of music, especially in ritual contexts.

**Uwe Skoda**, Ph.D. is Associate Professor, South Asian Studies, at the Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark. Currently, he is working on transformations of kingship in a former

princely state combining anthropological approaches with historical perspectives and a distinct regional focus on Odisha and Central-Eastern India. The project includes the relations between former rulers and Adivasi communities in the area. Starting from royal archives his research interests have increasingly shifted to photography and visual culture more generally, while his other research foci include political anthropology, specifically Indian domestic politics and Hindu-nationalism, as well as social organisation and kinship. He recently edited “Navigating Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Contemporary India and beyond” (2013, London: Anthem Press - edited together with Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger), and “Chronicles of the Royal Family of Bonai (Odisha)” (2013, Delhi: Manohar – co-edited with Rashmi Pramanik).

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# INTRODUCTION

*Tina Otten and Uwe Skoda*

## **Audio-dialogues**

‘Dialogue’ as such is not a novel concept. Rather, dialogues are often seen as a ‘basic component of human life and reality, something essential to human existence’ (Göranzon, Florin, Sällström 1988, 280). In choosing this focus for the volume, however, we were clearly inspired by Vitebsky’s seminal monograph on ‘Dialogues with the dead’ – also located in Middle India –, in which he meticulously analysed the Soras’ discussions of mortality – primarily in the form of verbal communication between the living and the dead – the latter speaking through shamans in trance. As Vitebsky argues:

‘In dialogues between living and dead, speakers persuade, cajole, tease, remind, deceive, plead with each other. Dialogues represent a mutual quest for awareness about the other person’s state of mind. At the same time, they are the medium through which each person’s being is constantly moulded. Living and dead people cause each other to do things through dialogues at the same time as they are themselves changed by these encounters. Each person is an agent, but at the same time is acted upon and does not simply return to his or her previous state.’ (1993, 5)

While the emphasis on verbal interactions with the dead and the ‘verbal articulacy’ of the Sora shamans – ‘word-play’ being according to Vitebsky (1993, 10) the primary art-form among them – might be unique, communication with other beings, not only between people, and particularly with the divine sphere is relatively widespread in Middle India. Yet, such interactions – as verbal and non-verbal communication – between gods, spirits on the one hand and humans on the other

hand have been rather neglected so far and have never been systematically scrutinized for the region.

The notion of ‘dialogue’ in its original Greek understanding seems particularly apt in this context. As Bohm et al. (1991) has stressed: ‘The word “dialogue” derives from two roots: “dia” which means “through” and “logos” which means “the word”, or more particularly, “the meaning of the word”. The image it gives is of a river of meaning flowing around and through the participants.’ In the empirical cases presented in this volume communication is commonly facilitated by possessed mediums through whom others often articulate themselves. While in case of the Sora dialogues the dead interact with the living we shift the focus to the gods. However, the Soras’ verbal exchanges, indeed, share a range of common features with the dialogues assembled here – not only that such divinations are intrinsically linked to mediums, but also to sacrifices as well as to healing and to transformations of the actors.

Yet, we argue for a broader understanding of the concept of dialogue beyond ‘simple’ verbal communication (see Wierzbicka 2006). We look at various valued forms of communicative [inter-]actions and exchanges between individuals and groups and at processes, often highly formalized as Hauser (in this volume) emphasizes, as well as people incited and motivated in various ways to achieve certain goals, while being often highly emotionally charged. We consider Middle Indian ‘arenas’ and occasions which may or may not be ‘entertaining, enlightening, [but] lead to new insights or address existing problems’ (Bohm et al. 1991).

Focusing on dialogues raises the question of language used in such divinations. Are the utterances of deities comprehensible to common people? As Mallebrein exemplifies in this volume, deities or higher spirits often use human bodies in order to manifest as ‘living gods on earth’. Temporarily assembled gods inhabit mediums who might then ride in wooden chairs or ‘play’ on large wooden swings. Their male bodies often habitually ‘ridden’ by local goddesses are transformed as Hacker (in this volume) documents into female goddesses and dressed accordingly in female dresses. They can be directly approached and addressed while on earth and often do respond. Such dialogues allow humans to bring up all kinds of problems concerning their families or

village and to follow the instructions of the gods to solve them. Yet, as Carrin shows in her contribution, not all gods speak and divine speech may not be [easily] understood by humans or might be incomprehensible. Instead, gods might use their own language. This language introduced by Prévôt is often rich in metaphors and can be codified by expressions in couplets and interspersed with meaningless syllables, or as Hardenberg states gods speak in pairs and in metaphors the common people – except for a few phrases – cannot understand.

This language has to be understood and translated by fellow humans who are experts in dealing with the invisible world. Divine responses may require the help of specialists and their interpretational skills. The dialogues with gods – like the access to them and to the interpreters – are often structured by power relationships as in Skoda's article on a Zamindar's verbal interaction with a goddess or in Otten's paper the recitation of an epic through women of status-high landholding families illustrates.

Interestingly, apart from literary or dramatic compositions the Webster dictionary lists two central meanings of dialogue. It is

- a) more narrowly defined as conversations, discussions or exchanges of ideas or opinions and
- b) seen as 'a musical composition for two or more parts suggestive of a conversation' (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialogue-30/05/2012>).

These non-verbal, musical dialogues also form an essential part of a communication with the divine in Middle India as Guzy and Prévôt (in this volume) convincingly demonstrate. In Guzy's case study the music is not only of central importance for the ritual transformation of the human priest into the medium and divine manifestation of goddesses, during the performance the musicians employ a certain sequence of holy rhythms named after certain goddesses and representing their speeches and characters. Similarly, the musicians in Prévôt's case, playing the music for the deities, become central actors of the event. The mediums possessed by the deities ask for their corresponding tune to be played so that the deity can participate in the 'play of the

gods', which also includes shouting, gesticulating, and dancing. Otten describes with the example of the *bali yatra* ritual a similar theme: the gods are invited to come to a shrine by certain tunes of music and a recitation of an epic. Music and recitation through the mediums form the dialogue with the spiritual sphere and set the framework for understanding the creational process.

Thus, including music and sounds into our discussion of the theme the authors of this volume present 'audio-dialogues' with the divine rather than simply oral/verbal dialogues alone, while their contributions themselves – all being based on fieldwork in Middle India – are brought into a new dialogue for the first time.

## Rituals

Like 'audio-dialogues', the term 'ritual' is an analytical, etic construct and often runs the risk of being ethnocentric when defined. In fact, as an academic umbrella term for various actions, compared and theorized as 'ritual', it was not only a paramount concept in nineteenth and early twentieth century sociology, religious science and ethnology, but remains influential till today. We may recall here briefly how Durkheim (1912) claims that religion is a product of society, societies worship themselves and therefore rituals serve to create solidarity or how Arnold van Gennep (1960[1905]) argues that rituals serve to confirm the social order and that societies worldwide conduct rituals to mark transitions from one status to another. Both theories have subsisted a century, but there have been ample variations of discussions how to define rituals. In various definitions a basic agreement about the concept of ritual is that it is distinguishable from other actions of everyday life, but approaches differ in the definition what distinguishes a ritual from everyday actions. David Kertzer, looking specifically at political rituals elsewhere, defines ritual as 'action wrapped in a web of symbolism' and 'symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive' (1988, 9). He follows Geertz (1973) who, exploring a hermeneutic approach, argues that the anthropologist should decode the symbols of rituals through the participants instead of studying social structures.

Stressing an insiders' view, Geertz claims that only people who are involved deeply in a ritual know the meaning of the symbols.

In another approach, ritual materializes as a quality of action rather than a class of events. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 121) claim that the commitment, the intention to perform a ritual is the distinctive factor. Their turn to investigate the practice of rituals in the 1990s, but also the previous work of Turner (1967, 1986) and Schechner and Schuman (1976) to explore parallels between ritual and drama, has subsequently drawn attention towards how rituals are performed and experienced by their participants (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, see also Hauser 2012, this volume). The persons, who enact rituals, are not seen as mere executors of a given framework, but as agents, who actively reproduce or alter patterns of rituals, even though as Humphrey and Laidlaw stress, the actors both are, and are not, the authors of their acts (1994, 5).

Together with Tambiah (1979), one of the leading scholars of a performative approach, we would like to stress the communicative, often dialogical dimension of rituals. He defines ritual in the following way: 'Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It consists of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), redundancy (repetition)' (Tambiah 1985, 124). Drawing on ritual action, Tambiah reasons that its constitutive features are first the Austrian sense of performance, which means that saying also means doing something, second as a staged performance that uses multiple media and participants that experience the event intensively, and third in the sense of indexical values being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance.

In a recent study on ritual dynamics Michaels focuses on the question of a 'grammar of ritual'. He stresses the fact that this is a desideratum, since scholars have and are defining the rules of rituals in linguistic terms and linguistics itself includes non-verbal communication (2010, 7). According to Michaels, 'Frits Staal and Lawson and McCauley have taken preliminary steps in this direction by concentrating on

the syntax of rituals', while already Franz Boas remarked in *The Mind of Primitive Men* (1911) that in its unconscious elements ritual resembles language. Michaels fills a gap by investigating the 'corresponding specification of the "morphology", "syntax", "semantics" and "pragmatics" of rituals' (ibid: 9).

Thus, we conceive ritual as part of the social process, as a language, and as an agent that influences the social as well. From its early definitions, indicated above, the concept of ritual has travelled a long way and debates do not merely focus on the stability or instability of social structure, but its relation to language, and in this field, besides its other similarities with linguistics, its communicative aspects. Authors in this volume investigate the communication and therefore often dialogues with the divine. This includes social change and stratification in rituals, suffering and illness, gender roles and identity, as well as how the ritual actors creatively approach 'rituals', embody or perform their roles and may even transform social structures through individual, social and political processes in central-eastern India.

## **Possession**

All contributions in this volume do not only focus on rituals broadly, but more specifically on those involving communicative acts with the divine and almost all of them involving instances of possession – another key concept of this volume. A short glance at the history of definitions illustrates a variety of terms employed and the ideas behind (for deeper analyses we would like to refer to Boddy 1994, Hauser 2012, Lambek 1989, Mayaram 1999). The term 'possession' has manifold connotations and could be regarded as an umbrella term for phenomena widely recognized throughout the world in the same way as 'ritual'. The broad area of 'possession' was a scholarly topic during every theoretical turn in the discipline, and the difficulty of defining the term might be illustrated in the following.

Possession in British social anthropology in the 1960s and 70s was mostly investigated with the tools of structural functionalism (Beattie and Middleton 1969). Moreover, it was often conceived of as phenom-

therefore require different approaches, according to the society/community/culture in which it is embedded. In this way, this volume welcomes different ‘polythetic’ definitions of ‘possession’.

## The region ‘Middle India’

In our understanding of Middle India we generally agree with Georg Pfeffer’s definition of the region as

‘the broad belt of land in the middle of the subcontinent, [that] comprises the huge territory between the rivers Ganges in the north and Godavari in the south, while the Bay of Bengal forms the eastern and the Aravalli Range the western limit.’ (Pfeffer 2004, 386).

In this volume, however, we focus more narrowly on Middle India’s eastern side and particularly the Union States of Chhattisgarh (Hacker, Mallebrein, Prévôt), Odisha (Carrin, Guzy, Hauser, Hardenberg, Mallebrein, Otten, Skoda) and southern Bengal (Carrin). This region is mostly characterized by its highlands, hill ranges and plateaus on the one hand and the surrounding lowlands and fertile plains on the other hand. The river Mahanadi flows eastwards from Chhattisgarh through its centre into the Bay of Bengal, with the Chota Nagpur Plateau to the north of the river and the Bastar Plateau and the Eastern Ghats that continue in Andhra Pradesh to the southeast and southwest of it respectively.

Furthermore, the region under study here is known for its relatively low grade of urbanization with little more than 20 percent.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of the population lives in villages – most of them and a few large cities being situated in river valleys and in the intensively cultivated lowlands yielding two to three harvests annually. Among the few large cities are the state capitals Bhubaneswar, Raipur and Ranchi and

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<sup>1</sup> Urban population in Jharkhand ca. 22%, [http://jharkhand.gov.in/new\\_depts/pland/Jharkhand%20Overview.pdf](http://jharkhand.gov.in/new_depts/pland/Jharkhand%20Overview.pdf); Odisha ca. 20%, [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data\\_files/Orissa/5-fig-orissa-9.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/Orissa/5-fig-orissa-9.pdf); Chhattisgarh ca. 23% [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data\\_files/chhattisgarh/chhattisgarh%20PP%20%2011%20%28vol-1%29.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/chhattisgarh/chhattisgarh%20PP%20%2011%20%28vol-1%29.pdf) – all accessed 12/06/2012.

a few centres of heavy industries, particularly steel plants such as Rourkela, Bhilai-Durg and Jamshedpur. Established decades ago in the region rich in minerals and ores they have become hubs of commercial activities in an on-going process of rapid industrialization and migration adding to the existing multilinguism. The region is also dotted with older royal centres, former small town capitals of ‘little kingdoms’ later transformed into princely states – often in the ‘hinterland’ or in close proximity to modern mining. Accordingly, the majority of articles come from rural settings – directly or indirectly saturated with ideas of kingship – while Hauser’s contribution located in Berhampur, now renamed Brahmapur, as another major Odishan city indicates that the occurrence of divinations is by no means limited to the countryside.



Map Middle India

The plateaus, for example, Chota Nagpur with an average altitude of 700 meters, and mountain ranges such as the Eastern Ghats with an average of over 1,000 meters in altitude, are home to various communities such as the Gond (see contributions of Prévôt, Skoda), Kond/Kandha (Hardenberg) or Santal (Carrin) – all classified by the Government of India as Scheduled Tribes (ST). On average, 22 percent to 32 percent of the population fall into the category of ST. However, such average figures are often misleading – given, for example, the higher concentrations of ST-population in the north and south of Chhattisgarh or the western and south-western part of Odisha.<sup>2</sup> They often live in symbiotic relationships with other communities, which, for administrative purposes, have been classified as Scheduled Castes, for example the Ganda (Guzy) – although they share basic tenets with their neighbours within a wider and as such more populous Adivasi society which often differs from a caste society in the more densely populated plains or lowlands. Still other communities are clubbed together under the label ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBC) while sharing the same cultural traits of the other highlanders for example the Rona as a former royal militia or Mali as gardeners (see contribution of Otten). Without arguing that dialogues with gods are limited to Adivasi society, their central involvement in most of the empirical cases presented here is nevertheless striking.

An imaginary journey through the field sites of our contributions highlights the various occasions for rituals of possession in the region throughout the year. We start geographically in the Eastern Ghats and more precisely in Rayagada district of South Odisha, where Hardenberg studied the *bali yatra* of Dongria Kond in the Niamgiri hills. Their *bali yatra*, which is related to agriculture and health, takes place in *phalgun* (February/March) around the time of the full moon.

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2 Jharkhand ca. 26 percent ST population, [http://jharkhand.gov.in/new\\_depts/pland/Jharkhand%20Overview.pdf](http://jharkhand.gov.in/new_depts/pland/Jharkhand%20Overview.pdf); Odisha ca. 22%, [http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/SCST/dh\\_st\\_orissa.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_orissa.pdf) – accessed 04/11/2010; Chhattisgarh ca. 32%, <http://chhattisgarh.nic.in/book/hdr.pdf>. In general the share of ST in urban areas is as low as 2,4% in India – [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/scheduled\\_castes\\_and\\_scheduled\\_tribes.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/scheduled_castes_and_scheduled_tribes.aspx). All webpages accessed 12/06/2012.

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# THE DIVINE PLAY ON EARTH: Forms of Possession in Odisha

*Cornelia Mallebrein*

## Introduction

Protected by mountain ranges in the west and north, Odisha has been shielded from outside influences to a considerable degree.<sup>4</sup> Up until today, it has preserved its unique and rich cultural traditions as expressed in rituals and various forms of art. This great variety of religious expressions has its roots in its 62 different Adivasi groups. One characteristic feature is therefore the multitude of deities who are of tribal origin.

Divine power is experienced as being simultaneously transcendent and immanent. For the devotees, the gods are not confined to a remote puranic heaven, they also manifest themselves among men in different forms, most prominently in a human medium, who, in a state of divine possession, becomes a ‘living god on earth’. The medium, in his role as embodiment of the divine, plays a significant role in the religious landscape of Odisha. The medium becomes the mouthpiece of the divine, a channel of communication between man and god. The fascinating concept of ‘living gods on earth’ is a frequent and important phenomenon not only in Odisha, but all over India. It can be encountered everywhere, in urban villages and tribal settings, and at all levels of society. These deities on earth are thus perceived as being present, and they can be addressed directly. They react immediately to the offer-

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for supporting my research during 1999–2005 as part of the Odisha Research Project (ORPII). The data for this article derive from participant observation and narrative interviews during these years. I am grateful to the editors for their invitation to present my results in this volume. The various sections of this paper are discussed at greater length in my recent book on Odisha, *Divine Play on Earth: Religious Aesthetics and Ritual in Odisha* (2008 b).

## RECOVERING THE LOST SPEECH OF THE GODS: Reframing Discourses of Possession in Odisha and Bengal

*Marine Carrin*

I shall deal with possession episodes reflecting different voices among the Santals, an austro-asiatic tribe which number more than ten millions of individuals, living in Central and Eastern India<sup>86</sup>. Most of the anthropological studies of possession have generally focused on the person of the medium and the client and have neglected the words that are exchanged between men and gods during a possession episode. Among the Santals, there are patients and healers who address the deities in different ways. Though the audience may seem passive, its attentive presence attests to the shared meaning which emerges from these dialogues, defining the Self and the Other in the context of possession. As S. Mayaram (2000, 101) stresses, when analysing possession in Rajasthan:

... one of the most interesting aspects of possession is the way in which it renegotiates the taken-for-grantedness of the distinction between the self and the other. It is able to do so because of a dramatically different conception of personhood.

To simplify there are often two images of the self which oppose one another in the context of possession: a negative image, which is feared

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<sup>86</sup> I have done field-work among the Santals regularly from 1971 to 1993. I came back to Odisha Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj in 2002 and to Jharkhand in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2009 for one month visits as well as to Bengal (1992, 1994, 1995 for one year and a half in all ) and in Assam for a brief visit in 2011. Since 1994, I have also done field-work in North and South Kanara, where I have also worked on some forms of possession (Carrin 1998, 1999, 2011)

## (RE-) CALLING THE GODDESS: The Emergence of Divine Presence<sup>119</sup>

*Beatrix Hauser*

### Introduction

In the last decade of the twentieth century, anthropologists came to look at possession phenomena as cultural meta-commentary to consider ‘alterity’ and ‘otherness’ (Boddy 1994, 422–6). Similar to European (anthropological) discourses on foreign cultures, the social practice of (‘spirit’) possession essentially served as a vehicle to reflect upon and verify self-identity and the boundaries between the own and the ‘other’ (Basu 2002; Behrend and Luig 1999; Boddy 1989; Kramer 1984, 1987; Mayaram 1999; Taussig 1993). Studies along these lines emphasize possession in its capacity as a cultural performance, i. e. they focus on bodily practices, mimesis, dramatic techniques and aesthetics that convey extraordinary and apparently alien forms of behaviour as expressions of a constitutive otherness. However, scholars rarely touch the problematic question of in what respect the possessed actively shape these images, or possibly exercise anything similar to authorship. The bodily state of possession is associated with ‘passiones’ (rather than agency), i. e., with the exposure to an unintended mode of action.<sup>120</sup> But who actually (re-)produces the alterity of possession, in what way, and what forms may the ‘other’ take? Do

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**119** This article is an excerpt from habilitation thesis (Hauser 2012); a fairly different version had been published in German (Hauser 2004). I would like to thank Burkhard Schnepel, Klaus Peter Köpping and Michael Schetsche for their comments on earlier drafts.

**120** The anthropological rediscovery of the concept of *passiones* goes back to Godfrey Lienhardt and was put forward to make sense of the images created during possession episodes by Kramer (1984, 1987). Schnepel (2006: 125, 2008: 123–7) has applied the term to the analysis of Danda Nata performances in Odisha.

the possessed merely follow given stimuli or do they have a hand in the emergence of these figures?

To consider the agency of individuals who are regarded as driven by an exterior power may well challenge emic concepts of possession that imply the temporary suspension of the self (and consequently, amnesia). Moreover, it hints at the problematic assumptions of the Cartesian persona concept in Western culture. Here, mind and body are taken to represent intrinsically different faculties of the human being. Moreover, there is a clear hierarchy of the cognizing mind and the inferior human body devoid of any expressiveness on its own, but rather shaped by cultural and social conditions. Indeed several studies on possession presume a specific (but basically unknown) psychophysical state that is conceived of in cultural terms as deity or spirit possession.<sup>121</sup> From this perspective, to abandon oneself to another force, intention or mood seems to call for an absolute surrender of the body. However, several forms of possession are known to provoke rather patterned forms of behaviour: the host will use highly stylized language, interrupt her or his performance whenever attendants bring offerings and so on. Thus scholars are drawn into obsolete discussions on the levels of ‘dissociation’, on the difference between possession and shamanism or as to the authenticity of the act. All these arguments collapse due to the naturalist paradigm, i. e. the assumption of a pre-discursive altered state of the body that comes prior to its cultural interpretation. To conceive of an altered state of consciousness is also problematic in that it connects to religion as a system of belief. Defining religious practice as a result of (privatized) mental activity reflects a post-Enlightenment Christian approach to religiosity (Asad 1993, 45). This historically specific concept may fail to acknowledge the rationale of those forms of worship that are based on (politically informed) routines and embodiment rather than a certain form of awareness.

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<sup>121</sup> This line of thinking was particularly pronounced by Erika Bourguignon (1976), who distinguished the seemingly physical state of trance from its culture-specific interpretation as possession (for a critique, see Lambek 1989: 37–8).

# BOIL RITUALS IN WESTERN ODISHA<sup>139</sup> — On Goddess Spirit Possession, Music and Healing in Indian Religiosity

*Lidia Guzy*

## The Goddess in Indian Religiosity

Besides the powerful male gods in Indian religious traditions – as Vishnu or Shiva – multiple local goddesses exist in India<sup>140</sup>. They are called *Devi* (goddess) or also *Ma* (mother). The *devi* or *ma* alone is considered to create and to destroy the world and the cosmos. She is omnipotent and associated with the idea of *shakti*, an Indian theory of religious power<sup>141</sup>. This power concept is of an ambivalent character as the goddess has a creative and destructive power at the same time. She can kill and she can create. The cults of the goddess are especially powerful and important for believers in rural regions of India. But also within urban sacred places the worship of the goddess has an important impact on the life of her believers. Through pilgrimages<sup>142</sup> for instance religious mobility and personal devotion levels differences between rural or urban contexts.

Altars of local goddesses are scattered everywhere: on the crossroads, under big trees, on the earth. For her believers, the local goddesses show themselves in an aniconic form: as stones, as quarries, as eruptions of the earth, as waterfalls, rivers<sup>143</sup> or as other natural phenomena. The goddesses have many names. One can not count the divers names of the goddesses. Many local cults of goddesses are for ex-

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<sup>139</sup> For more details on musical traditions of Western Odisha see Guzy (2013).

<sup>140</sup> See: Kinsley 1985; Wilke, Annette, Axel Michaels and Cornelia Vogelsanger 1994; Fischer, Eberhard, B. N. Goswamy and Dinanath Pathy 2005.

<sup>141</sup> See: Wadley 1975.

<sup>142</sup> See Bakker, Hans and Alan Entwistle (ed.) 1983.

<sup>143</sup> See here especially: Stietencron 1972.

ample integrated into the supra-regional worship of the goddess Kali or Durga. The worship of Kali is a good example for the integration of local indigenous cults into more supra-regional traditions often labelled as the Hinduisation of local or indigenous cults<sup>144</sup>.

The meaning of the goddess for her believers is enormous. The goddess in her manifold manifestations is responsible for the fate of one's life: she gives life, she takes it, she can change it benevolently through advices coming by dreams and she can change it through destructive intrusions in form of a dangerous illness, as for example through the disease chicken pox. The live-giving and life-taking power and energy of the goddess is uncontrolled but nonetheless can be appeased and positively influenced by the right worship for her.

### **Modes of ritual communication with the Goddess**

The worshipper of the goddess gains access to the Goddess through multiple forms and as below listed I shall concentrate on three forms of access.

1) The first access can be the ritual offering, the sacrifice:

This offering can be a vegetarian sacrifice as the offering of fruits or of specific male flowers<sup>145</sup>. It also can be a real or symbolic animal sacrifice<sup>146</sup>, as the goddess needs life, in order to give life. Blood of domestic animals in rural and tribal ritual contexts of India means this life-giving energy. In Indian tribal contexts buffaloes are for example periodically sacrificed for the Earth Goddess, for the well-being of the community<sup>147</sup> and for the pursue of the cult of the ancestors. Those sacrifices are of extreme importance for the power of regeneration given by the goddess. In Hindu rural contexts smaller animals such as hens

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144 Mallebrein 2004.

145 On flowers as cultural taxonomies see: Goody 1993 especially his chapter: 'Garlands in India: the Marigold and the Jasmine' (pp. 321–346).

146 See Herrenschmidt 1981; Beck 1981.

147 Pfeffer 2001; Berger 2002; Hardenberg (unpublished).

can be offered to the goddess. In this way the believers comply with their ritual responsibilities towards the Goddess and thus satisfy and appease her through the sacrificial ritual.

In both (vegetarian and more bloody) ritual activities the sacrificial ritual is of central importance. It is connected to celebrations of agricultural fertility and to the restoration of the world order through the sacrificial act itself.

2) The other mode of communication with the goddess is carried out by human mediums, which is widely known as ritual possession in South Asia.<sup>148</sup>

Ritual goddess possession is characterised by trance, specific rhetoric devices as a ritual speech and by diverse ecstatic forms of expressions and by specialised male or female priesthood<sup>149</sup>. Those expressions can be an ecstatic dance, but also a form of ritual performance. Music always accompanies enactments of goddess spirit possession<sup>150</sup> and thus processes of a spiritual transformation. Goddess spirit possession originates from non-Brahmanic social groups (Roche 2000, 291–293) and is mostly found in rural regions of India. Goddess spirit possession includes: priests as mediums who will be possessed by a local or regional goddess (*devi*) during a ritual worship for the goddess and it consists of ritual music performed exclusively by initiated male musicians. It also consists of the use of highly symbolic music instruments.

3) As we see from the two modes of communication with the goddess namely sacrifice and mediums, music can be considered as a third mode of communication with the goddess. Notwithstanding, it is important not to see the modes of communication in an isolated way. A sacrificial offering implies simultaneously music, priests, and mediums of the goddess spirit possession.

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148 Assayag and Tarabout (éd) 1999.

149 For an impressive example on female priesthood and spirit goddess possession, see Carrin 1997.

150 Roche 2000.

## **The role of music as an important ritual element in Indian religiosity**

In order to understand how music and religion work together in Indian religiosity we should generally consider the fact that the acoustic perception is perhaps more powerful than the visual. As we can close our eyes but we can not close our ears. The perception of the sound in the religious context is thus very powerful. We should consider this psycho-acoustic power as an important part of oral culture and also as an oral wisdom which transmits its cultural values through the sound, gestures and performance practices.

### **Music in Indian religiosity**

Ritual music in Indian religiosity is the encoded, organized sound for religious ceremonies (Roche 2000, 288). In Indian religious traditions, it is widely spread as a means of communication with the Devine. Music can be traced in form of the liturgy of Vedic priests, within the ancestor invocations of tribal communities<sup>151</sup> or in poetical declamations of popular devotional Hindu groups<sup>152</sup>.

The origins of music and sound as ritual worship are very old. Already in the ancient Indian scriptures of the Puranas (dated around the 4<sup>th</sup> century before Christ) we find some first fragments of treatise on music expressed by the sage Bharata (in his *Gitalamkara* – in Sanskrit). The more ancient fragments of Rig Veda (Somaveda) explore the spiritual und ritual characteristic of sound<sup>153</sup>. Besides those fragments the text collection *Natya Shastra*<sup>154</sup> of the sage Bharata is the biggest work on classical theory of Indian Music (beginnings are dated between 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, whose compilation ended in 4<sup>th</sup> century AD).<sup>155</sup> Since the ancient times, sound and music are related to religious worship. In the

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151 Gaenszle 2002.

152 Malinar 2004.

153 Wilke, Annette and Oliver Moebus 2011; Doniger O'Flaherty 1981.

154 Rangacharya 2003.

155 Daniélou 1982 (1975).

# BOEL IN GARH LAIḌĀ

## Royal Communication with the Divine

*Uwe Skoda*

### Introduction

This chapter introduces the *boel* ritual in Garh Laiḍā, a former Gaṇḍ- or Rajgaṇḍ-Jamindari in present-day Sambalpur District of Odisha.<sup>169</sup> *Boel* is performed for the Goddess Samlei, who is also addressed by her more Sanskritized name of Mā Samleswari. The name *boel* (*bali*) also refers specifically to blood sacrifices, which she – together with other offerings – accepts during her *jātrā* or festival. During *boel* Samlei manifests herself in a very direct, visible and tangible way in the form of a medium known as Baruā,<sup>170</sup> and various acts of communicating with the divine play a major role in the festival.

Focussing in this chapter particularly on the royal aspect of the rituals, I will show, first, that this communication is clearly ranked. The Jamindar as “king” (king here as a structural relation including title- and entitlement-holders such as Raja, Jamindar etc.) has privileged access to his tutelary “private” deity (*ishta debi*) in her temple, as well as while she visits his house, where she stays much longer than in the houses of “commoners”. Moreover, during the *jātrā* she communicates with the royal family and trains the Jamindar directly in how

<sup>169</sup> As far as possible I have transcribed indigenous terms. In some cases a conventional spelling like Pujari, Raja, Shakti or Dossehra has been retained. Regarding *boel*, strictly speaking it should be transcribed as *bael*, but I decided to stick to *boel*, which is closer to its sound because short *a* sounds more like *o*.

<sup>170</sup> While during *boel* Samlei appears in the form of a medium known as Baruā on earth, this is only one form of possession in the region. Other forms of possession occur in relation to other gods. For example, during Krishna Guru parties, Krishna or Hanuman might possess devotees – the latter being recognised by his jumping around like a monkey. This form, known as *bana* (literally “flag”), stands in clear contrast to the form described in this article and seems to be linked primarily to more benevolent gods with whom one can even joke.

to use the sword. Thus, and secondly, various modes of communication come into play, including forms of imbalanced communication (the goddess affirming something rather than uttering it) and inaudible communication (between the Goddess and her sisters). Apart from verbal communication, non-verbal communication with the divine is at least of equal importance to the king, perhaps even more important. Thirdly, through the sword play a special bond between king and Goddess is re-enacted, a *display of life and death* in which the Goddess visibly empowers and protects the king. This leads, most notably, to a reproduction of the distinction between *raja* and *praja*, ruler and subjects. It will be argued here that *boel* embodies a range of features of a *sacrificial polity* – to borrow Nicholas’ term (2013: 3) – that is, dominance and subordination are expressed on the basis of communities and clearly linked to the religious sphere and performance. Lastly, while the Goddess and Jamindar share a close relationship, which is renewed during *boel*, there are other central and indispensable roles in the rituals (Brahmin, *pujari*, a certain Gaṇḍ dominance through various tasks, Keunt as sacrificer, Teli etc.), which are highlighted publicly. Most importantly, a high-status Brahmin induces the possession or ensures the transfer of divine power from idol to medium. He is also in charge of the rituals, particularly in the inner sanctum, while the Jamindar’s dominance is stressed beyond the sanctum.

While the chapter focuses on *boel* in Laidā as observed in 2001 (with subsequent visits to the village), my later research interviews with the Jamindar of Kolavira<sup>171</sup> – another Gaṇḍ-Jamindar north of Sambalpur with affinal ties to the Laidā family – revealed the existence of very similar *boel* rituals. Therefore I will occasionally bring in Kolavira for comparative purposes. Moreover, Gaṇḍ Rajas and members of the royal families of Raigarh and Sarangarh, two former princely states in present-day Chhattisgarh and ruled by Gaṇḍ dynasties, also confirmed similar festivals. A close relationship between Gaṇḍ kings, the Goddess Samlei as their tutelary deity (*ishta debi*) and

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171 Spelled variously as Kolavira or Kolabira, a variation I have followed here.

the *boel* ritual may therefore be inferred. Indeed, preliminary surveys in former Gangpur State, as well as in Sambalpur itself, indicate that this nexus may not be limited to Gaṇḍ dynasties and may even be a regional pattern linked to a cluster of states or ‘little kingdoms’ (see also similarities with Padampur as analysed by Guzy, this volume). Therefore, before turning to the *boel* rituals in Laiḍā, let me elaborate briefly on the history of Laiḍā and the idea of a sacrificial polity.

### **Laiḍā Jamindari as a changing *sacrificial polity***

*Boel*, I argue, exemplifies elements of a *sacrificial polity* in Nicholas’s sense (2013: 3). Analysing Durga Puja in West Bengal, he proposed that the social hierarchy is re-affirmed and the authority of the zamindar/king legitimized and ritually enacted – ranked roles are made visible. Without ignoring additional benevolent, redistributive elements of rule, he argued:

*Durga Puja mobilizes powerful symbols and speaks to a wide realm of culture and society in Bengal. In the old style Jamindari puja [...], the social order of dominance and dependency is validated. The display of life and death, with weapons, bloodshed, and apprehension, makes explicit the force behind the authority. (Nicholas 2013: 185)*

Nicholas’s work resonates with Geertz’s earlier focus on the crucial performative dimension of kingship as encountered in the precolonial Balinese state. Here, as Geertz (1980: 4) argued, the political configuration of a “localized, fragile, loosely interrelated petty principality” was characterized by its “expressive nature.” That is, it was not directed at tyranny, but rather at spectacle, at elaborate ceremonies and public dramatizations of rank, with kings as “impresarios”, priests as “directors” and peasants as “supporting cast, stage crew and audience” (Geertz 1980: 13). Though Geertz’s emphasis on court ceremonialism was criticised as being too harmonious and over-ritualistic, and his stress on the power of rituals to relegate political power and economic ties to the background was questioned (see e.g. Naagtegal 1996: 9), his point that kingship and

statecraft are intrinsically tied to performance and rituals with the ability to unify and renew an order certainly remains relevant. As he argued:

*To understand the negara is to locate those emotions and construe those acts, to elaborate a poetics of power, not a mechanics. [...] The state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies, its semiotic capacity to make inequality enchant.*  
(Geertz 1980: 123)

The performance of *boel* in Laidā as a sacrificial polity stresses particularly the special relationship between Goddess and Jamindar (‘Zamindar’ or ‘little king’ / landlord). While in principle the Goddess can be approached by every devotee, access to her is clearly ranked. As the local temple priest (*pujari*) explained it:

*Mother (mā) is the beloved goddess (ishta debi or tutelary deity) of the Jamindar. They were worshipping the goddess, and as and when they called, the mother was responding. Now also the relation is like this.*

Looking at the pantheon of gods and goddesses, Samlei shares many elements with other “wild” rather than “mild” goddesses (Michaels 1998, see also Kinsley 1987, Schnepel 2002). She is represented as a red-stone *murti* with eyes, nose-ring and crown (see Plate 1)<sup>172</sup> and is considered to be unmarried. However, a newly established Hanuman temple within the temple compound in Laidā might suggest an emerging bond with a male consort. Some people argue that it has been set up in order to balance her power and potentially destructive force, since only Hanuman is able to contain it, at least partially.

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<sup>172</sup> There are actually two idols: a new one (*nuā murti*) and an old one (*junā murti*). The old one – a simple stone – is nowadays invisible under red cloths, while the new one, a red stone, stands at the centre of the sanctum. The Brahmin performing *boel* called the new *murti* “Laxmi-Samlei” and the old one “Budhei (old) Samlei”.

## THE 'POSSESSED' BODY: *Siraha*, Swings, and Performing Difference in Bastar, Central India<sup>191</sup>

*Katherine Hacker*

Invoking the gods corporeally through possession and visually with symbolic objects, the contemporary ritual spectacles in Bastar, south Chhattisgarh state are highly charged performative and integrative events.<sup>192</sup> As such, social actions and communities converge in a richly visual and discursive field. Drawing on extensive field research, my study explores this dynamic interaction between highly localized religious ideas and visual expression, especially during the spring festival cycle of *Mandai*. After a procession of neighbouring deities, the assembled gods temporarily inhabit people known as *siraha* who will ride in wooden chairs (*deo kurchi*) or 'play' on large wooden swings (*jhula*), often lined with spiked iron nails.

The swing is a ubiquitous, prominent feature of shrine compounds as well as of the small brass images locally crafted and gifted to goddesses or *siraha*. As Alfred Gell (1980) persuasively argued in his 1980 article on vertigo and possession, the use of the swing leads to an altered state of consciousness, and an assault on the equilibrium.

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**191** Portions of this article were presented at the meeting of the Canadian Society for Cultural Anthropology and the American Ethnological Society in Montreal (2001); and the Conference on the Study of Religions of India in Chicago (2006). Research in Bastar for several months each year in 2004, 2005, and 2006 was generously funded by a three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

**192** Formerly in southeastern Madhya Pradesh, Bastar is today part of Chhattisgarh, a state newly created on 1 November, 2000. Along with this redefinition, the previously large district of Bastar which encompassed several of the sites I discuss was subdivided into Bastar District in the north and Dantewara District in the south. While I am cognizant of these new political divisions I have elected to retain Bastar as inclusive term for this larger region.

## MUSIC, SPIRITS & SPIRIT IN BASTAR, CENTRAL INDIA

*Nicolas Prévôt*



**Picture 1** (by Tejendra Tamrakar, T. T.)

### **Introduction**

In many cultures ethnographers have underlined the tight link between music and possession<sup>233</sup>. However, they rarely informed us about the status and role of music in rituals and about the nature of the interactions between musicians and possessed<sup>234</sup>. Based on fieldwork conducted in Bastar between 2000 and 2002, this article will discuss the

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<sup>233</sup> In his famous book *La musique et la transe* (1980), Gilbert Rouget gathered and compared lots of data collected by many anthropologists, mostly in Africa, Brazil and Europe, and analysed the relationship between music and different kinds of trance.

<sup>234</sup> See Emoff (2002) about the Eastern coast of Madagascar, Desroches (1996) about Tamil rituals in Martinique, Jankowsky (2010) about Tunisia.

roles of music and liquor in an annual village ritual and will examine the local conceptions of sound and possession<sup>235</sup>.

### **The Gods' Market: A Ritual in Bastar**<sup>236</sup>

One of the last princely states of India, Bastar became the largest district of Madhya Pradesh after the independence; it was subsequently subdivided and today it is a much smaller district in the recent state of Chhattisgarh. Although Bastar is known as a 'tribal' area, the *Gond* majority seems to have always mingled with local castes: potters *Kumhār*, weavers *Pankā*, tailors-musicians *Gandā*, bronze casters *Ghārṇwā*, smiths *Lohrā*, cow keepers *Rāwat*, alcohol makers *Kallār*, gardeners *Mahār* and so on. In fact, the so-called tribes and castes often live in the same villages, share broadly the same values and representations and sometimes even the same clans and ancestors<sup>237</sup>. They certainly don't share the same mother tongue, but each group knows the language of its neighbour. Halbi<sup>238</sup> is used as a lingua franca and has become a mother tongue for many groups.

The ritual I will focus on concerns all of them, castes or tribes, and puts together their gods and ancestors several times a year during a weekly market when one of the village gods is honoured by a sacrifice; all the gods and spirits of the neighbourhood are invited to join the festival. This

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**235** My research analysed the relationship between music and possession on three levels: 1. through the local conceptions of music and possession (vernacular terms, talks, myths, etc.), 2. in the actions and interactions of the different ritual protagonists, more precisely in the interactions between musicians and possessed during the ritual, 3. in the musical structure of the ritual repertoire: this article will not deal with the third level; for a comparison between the musical structure and the organisation of the pantheon, see Prévôt, 2005 & 2008.

**236** This part quotes Prévôt, 2008.

**237** The terms *tribe* and *caste*, first used by the British rulers in their attempt to classify and understand the Indian population, are still used by the Indian Government who maintained and carried on with this classification ('Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes') in order to undertake positive actions in favour of the socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Differentiating 'tribes' and 'castes' in India is all but simple, especially in Bastar where the so called 'castes' seem to have emerged from the 'tribal' population by specializing into specific occupations and thus were probably kept in closer contact with other groups. From the second half of the nineteenth century on, some other castes, encouraged by the British to colonize this 'wild' area, migrated from different regions of India and settled in Bastar as merchants, cultivators or administrative workers.

**238** Halbi is an Indo-European language, originally the language of the Halba tribe. In this article, all the vernacular terms are in Halbi.

While embodied by men, the same gods and ancestors also animate diverse sacred objects (bamboo poles, wooden frames, litters, palanquins, etc.), which, carried by villagers, manifest their power by trembling, rocking, moving in all directions.

The musicians will please and entertain the deities – in the shape of men or in the shape of objects – by playing for each of them his respective tune(s) called *pārḥ*. The result is an unbroken line of melodies played on the shawm with the circular breathing technique and accompanied by specific rhythmic patterns on the kettledrums.

### **Playing with the Gods: Musicians and Possessed<sup>240</sup>**

Considering the complexity of their repertoire, the musicians must be specialists whose musical and ritual knowledge is transmitted orally in the family. They are not paid but receive what is considered as compensation in grain for their ‘dharmic’ service. As is often the case in India, despite their great knowledge and their essential role, ritual musicians belong exclusively to a very low and despised caste, called *Gandā* here. Even if agriculture has become their main source of income, the *Gandā* of Bastar are characterized by several traditional occupations found among other comparable castes of India: weaving (now replaced by tailoring), cattle grazing, village watching and music making. Known as *devtā mohri*, the ensembles playing for such events as *dev bajār*, are composed of two or three *Gandā* musicians: the leader, often the elder, plays a shawm called *mohri* and is accompanied by a pair of kettledrums called *nagoṛā*, and an optional smaller kettledrum called *turbuli*.

The mediums embodying the deities are male specialists called *sirhā*. Unlike the musicians, they might belong to any caste of the vil-

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<sup>240</sup> Since this paper focuses on the process of possession and on the interactions between musicians and mediums, the activities of the priest (*pujāri*) will not be presented here: yet he is a prominent character since he organizes the sacrifice, makes the offerings and takes part in the discussion with the gods. He is always a *Gonḍ*, probably because he mediates with the Earth (*Gonḍ*s are considered as the founders of most villages of Bastar and as such deal with territory at a ritual level).

## **BALI YATRA OF THE KOND: A Ritual Performance and Its Socio-Historical Context**

*Roland Hardenberg*

### **Introduction**

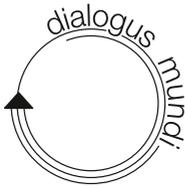
Like the other contributions to this volume the following paper also deals with a complex ritual sequence called Bali Yatra. This name, as becomes apparent from the variety of contexts covered by this volume, designates a local category of rituals that in Needham's terms (1975) can be called a 'polythetic class'. For Needham a 'polythetic class' is an open category in which the elements resemble each other in a number of respects without necessarily sharing identical elements. The category Bali Yatra in Orissa, too, includes a number of local performances which have certain 'family resemblances' in common but cannot, at least in my opinion, be reduced to a certain prototype.

In my contribution I present the Bali Yatra as celebrated by the Dongria Kond, a small community of swidden cultivators residing in the highlands of Orissa. They are usually categorised as part of the larger 'Kond' population which is estimated to consist of about one million people inhabiting the Eastern Ghats from the Mahanadi up to the border of Andhra Pradesh. The Kond figure prominently in colonial writings (see Padel 2000) because they used to practice human sacrifices locally called Meria. The colonial government forcefully suppressed this practice and managed to 'persuade' the Kond to use buffaloes instead of humans as sacrificial victims. It seems that with the abolishment of the human sacrifice the Kond once again fell into oblivion because hardly any research has been conducted on their religious and social life in recent decades. A few exceptions are F. G. Bailey, who conducted fieldwork among the Northern Kond and published

several monographs (e.g. 1957, 1960, 1961), H. Niggemeyer who carried out long term research among the Kuttia Kond and wrote a monograph (1964) about his findings, and A. Götzelmann, who similarly studied the Kuttia Kond during a number of field trips over a period of 12 years but has unfortunately not published his results. Studies on the material culture of the Kond, especially on their bronze statues and the ritual contexts in which these are used, were conducted by Cornelia Mallebrein (1993, 2001) and Katherine F. Hacker (2000a, 2000b).

The Dongria Kond inhabiting the Niamgiri mountains in the Rayagada District of Orissa received more attention than the other Kond groups. The first major study on them was conducted by an Indian anthropologist named P. K. Nayak (1989) who focussed on their feuding system. The second major work about the Dongria was produced by another Indian anthropologist, U. Aparajita (1994), who carried out research on the impact of development projects on these people. A third volume on the Dongria Kond was produced by an Indian research team led by Klaus Seeland (Jena et al. 2002) which concentrated on the relationship between the members of this tribe and their natural resources. My own recent monograph on the Dongria (Hardenberg 2005) deals with three major topics: 1) the relations between the Dongria and their 'clients', the Dombo; 2) the two major forms of marriage prevalent among them, i.e. bride capture and arranged marriages; 3) the buffalo sacrifices.

In none of the above mentioned publications, including my own, one finds any detailed description of the Bali Yatra as celebrated by the Kond. This is astonishing because according to my field experience this festival is considered by the people themselves as one of their most important religious ceremonies. Thus, the Bali Yatra celebrations I attended attracted large crowds of people and many of them actively participated on this religious occasion. Furthermore, the themes expressed in this ritual and the forms of worshipped used clearly show that the Bali Yatra is intricately linked to Dongria social categories and cosmological ideas. However, the Bali Yatra differs in one significant aspect from other Kond ceremonies: it links the Dongria with the people from the valleys. Thus, in contrast to other festivals it attracts



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