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On Memory:
Processes and Supports

Guest Editor: **Nicole Revel**



NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

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This issue of *Folklife* is a brief presentation of French research in South Asia. In order to explore new data and insights, on the basis of a comparative approach and scholarly debates, since 2001, an interdisciplinary seminar « *Processes and Supports of Social Memory* », has been launched at the Centre André-Georges Haudricourt (C.N.R.S) and at the Centre de recherche sur l'Oralité (CRO) Institut des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), in Paris. It brings together the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics, ethno-poetics and ethnomusicology, history of religion and history.

Long sung or spoken narratives, often linked to rituals, are presented irrespective of whether they belong to societies with a living oral tradition or societies with a mixed oral and written tradition, as in the case of India.

This shows an amazing variety of Speech Arts and their power, transformations in form and in semantic content. Our aim is to safeguard, analyse and comprehend, from the native view, this Intangible Heritage of oral traditions and expressions.

According to the various Traditions, the singer of tales composes a narrative following either fixed or changing "paths", as he performs. Bringing to surface the "landmarks" of such paths and the mnemonic devices at work in the miscellaneous expressions of oral composition, is one of our aims. Some cultures set in motion mnemonic devices extremely rigid: memory is exclusively attentive to the signifier and training is based on very complex syllabic scales and sound exercises: virtuosity in articulation, syllabic permutations and plaits, mastery of voice in melody, timbre, modulation and ornamentation, this type of transmission requires a relationship of Master to disciple as is still practised today in the Vedic schools of South India. Other cultures appreciate more flexibility at the sound level in composition, but they are carefully attentive to the logical schemes underlying the narrative and the plot. As the singers of tales perform long sung narratives, an inexhaustible matter has to be explored. I propose that we consider the singing of a long narrative (epic, ballad, lay etc.), as a "skilled activity", like playing the piano or playing chess. Mental processes together with body

On Memory: Processes and Supports

NICOLE REVEL



motions - this embodied and located orality - training devices and the work of memory based on aural perception, emotion and creativity, are as many quests and queries in cognitive sciences where Humanities and Social Sciences can play a genuine and fruitful part.

Smṛti, « memorised Tradition » and *Śruti*, « audition » and « revelation », the literary source of

Indian Law, (*Dharmasūtra* and *Dharmśāstra*), in contrast with the perception of voice, rhythms and words inspired by supernatural poetic power (the ensemble of *Vedic* texts) are the closest Indian notions. An erudite Tradition combining the oral and the written, highly praising poetry and resting on an immense substratum and practice of oral transmission is alive. As anthropologists and linguists, India specialists in France today, are more and more inclined to study Folk Tradition, at the urban, the rural and the tribal community levels.

In order to observe and detect techniques and practices related to each "Memorial", codification, memorisation and transmission are our main focuses. Various forms of interaction and interlocution are observed and analysed as narratives while rituals and other formal speech acts are analysed as performances. An ethnographic description is carried on with the help of linguistic, ethno-poetical and ethnomusicological approaches. The use of miscellaneous supports - gestures, motions and movements; voices, rhythms and melodies - is taken into account. Recent multimedia technology is of great help for transferring our methods and insights. Recordings with audiotapes, audio-video tapes and films, elaboration of hypertexts with CD-Rom and now DVD-video combining sound, films, photos, texts and comments, allow the safeguarding of long narrative and complex rituals in performance. Thus reiterative visualisation of a very complex event and the building of new digital archives are made possible.

Attention shall also be lent to visual tangible supports such as chapbooks (*puṭhi*) and graphism, either on paper, cloth (*patua; par*), shell, wood, bamboo, or *lontara* (Palmyr palm), as found in many cultures of South Asia, continental and islands of Southeast Asia. Other iconic supports are equally studied: face paintings and costumes, theatres of actors, shadow plays and puppetry, all forms of creativity related to theatre and the performing Arts. These actions and multimodal experiences take place during performances—a privileged moment to capture and bring to light mnemonic devices, transmissions of know-how and mastery of composition. Music, kinesic, and plastic expressions are necessarily part of these compositions. Transmission processes are based upon the following: strategies guiding musical, vocal, narrative, discursive and praxemic artistic actions and expressions; training by silent, non verbalised

showing techniques; training with explicit teaching (comments, treaties); respect for the Word, respect for the Master, respect for the Book, stimulate mimetic actions, faithful reiteration, yet creation. As far as the translation is concerned, it has to be particularly accurate, aiming at rendering a relevant, interpretative synthesis of the various symbolic forms and practices. Simultaneously, searching for concrete/abstract manifestations of mental processes at work is undertaken. As the analysis develops, places and events that structure the experience of Temporality of the respective groups, are taken into account and analysed.

History of this Research

In a certain way, this seminar of research is a continuation of a Seminar on: "*Literature of Voice: Epics*" that I conducted, with the assistance of C. Champion Servan-Schreiber, from 1991 to 2000 at the CRO. This was one of five international seminars, integrated to the "*Integral Study of Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue*", a vast program of UNESCO which was part of the *Decade for Cultural Development* (1988-1998).

In the year 1990, I launched the project on in a seminar jointly organised by INTACH, Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO in Chennai.

In 1992, a conference launched the five integrated seminar programs in Paris: "*Les Routes de la Soie: Problèmes scientifiques et culturels*".

As far as the seminar on "*Epics*" was concerned, several international workshops took place in various countries of Europe and Asia.

In Europe: The first one, "*Epics Along the Silk Roads*", was convened by Lauri Honko in Turku and focused on the notion of "mental text" (1992). The contributions were published later as a special issue of "*Oral Tradition*" at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri-Columbia. The Folklore Fellows' Summer Schools then developed. The second one was convened in Bonn by Walter Heissig (1992) on "*Ethnography and Oral Tradition*", followed by a third one in Sankt Augustin (1994), organised by Walter Heissig and Rudiger Schott on: "*Oral Tradition: Their Preservation, Publication and Indexing*". The next was convened by Karl Reichl near Bonn on: "*Epics: Performance and Music*" (1997).

In Asia: Earlier in February, an utterly stimulating workshop was organised by Kapila Vatsyayan, B.N Saraswati at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNTA), New Delhi: *Katha Vacana Aur Katha Vachak : Exploring India's Chanted Narratives*. Molly Kaushal edited and published the proceedings "*Chanted Narratives. The Living 'Katha Vachana' Traditio*" in 2001.

Dr. Pitiphat convened another workshop in Bangkok on "*Thai's Epics*".

A Conference in Ateneo de Manila University took place during the French Spring 2000 in Manila: *Literature of Voice: Epics in the Philippines*", as the Philippines Oral Epics Archives were launched. Last January 2006, a panel

on: "*Epics in the Austronesian World*" was convened during the 10th International Conference on Austronesian Languages (10ICAL) which took place, this time, in Palawan, Philippines: (<http://www.sil.org/asia/philippines/ical.html>). Proceedings of most workshops and panels on "*Epics*" have been published on various types of supports in the respective countries of South and Southeast Asia, besides the publications of the very texts by the scholars themselves.

In France: Long chanted narrative is approached as a score; the analysis focuses on the multilayered relationships, at the narrative, semantic, poetical, vocal and musical levels (rhythms, melodies, timbres), as well as at the praxemic level (motions, movements, gestures), contextual and historical levels.

A special issue of *Diogenes, The International Journal in Human Sciences*, n°181, "*Épopées: Littératures de la voix*", was edited and published in 1998, presenting some of the contributions to the seminar at CRO. Besides, three typescripts of a number of papers along the years were edited in collaboration with C. Champion Servan-Schreiber for the members of the seminar:

-1993-1994: "*Interaction oral-écrit: Modes de composition ; Modes de transmission lors de la performance; Modes de transcription*", (87p.)

- 1994-1995: "*Épopées et Récits de Fondation*", (102p.)

- 1995-1996-1997: "*Épopées orales, semi-littéraires et littéraires: Les représentations des héros. Images poétiques, images graphiques, formules mélodiques et rythmiques*", (134p.)

A special issue of *Purusartha: Traditions orales dans le monde indien*,

(24 papers) was coordinated and published in 1996, by C. Champion Servan-Schreiber at Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, (CEIAS).

On May 7 th 1997 at Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH) in Paris, a round table conference bringing together three seminars, was held by J.L Racine, F. Mallison, C. Servan-Schreiber and myself on: "*Regards croisés (II): Figures emblématiques, identités, oralité*".

From 2001 to 2006 sixty papers on the following topics were presented at the seminar: *Processus de la mémoire et rituels. Noeuds de mémoire. Épopées ,rituels et mémoire sociale. Savoirs et savoir faire rituels I/. Processus de la mémoire et rituels chamaniques. Temporalité, Rituels, Musique, Poésie. Expressions orales, écrites & nouvelles technologies. Savoirs et savoir-faire rituels III/. Créativité, performance, rituels. La formation de la personne. Rituels-Musique-Poésie Mémoire des Généalogies. Mémoire des Ancêtres. Mémoire des Dieux.*

During the last Conference on "*Réseau Asie 2*", held in Paris, September 2005, a panel on: "*Processus et supports de la mémoire: Savoirs et savoir-faire rituels II*", exemplified French research in Asia, (on line: (<http://www.reseau-asie.com>) and in press. The papers in the present issue of *Folklife* are offering a more extensive, although limited, insight into the French research in India.

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New NFSC Publication



Indian Folktales from Mauritius

Dawood Auleear and Lee Haring

Eighteen magical, romantic, and comic oral tales, from the island of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, are here translated into English for the first time. The stories were taken down literally from the lips of storytellers in the Bhojpuri language. They are not rewritten or redecorated; they are translated literally, and some are given in Bhojpuri.

The ancestors of these villagers were forcibly expatriated from India, a century and a half ago, as indentured labourers. Today, through these tales, they maintain their ancient language and culture. Comparative notes place these Mauritian tales in the context of world folklore.

Illustrations by Kalamkari C. Subramaniam,
i-x + 116 pages, Rs.200 (in India)

Rs.200 in Mauritian rupees in Mauritius,
US \$ 10.00 in Other Countries) ISBN 81-901481-7-6



DENIS MATRINGE, Centre d'Étude de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS) CNRS-EHESS

A Dialogue with Persian Classics in a Folk-based Verse Narrative from Eighteenth Century Punjab

DENIS MATRINGE



Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, a Punjabi poet affiliated to the Qadiri sufi order chose a folk story of the lower Indus valley to write one of the most exquisite verse narratives ever produced in his language [1]. His name is Hasham Shah, and not much is known about him. He was born around 1753 near Amritsar, died in 1823 and is buried near Sialkot [2]. He wrote both in Persian and Punjabi, using the lingua franca of Western, Central and Southern Asia mostly for Sufi treatises and biographies, and his mother tongue for romances is locally known as *qissa-s*, including his masterpiece, *Sassi Hasham*. The latter is the story of the tragic love between the Sindhi princess Sassi and the Baluch prince Punnun, and its title, as usual with classical Punjabi *qissa-s*, associates the name of the heroine and that of the poet.

Today, any Punjabi knowing reader is instantaneously bewitched by the magical charm of Hasham's poetic diction, by the delicate subtlety of his touch, by the sustained evenness of his tone, by the suggestive power of his images, as well as by the harmonious construction, the exceptional concision and the tragic intensity of his narrative. All these distinctive features contrast sharply with the only surviving *qissa* of the great poetic genius of the previous generation, the majestic *Hir*, achieved by Varis Shah in 1767, a poem encompassing many Punjabi social and religious idioms of his time, in a style at the same time sparkling, ironic and deeply moving [3]. The contrast is indeed immense between the fine chiselling and the perfect harmony of *Sassi Hasham* and most pre-modern North Indian narrative poems, with their intricate intrigues and their overlong conventional passages.

A striking aspect of *Sassi Hasham* is the kind of cultural diversity which underlies, without any asperity nor awkwardness, its sublime unity of style and composition, and the aim of these few pages is to give a hint about the relation of *Sassi Hasham* with two great Persian classics in order to add an element to my previous characterisation of Hasham's poetics [4].

It might be appropriate, first, to summarise the story as narrated by Hasham in hundred and twenty four stanzas

of four rhymed verses, and to remind briefly how it differs from other versions. After a brief prologue, *Sassi-Hasham* consists in three parts. The first one (stanzas 1-26) is about Sassi's birth in a royal Sindhi family in Bhambor (near Tatta, on the lower Indus) and her abandonment in a chest on the Indus after astrologers questioned by her father have made this prediction: "A faultless lover will she be / when she's a maiden young. / Then in the desert will she die / by parting's sorrow slain. / Yet, Hasham, though her kin be shamed / her story will be sung" [1:59].

In the second part (stanzas 27-82), Sassi grows up with her adopted parents from the washermen caste. As an Adolescent, she refuses wedding proposals in that low caste. She also refuses to see her natural parents. Thus, summoned by the king about her attitude, Sassi simply sends him an amulet which he had got tied around her neck before entrusting her to the river and which contains the truth about her birth. Thereafter, she becomes enamoured of Punnun, a Baluch prince from Kech (today Turbat in Pakistan), whose portrait she has seen in an exhibition of paintings of royal figures in the garden of a rich merchant. In order to attract Punnun to Bhambor, Sassi obtains from her biological father that the first caravan merchants coming from Kech to the city be kept as hostages. So it goes, and one of the two leaders of the caravan is dispatched to Punnun's father, Hot 'Ali, to request him to send his son to Bhambor. The king refuses, approved by his wife, but Punnun, hearing from the merchant about Sassi, becomes enamoured with her. Against his parents' advice, he crosses the desert riding on a camel and joins his beloved. When the caravan merchants arrive in Kech without Punnun, the king and the whole city are plunged into despair. Both the prince's brothers then decide to leave for Bhambor. They find Punnun together with Sassi. Having treacherously made him drunk, they take advantage of the lovers' sleep to abduct him and bring him back to Kech.

The last part gives the story its tragic conclusion. Sassi, despite her mother's entreaties, sets off in pursuit of Punnun across the desert. Burnt by the sun, she looks for footprints of the Baluches' camels. She finally discovers one, and then looks in vain for another one. A shepherd, who catches sight of her, thinking it might be a ghost, does not dare to approach her. Resuming her quest, Sassi understands that her end is near and she comes to breathe her last on the footprint of the camel which had, maybe, carried her lover. The shepherd, then, realises his mistake, buries Sassi and builds her a tomb, near which he decides to live as a *faqir*, abandoning his family and his herd. Warned in his sleep by Sassi's soul, Punnun leaves Kech in haste, not without having been

forced to threaten with his dagger his brothers who wanted to hold him back. His camel takes him directly to Sassi's tomb. Learning from the shepherd the decease of his beloved, he dies of grief on her tomb, which opens up to welcome him.

Hasham's narrative is based on a folk story known in the whole lower Indus valley and its surroundings, where it forms the theme of many folksongs, and where it has long been transmitted by bards with lots of variations. Thus, Richard Burton [5:81-89] narrates an oral version from Sind which differs considerably both from Hasham's story and from the Gujarati version collected by Marianne Postans [6:199-202]. Within the Punjab itself, there are important variations, as is obvious if we look, for instance, at the story as it has been recorded in the *Dasam Granth* ("Book of the tenth [Guru]"), the second sacred book of the Sikhs after the *Adi Granth*, compiled by Bhai Mani Singh at the beginning of the 18th century. Sassi was born from the semen spread on the sand of the Indus bank by a Hindu ascetic at the sight of a celestial nymph. She has been married to King Punnun, who had already several wives. The latter are jealous of Punnun's love for Sassi and assassinate the king. Hearing of the tragedy, Sassi rushes to the spot of the crime and dies of a broken heart. The story stresses sincerity and fidelity, whereas so many others in this section of the *Dasam Granth* deal with the misdeeds and the vices of women. It is with a Muslim poet contemporary of the compilation of the *Dasam Granth*, Hafiz Barkhudar, that the version we find in Hasham's narrative first appears.

In the third stanza of his poem, Hasham writes: "listening to the story of Punnun and Sassi, one reaches perfect love", thereby claiming to compose a story the hearing or reading of which would lead one to that stage of the mystical path where love, the lover and the Beloved become one. It was Hasham's admirable achievement to reach that goal without any religious comment or allusion in his work, without any eulogising prologue (his is reduced to three stanzas, one on God, one on love and one on the composition of the poem) and without any explicative epilogue. There is not a word about nor an allusion to the Prophet or to any saintly figure in the poem, no direct reference to Islam after the mention of God in the first stanza and, with the exception of the two kings, Adam in Bhambor and 'Ali in Kech, and of the rich merchant called Ghazni, the characters have local names. Like in so many other Sufi poems, human love and spiritual love are not alternatives [7: 24]. But human love is painted in such a way that no misunderstanding is possible.

To achieve this, and to cause his lay to produce a maximal effect, Hasham made full use of all the cultural elements at his disposal. Folklore of course is overwhelmingly present through the story itself, which Hasham reworked in many ways, as, for instance, when he turns the shepherd from a man with dubious intentions into a simpleton struck by the vision of love to the point of becoming a *faqir*. But what I would like to insist upon here, as it is less obvious, is a specific aspect of his literary

culture mobilised by Hasham to compose a tale on pure love. Like all the members of the Punjabi literary elite of his days, the poet had studied the great masters of classical Persian literature. Moreover, like quite a few among them, he tried his hand at writing a Punjabi version of *Khosrow and Shirin*, in the tradition of Nezami (d. ca 1209), who inspired writers for centuries in many parts of the Muslim world, and who himself had borrowed the subject of three of his lays (*Khosrow o Shirin*, *Haft peykar* and *Eskandar-name*) from the *Shahname* of Ferdowsi (d. ca 1020).

Both Ferdowsi and Nezami accompany, so to say, Hasham in his writing of Sassi Punnun. Intertextuality with Ferdowsi's epic surfaces in the crucial episode where Sassi is cast away in a chest on the Indus. Here is an ancient folk-motif, well known in the Muslim world because of the story of Prophet Musa (Moses), and the oldest appearance of which is probably in the legend of Sargon I (ca 2340-2284), the founder of the empire of Akkad. Sargon's mother put him in a basket of bulrushes and abandoned him to the Euphrates. Akki, the water-carrier lifted him up from the river and brought him up as his own son. This motif found its way into Ferdowsi's *Shahname*, where it appears in the part of the epic which bridges the genealogical gap between Bahman and Alexander through Hoday. Bahman is the son of King Esfandiyar, who has been killed in a nonsensical fight by the great hero Rostam. But before dying, the king has entrusted his son to Rostam, who educates him and sends him back to the court. There, Esfandiyar's father, King Goshtasp, who had converted to the religion of Zoroaster and caused his son's death by ordering him to bring Rostam to his court, gives the throne to Bahman, his grandson, and dies. Bahman first wants to avenge the death of his father, and thus gets Rostam's son Faramarz hanged. But he then repents and, having engendered a son from his own daughter, Hoday, he gives her the throne. Hoday governs with justice, but she gets rid of the child she has had from her father by abandoning him in a chest on the Euphrates. The child, Darab, is taken in by a washermen couple. He persuades his adopted parents to get him educated as a warlord: his royal quality is soon recognised and he is welcomed as king at the court of Iran. The emperor of Rum, whom he has vanquished, gives him his daughter. He sends her back to Rum after she has conceived a son, Darab (Alexander), who later becomes king of Rum. From another woman, Darab has a second son, Dara, who succeeds him. And when Darab-Alexander attacks Iran and defeats Dara's army, the latter, agonising after having been slain by two of his ministers, entrusts his country to Alexander before dying. Thus is the genealogical link established between the kings of Iran and Alexander.

Hasham had certainly read the story of Hoday and Darab in the *Shahname*. In *Sassi* as in Ferdowsi's epic, a skilled carpenter is summoned, a chest is finely assembled and richly adorned, jewels are added to it, a launderer rescues the baby and, along with his wife, offers the child a good life and gets him (or her) nicely educated. In each case,

having come of age, both the prince and the princess refuse to live as launderers. There are of course differences too, including an important stylistic one. The episode is much more developed, with a more minute narration, in Ferdowsi, and this very fact tells a lot of Hasham's poetic intention, as I have shown elsewhere in a comparison with Varis Shah [4:31-41]. Hasham's poem is condensed to the utmost in order to produce a maximal effect on the reader. Besides, unlike Ferdowsi, Hasham creates a sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the suffering of the baby tightly chained to the chest and her frightening journey on a stormy river haunted by monsters and demons, and, on the other hand, the loving tenderness and simplicity of Atta, the launderer who rescues her. Both this conciseness and this contrast cause Atta's "pure love" to be more intensely felt by the reader.

If we now turn our attention to Hasham's reading of Nezami, we are struck all the same by astonishing elements of symmetry and contrast. In *Khosrow o Shirin*, Nezami creates three unforgettable characters: Khosrow, the king torn between his love and the throne, Farhad the architect, first sketch of the perfect lover, a figure magnified with Majnun in *Leyli o Majnun*; and Shirin, the dominant character in the novel, incarnating fidelity and mastery in love. Now, there is a striking crossed symmetry between the way Shirin and Khosrow in Nezami's novel and Sassi and Punnun in Hasham's poem fall in love. In Nezami's *Khosrow o Shirin*, first Khosrow becomes enamoured with Shirin by hearing his intimate friend Shahpur singing Shirin's praises, and then Shirin with Khosrow by seeing drawings of him made by Shahpur and fixed to trees in places where she goes for walks with her friends (here again well-known folk motifs). As for Hasham's characters, first Sassi is struck, the poet says, alluding directly to Nezami's novel, "by the wound which once laid down Farhad" [1:77], when she sees, along with her friends, Punnun's portrait in the merchant's garden; later on, Punnun falls in love with Sassi when he hears one of the caravan leaders speaking "to him with fulsome praise of Sassi's loveliness" [1:89]. In both sets of episodes again, Hasham's dense and tense stylistic soberness is to be contrasted with Nezami's superb poetic diction, sometimes however verging on mannerism and preciousness, sometimes somewhat rhetorical. If Nezami's long (6500 distiches) and complex narrative can be read as a kind of apprentice novel, Hasham's condensed fable is, once more, entirely oriented towards giving access to the feeling of pure love.

On that matter, it is interesting to note that about the merchant's garden and its gallery of royal portraits, Sassi had "heard it was as fine as Khotan fabled musk" [1:77]. Now, here is precisely the image which a poet like Hafez (d. ca 1390) uses to refer to the smell of the gateway to paradise in the famous ghazal 373 of Khanlari's classical edition [8]: *barha gofte-am o bar-e degar mi guyam* ("Times I have said, and again I say"). In a single line of this ghazal, Hafez enunciates both the source of his art and his

expectation of a mystically qualified reader: *gowhari daram o saheb-e nazari mi juyam* ("I own a jewel and seek a master of vision"). The allusion to the musk of Khotan in Hasham's poem is no mere chance; Sassi is on the verge of entering the universe of pure love, – that jewel which the Qadiri Sufi Hasham wants to share. By mobilising many aspects of the cultural universe of his reader around a story which has nothing to do with the rhetoric of religion, and through his very personal dialogue with great Persian classics, Hasham precisely wants to make his reader this "master of vision", apt at following the injunctions of his own internal master, Hafez's *pir-e golrang* ("rose-colour Master", ghazal 99), – his heart. It is thus no surprise if, until today, in Sufi convents of the Punjab, *Sassi Hasham* might be read by a master to his disciples in order to plunge them into a state (*hal*) conducive to the practice of spiritual exercises [9].

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9. As demonstrated by Nicole Revel, in the Sulu and Tawi Tawi archipelagos in Island Southeast Asia, one finds a parallel though distinct attempt in the chanting of and the listening to a *kata-kata* like *Silungan Baltapa* ("By singing a blue print of *Al Mir'aj*"), the second part of which is meant to show the Way and has a healing efficacy. See N. Revel, with H. Arlo Nimmo, A. Martenot, G. Rixhon, T. Sangogot and O. Tourny, *Le Voyage au ciel d'un héros Sama / The Voyage to Heaven of a Sama Hero Silungan Baltapa*, trilingual edition (Sinama, French, English), Paris, Geuthner, 370p, 4 black and white pictures, 1 DVD video (1 sound file: the epic in integral, +2 files with a diaporama of 110 photos and a narration in French and in English), by N. Revel and A. Martenot. ❖



The Meaningfulness of Recentering: Case Study of a Thar Narrative

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Mumal-Mahendra's story originated and takes place in Thar Desert. It is still orally performed in this area in three distinct genres by the Manganiyar bards. Besides, it was written many times during the last three centuries. All these oral and written productions are as many re-centerings of the story, of which emerges a new meaning each time.

A shift from study of texts to analysis of the emergence of texts in contexts was a crucial move in the establishment of performance approaches. It has established how performance is anchored in and inseparable from its context of use. Nevertheless, processes that anchor discourse in contexts may be opposed by others – like entextualisation process - that potentiate its detachability. The entextualised stretch of linguistic production can be de-contextualised from its interactional setting and re-contextualised in another¹. Then one may ask what makes this de/re-contextualisation process possible, how it is accomplished, by whom, for what ends, under what circumstances, what is the emergent meaning of the text once re-contextualised, and so on?

The common approach for the study of a corpus that contains both oral and written productions consists in regarding those as “versions” of a single story and comparing them, either to find a relationship between them, or to bring out features that distinguish them. Such an approach would not have added anything new to existing works which have already showed that oral and written transmissions of a single story parallel each other in time, and that any one version may draw from either or both. Another usual comparative approach consists in subjecting all these “versions” to a semio-narratologic analysis and reducing them to a common model - assumed to be original and generative - of which one defines the structure and meaning. This analysis that ignores the production context is generally limited to morphological study of the plot (structure, actions and characters), whereas the narrative choices, anachronies and perspectives go towards in setting the interpretative framework.

For my part², I regarded all the texts (written and oral) of the corpus as products of a recentering process, of which I systematically identified the agents, circumstances and means. I then subjected each text to narratologic analysis.

I did not limit it to morphological study, but also examined the spatiotemporal universe of the plot and how this one is organised in the narrative which exposes it (narrative modes and perspectives, temporality, etc). These first two stages made possible to draw the interpretative framework peculiar to each

recentering and to bring to light the new meaning that emerges from it. Here are the main conclusions of this third and last hermeneutic stage.

The words *bât*, *vârtâ* and *qisso* refer to the three oral genres performed by Manganiyar. These genres are linked with distinct groups of performers and patrons and constitute dissimilar interpretative frameworks. Among these three oral genres, two have been studied — the *vârtâ*, performed for Sodha Rajput patrons, and the *qisso*, performed for Sindhi patrons.

Within the *vârtâ* framework, Mumal's story is both an instrument of exploration of *Shakti*'s power – conceived at once as autonomous Goddess and convention-bound woman – and an apologue about the prince's *dharma*. The prologue, that is peculiar to *vârtâ* performance tradition, is a kind of mythical narrative in which Mumal is depicted and acts as many other Rajasthani woman-Goddesses³. In the story itself, she embodies the devoted wife (*pativrâtâ*), of which she however transgresses the code of conduct by journeying unchaperoned. Paradoxically, wifely devotion was the very reason of this transgression.

The story thus represents a conflict between requirements of social code and demands of the crisis to which heroine must face. The breach in everyday life rules of behavior is justified by the special circumstances of the crisis and reasserts supremacy of wifely devotion over all other social customs and duties in hierarchy of women's *dharma*. But as in any « social drama » (Turner 1969), crisis is resolved by redressive action and breach is eliminated by reintegration. The *sati* rite, which proves Mumal's dedication to her husband and chastity, makes transgression into submission to gender roles and reintegrates the heroine in social structure by transcending the liminal circumstances of her incursion in male space. The story and its prologue thus underlines that women's autonomy can only be conceived as an attribute of liminal status (either of the wandering Goddess before she is provided with a temple, or of the devoted wife during liminal stage of her journey).

The problem subjected to audience perspicacity is not to decide whether Mumal is a Goddess or a *pativrâtâ*, but to resolve her paradoxical status of being both. The story doesn't fully carry on the common split image of Hindu female nature, but proposes a more unified feminine image, which is quite similar to the one revealed in Rajasthani women's songs and stories. Nevertheless, the problem is finally solved in a male perspective. The *sati* scenario not only resolves a “social drama” but also creates

a symbolic solution to spatial discontinuity (between Goddess's outer domain and *pativratā's* inner domain), reestablishes symmetry (destructive Goddess *vs* protective *satimātā*) and transcends the contradictions of the men projected split image of feminine nature.

Either as *pativratā* prompting her husband to achieve his duty or as Goddess repudiating the king who transgressed the code of honor by failing in his duty to protect women, Mumal stigmatises Mahendra resorting to a derogatory stereotype articulated in terms of the structural opposition between Merchants and Rajputs ("Take your scale and your weights, your honor is that of a merchant"). Mahendra, who adopted values and customs of Merchants castes, did not behave in accordance with his own *dharma*. He is not the only character of the *vārtā* who adopted a life style unsuitable to his *svadharmā*. Events that are analysed as causes of actions on semio-narratologic level are, on another level of reading, as many breaches of *dharma* which induce disorder. The Goddess's intervention and the kings' death (in the prolog), then *pativratā's* sacrifice, are the only means of putting an end to it. The moral of the story appears rather simple then: each one must live according to its own *dharma* so as to preserve the world order.

The teaching of the story is rather different when it is recentered in the framework of the *qisso* performed for Sindhi patrons. This framework enables a Sufi mystic interpretation of the story. However, the story doesn't lend itself to a linear interpretation where characters would personify the common fixed roles of the Beloved (spiritual guide, the Prophet or God himself) and of the lover (disciple). These roles are related to, and vary according to, the actants (Greimas 1983) embodied by the characters in the original de-centered story. Thus, Mahendra, who successively embodies the Subject and then the Object, successively represents the seeker who, having mastered the "lower soul" (*nafs*), can progress on the Path (*tariqā*), and then the Beloved.

Conversely, Mumal, who is Mahendra's Object of quest and thus embodies the Beloved, embodies the seeker or the "woman-soul" in her own narrative trajectory, whose analysis showed that it is similar to that of a hero of a *roman d'apprentissage*. Mumal symbolises the seeker who does not manage to tame the « lower soul ». She did not remain awoken to remember the Lord and failed in performing the constant recollection (*dhikr*). She fell in the "sleep of negligence" (*khwāb-i ghaflat*) and so has to undergo a long and painful purification process.

As in the *vārtā*, Mumal finally dies on a pyre. But here, the *sati* scenario represents the final stage of the purification process of the soul and the "extinction of the self in God" (*fana*), which many mystic poets have illustrated with the metaphor of the moth burning in the flame of a candle. Mumal's death can be understood as the annihilation of individual qualities, which leads to spiritual resurrection, and as the body's death, which is welcome for the true lover, because it removes the veil that separated the lover from the Beloved. For the « woman-soul », death on the Path is the day of her wedding with the Beloved. Within the framework of this bridal symbolism inherited from the Hindu tradition

(*œakti* mystics and *bhakti*), the image of the *sati* fully makes sense. Adorned of all the emblems of marital happiness as the day of her wedding, she dies as a bride.

This interpretation is available only for competent listeners who know both the paratext (Genette 1982) and the intertext in which the *qisso* is encapsulated. The local oral tradition, which is distinct from performance tradition and contains sub-plots and didactic metanarratives which are never performed, forms the *qisso* paratext. During the performance, a network of intertextual relations is built by the performer who recenters mystic *kāfi* songs and verses of Shah Latif's *Sur Mūmal-Rāno*. Interpretative frameworks of the *qisso* and of the *Sur Mūmal-Rāno* lend to a rather similar interpretation but are built in quite different ways.

Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit (1689-1752) was the greatest mystical poet in the Sindhi language. He left behind him a collection of thirty poems (*sur*) that has become known as the *Risālo*. As a part of this collection, the *Sur Mūmal-Rāno* is placed in a set with which it creates a meaningful network of textual relations. This collection's internal network links different stories which all belong to the same generic class, that of "tragic love stories". In ten of the thirty poems of the *Risālo*, Latif recentered such locally well-known oral love tales, of which heroes and heroines are transformed into symbols of God seeking soul.

This internal network is in its turn embedded in two other textual networks. Firstly, it is integrated in an intertextual web, that is global or even universal and woven by Latif who quotes the Quran, the Prophetic tradition and Persian mystical poets. Secondly, it is anchored in the paratextual web of performance traditions, which is local. As we have seen, local oral traditions constitute the paratext of the *qisso* and are a constitutive part of its interpretative framework. In the *Risālo*, the interpretative framework is explicitly given by its author. But the listeners / readers need to know the local performance traditions in order to understand the stories, since Latif never enters into detailed narration of them, but singles out some elements to develop his teachings about suffering and love.

This kind of "metonymic recentering", the "woman-soul" theme and some other features are common to the other *surs*. But, as in the *qisso*, the original actancial structure of the story makes more complex its symbolic interpretation. In the first two chapters of the *sur*, Mumal symbolises the cruel Beloved. In the six following chapters, she symbolises the "soul that blames" (*nafs al-lawwāma*). And in the ninth and last chapter, she eventually symbolises the "soul at peace" (*nafs al-mutma'inna*) when, in a vision of God's primordial light, she realises that the one she was searching for is in her heart and that "everything is He". Conversely, Mahendra, who symbolises the Beloved in the last seven chapters, symbolises the seeker in two first ones.

Even if, unlike *qisso* performers, Latif didn't resort to *sati* scenario to represent the final "annihilation" stage, he didn't change anything in the story's action and Mumal finally dies as in all the other recenterings of the story, except one.

The recentering done by the Rajasthani playwright Tej Kavi (1881-1926) is the only one with a happy ending. One can ask why? Tej Kavi adapted Mumal's story for a dramatic folkgenre known as *rammat* in the Jaisalmer and Bikaner area. *Rammat* shares many thematic, formal and contextual characteristics with the Rajasthani *Khyâl*. But first and foremost local definitional criterion is that actors and patrons belong to Merchants castes. Tej Kavi relied on *vârtâ* and *bât* performance traditions, which are anchored in Rajput cultural world and so conveys ethic, and other values which are alien or even opposed to the Merchants castes system of values. Mumal's narrative world and its values clashed with the cultural universe of the agents of the recentering. This was not the only incompatibility which Tej Kavi had to deal with.

Rammat performances mainly took place during Holi festival. Apart from the fact that the tragic end of the story was discordant with the jubilation atmosphere of Holi festival, Mumal's death almost always represents the restoration of social order and the victory of the society for which "non-standard" love experience represents a threat. This representation of the supremacy of the structure and collective norm over the individual "deviance" of ecstatic love was much more dissonant with the context of Holi festival, which is an inversion ritual during which man and woman are temporarily released from their statuses.

Tej Kavi didn't only change the representative mode (from narrative to dramatic), but also deeply modified the story's action. This pragmatic transposition (Genette 1982) relies on changes in motivations and modifies characters' valorisation. These modifications (valorisation / devalorisation) are fully actualised only because a new system of values has been set up. The Being and the Doing of the characters, even when they remain unchanged, are revalued with the alder of this new system.

On a stage where there isn't anymore any representative of the social structure, characters are freed from the corset of the behavioral norms and gain in individuality and humanity. Mahendra is a sensualist who has "weaknesses", but he also has wisdom. Mumal does not reproach him anymore his breach in code of honour, but she praises his intelligence. In the renewed system of values of the *rammat*, the pragmatic and psychological transformations give to Mahendra's character a more "sympathetic" part than in the *vârtâ*, where his nonconformity with the ideal Rajput devalued him.

Conversely, all these changes partially devalue Mumal's character. Neither Goddess, neither *pativrata*, nor *sati*, Mumal doesn't belong anymore to any one of the prototypic categories of the feminine nature. Deprived of the sanctifying trials of *virah* and suicide, she's now nothing more than a representative of her "species", of which Tej Kavi gives an unflattering image. This pejorative stereotype of womanhood goes together with the new freedom that Mumal enjoys in the *rammat*. This freedom, which is different from the one the virgin Goddess of the *vârtâ* enjoyed, is wholly exerted in the field of sexuality. The importance given to the sexual aspect of the relation is a characteristic that distinguishes the *rammat* from the other recenterings, where it is at most evoked through

conventional images. This element is certainly related to the context of the Holi festival, but it is also a feature that distinguishes the Rajput tales from the Merchants tales.

Unlike Tej Kavi, L.K. Chundawat did not change the action. The transformations which she carried out are less visible but however quite as deep. When we compare the text she has written and published in 1959 with its hypotext, a Caran manuscript of the 18th century (MSS 210/20), it is revealed.

The quantitative analysis of these two texts shows that Chundawat practiced many excisions and amplifications. The excisions lead to the disappearance of the actors' social universe. Some of them can be perceived like expurgations underlain by the ideology of social progress. The amplifications give a new prominence to the characters' Doing and Being. Some of them are borrowings to Rajasthani oral traditions and include the story in a Pan-Rajasthani intertextual network.

The narratologic study reveals that Chundawat also carried out modifications on the discursive and semio-narrative levels. She developed the characters' cognitive and pathemic trajectories and so gave them the depth and the inwardness of which they were previously deprived. Thus, they also acquire freedom to act and choose. But the eruption of feelings, sensations and of the doubt about oneself and the world complicates their choices and hampers their new freedom. The subject seems to keep itself aloof from action and from world. Action is not any more the object of a judgment a posteriori, but of a preliminary reflection. The world is not any more the symbiotic environment on which the subject has a good hold, but the object of a perceptive experience. The temporality of the two narratives is also rather different. For the cyclic time of the narrated world of the hypotext, Chundawat substitutes the linear time of a world which has lost its stability and which in its dilations and contractions seems to follow the variations of the actors' states.

Analysing the evaluations (Hamon 1997), one can see that in Chundawat's narrative they focus on the actors' environment and states, while in the hypotext they primarily focus on the actors' Doing and on its conformity to social standards. While the hypotext stages and conveys a system of values, Chundawat's narrative rather pertains to a phenomenological and knowledge enterprise. This difference also appears in the way in which the characters' physical body emerges in the discourse. In the hypotext, this organic emergence of the body is related to the actor's Doing and signals the outcrop of a normative system. In Chundawat's narrative, it is associated to the actor's states and signals a pathemic apex.

The narrative of the hypotext shares much more characteristics with what we usually call a "tale", than Chundawat's. Even if she herself calls it a "Rajasthani folktale", her narrative is much closer to modern short story. The narrative universe created by Chundawat singles out her recentering among all those which were studied and seems to signal Mumal's entry in the era of modernity. Chundawat's recentering is the only one which presents a feminine point of view on woman and a unified image of Mumal's character. It is

perhaps in this way, by conveying a woman's image peculiar to Rajasthani women oral traditions, that Chundawat's recentering genuinely roots in a Rajasthani folk tradition.

Well before the 18th century, Carans and other bards had produced many written versions of Mumal's story, which they spread beyond the limits of Thar on the whole of the geographical area of the future state of Rajasthan. These texts were rediscovered by the learned elites who, shortly after the creation of the state of Rajasthan in 1949, undertook to preserve their cultural heritage and to build a regional identity. Published in 1957 in one of the many folkloristic reviews which had just sprung up, one of these manuscripts constituted the hypotext of Chundawat's retelling. Chundawat added a new link to the already long chain of recenterings and thus participated to the traditionalisation and regionalisation of the story. The study of the successive recenterings does not only make it possible to discover the various meanings which were given to the story, but also illuminates the way this story of Thar became a story of Rajasthan. The investigation of recentering is thus meaningful in more than one way.

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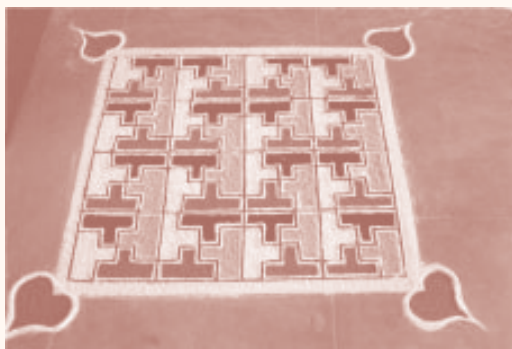
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Endnotes

¹ For an overview, see Bauman & Briggs 1990.

² *Moumal-Mahendra: Contextes et variations d'un cycle légendaire du Thar*, PhD thesis, INALCO, Paris, 2004.

³ For other examples, see Tams-Lyche 1999.



Singing Texts and Reading Chapbooks: the Bhojpuri Tradition

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In spite of the conventional assertion that India favours oral culture, compared to the West, in many a case, several factors show that the world of the oral performance is not cut off from other medias, whether graphic or written expressions. Long before the popularisation of printing, those of the singers who could write and read would note down the content of their songs in small exercise-books known as *puthi*. But what is true for traditional village singers, both man or woman, is even more in the case of the wandering singers. Regarding the long medieval epics, or *gatha*, sung by the bhojpuri wandering singers, their memorisation is the more difficult, as musical rhythm is quite irregular and contents are not necessarily versified. Furthermore, as the singers most often perform outside the native village,

they cannot bring their children along to train them, and let them benefit the performing moment to impregnate themselves with the *gathas* contents, as it is the case in the *qawwali* tradition, for instance, where children often attend the singing session inside the very singing group. Such reasons may lead a singer to readily

appeal to the help either of *puthi* or of printed booklets. In the same time, the public's taste for the *gathas* auditions and the eagerness to await the arrival of the wandering singers are undoubtedly reinforced by the purchase and reading of *gatha* under the form chapbooks versions. Hence, the question of the memorisation and transmission of bhojpuri *gathas* cannot be broached without an inquiry into the chapbook printing industry.

1. Oral performance and the selling of chapbooks: striking coincidences

Among the four main trends which have inspired the bhojpuri tradition of *gatha* (the mystic quest of the Shaivite Naths, the desire to glorify the chivalric tradition of the Rajputs, the mercantile vocation of the nomadic castes, and the pervasiveness of Sufism), all the repertoires have been printed, either in proper books, in reviews, or in chapbooks. However, chapbooks are the most common forms, and they are quite cheap also. Except for Ahir singers of the epics of *Vir Kuar* and *Lorik*, who pride

themselves on never using any chapbook version, all other artists do. Though it is not as obvious as the silk industry or the glass bangles craftsmanship, the market of bhojpuri chapbooks is an urban phenomenon which is very successful. An inquiry into the popular printers of chapbooks and on their sales policy reveals the wide scale of the sector, inside the bhojpuri-speaking belt as well as outside of it. The most active of the bhojpuri printers, and the oldest, is certainly Thakur Prasad, of Kachauri Gali, in Varanasi. He is the owner of two presses, one in Bombay and another one in Varanasi. He has published all the titles of the epic repertoire, including folk songs, *kahans*, (prose stories), *kissa* (stories from arabo-persian origin), and popular dramas. His tiny shop in the narrow lane of the bazaar is always busy with customers. The price of a chapbook varies from 10 to 25 rupees. The print run is usually 1000 copies for one title. Chapbooks are not only sold at his shop, but also sent throughout UP, Bihar and Calcutta, in Mahatma Gandhi Road, where he has opened a branch.

In Patna, the commercial orientation of the printing press, Narayan and Co, in the area of Salimpur, is slightly different. It has specialised in the printing of successful popular songs and film songs, together with gathas. The print run is from 1000 to 5000 copies. D.N. Lal, the owner, has published all the titles of the bhojpuri songs repertoire, *gatha* and dramas. He sells about 10,000 copies of *gatha* chapbooks, and 50,000 copies of songs chapbooks a year. The chapbooks are diffused to Assam, Delhi, Bombay and Nepal.

In Calcutta, all the Bengali main printers of the Mahatma Gandhi Road contribute to the printing of bhojpuri folklore. For the last 50 years, Loknath Pustakalaya founded by the Trivedi family, has an important clientele. His print runs are from 15,000 to 20,000, and he reissues the titles every two years. Next to him, Bholanath Pustakalaya and Sachdev Prakashan also provide bhojpuri chapbooks.

The *chaupatiya* (chapbook), as well-known, is a small-size, cheap, light publication, easily carried and handled. Once printed, chapbooks are sent to numerous places of sale, either by train, lorries, or by special bicycles which hawkers have equipped with a *thela* (platform). But whereas this activity has vanished in Europe and it is still alive in north India. The *paikar* (pedlar) carrying two *jholi* (bags) full of chapbooks on his shoulders, sings the repertoire of epics while walking along the roads. His areas of sale are usually the *maidan* (circular places) of big cities, bazaars, vicinity of railway stations, temples, *dargah* (tombs of the muslim saints), and *mela* (fairs). Sales are done either from small carts or straight on the pavement. On Calcutta *maidan*, every Sunday, while the singers of *Alha-Udal* perform the epic, the sellers of bhojpuri chapbooks are in the space around. On the Patna *maidan*, where the performance of *Alha-Udal* is a daily event in the month of July, many stands of chapbooks also await the customer. The annual itinerary of the wandering singer shows a great similitude with that of the *paikar*. Their performing places also quite often coincide with the selling places of printed *gatha*. Unless

it would rather be the circulation of these chapbooks which follows the respective itineraries and halting places of the bhojpuri wandering singers.

2. From oral texts to printed chapbooks: The romanticisation of folklore

No doubt, the beginning of printing of bhojpuri folklore was linked to the colonial interests of British administrators. The collection of samples of bhojpuri epics was not undertaken for the sake of folklore, but in order to furnish good examples of the language to European officials, who were encouraged to learn the vernacular languages of the districts committed to their care. George Grierson, who had undertaken the first collection and edition of bhojpuri *gatha*, explained that 'This would be not only equally practically useful, but would also be an assistance to students of philology in Europe, and to missionaries' (Gupta, 1970, 45). At the time of the mass printing industry development, around 1880, the folklorists who collected *gatha* were belonging to the brahmanical minority. In the modern times, they are more the product of the literate segments of castes such as Yadavas, Koiris, Kurmis, Bhumihaar Rajputs or Byaparis. Their name appears on the first page of the chapbooks, and sometimes, their pictures. The most prolific of these collectors was Mahadev Prasad Singh, from Shahabad district.

The matter of fidelity of a printed version to an oral one, from which it derives, has been often debated. As a pioneer in discussing the transmission of oral texts, G. Grierson himself often insisted on his faithfulness to the oral version he had: 'The song is published exactly as it was taken down for me from an itinerant singer of the Shahabad district. I have allowed no theory of my own to interfere with the text obtained' (Gupta, 1970, 137). According to the account of the father of Vishvanath Trivedi, the printer of Loknath Pustakalaya of Calcutta, Mahadev Prasad Singh used to transcribe in the written form the entirety of the repertoire of the wandering singers who would regularly perform near the pond of his village. And the formulae included in the printed texts clearly indicate the oral origin of the versions collected: 'my friends, listen to my story', or 'noble audience, listen to my story', or 'And now listen to what is coming next', 'And now lets see what's happening to so and so...'. But when it comes to the printing of chapbooks, the suspicion of far reaching transformations arises. Frances Pritchett notes that with the indian mass printing industry, 'Ephemeral texts are produced'. They are controlled only by the publisher. They are often anonymous, often ascribed to an author who may be a plagiariser, translator, compiler or editor. Far more important, however, are those changes which affect the structure of the plot itself' (1985, 20).

Between the oral performance of artists who sing a text, and the content of the bhojpuri chapbook which is printed, several major shifts are noticeable. Care is taken to soften the martial inclination of the bhojpuri hero. Blood shedding battles, kidnappings and rapes are not described as they are in the oral context. A concern for introducing moral and chaste values where the oral texts



show freedom of relation between men and women, is prevalent. While the bhojpuri folklore insists on a mystical quest or in a rajput ideal of land conquest, and leaves no place for love stories, the printing chapbooks with its more and more glamorous coverpages and illustrations, seem to emphasise a romantic view. Where oral and folk traditions insist on situations of rupture, the chapbook attempts to transform a folk culture into an idyllic pastoral world. These changing elements, once printed, may be incorporated in the oral performance and step by step change its nature.

Such transformations are not specific to the culture of Indian popular mass printing. The contribution of the chapbook literature, with its centralising impetus, has often been perceived as a factor in cultural impoverishment. This was the case in the history of the printing of French folklore in modern France (Muchembled 1978, 348-366). From the oral texts sung by wandering bards to a mass printing industry, printed folklore has gone through a series of changes, losing its mystical dimension, losing its caste specificity, and transforming the spirit of the *gatha* into that of a *katha*, a story devoid of time and space.

Another difficulty arises, if we compare the metrical rhythm chosen by the compiler in the printed edition of a *gatha* and the melodic structure of the saying of the epic bard. One follows the literary metric rules of the medieval scholarly poetry; the other follows his breathing capacity. Some stylistic features remain similar, like complete inversions of the syntax in prose, the place of the subject and the verb being permuted, in order to emphasise the last word of a verse. But yet, the support of a printed text follows rules that the singer is not used to. They are closer to the *Ramcaritmanas* composition of Tulsidas than the bhojpuri folk metre. In the epic of *Alha-Udal*, the '*alha*-metre', which is built up to an extremely fast speed delivery, is sung in alternance with the '*raiso*' tempo, the medieval literary texts compiled in old manuscripts (Schomer, 1992). Confronted to this difficulty, the singer has adopted a strategy of his own, varying from the chapbook support to his personal inspiration according to the topic of the song and the musical support. Descriptions of battles, for instance, cannot be memorised with the help of booklets. They rely on the *dholak's* beat.

A pattern of sociability:

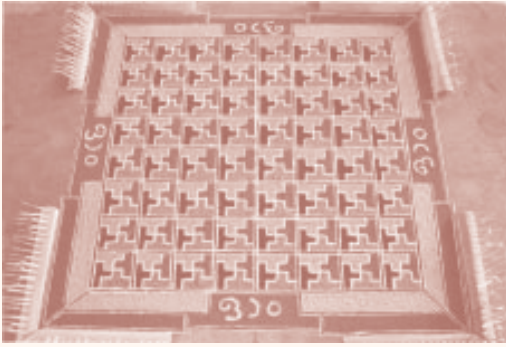
In spite of the competition of other medias, such as cassettes of folklore songs or *filmi git*, the taste of the public for the long versified *gatha* has not faded. For the *bideshiya* (the bhojpuri worker outside the Bhojpuri Anchal), who, far away from home, enjoys listening to the oral performance, the buying of a chapbook is a means of keeping alive the link with his ancestral land, while waiting for the arrival of the wandering singers in his city of adoption.

Though much less appearing than religious chromos, the illustrations included in the chapbooks play an important role in the imaginary. Some of them, such as the scene when the wife of Bhartrihari faints as he comes to beg at the door of his palace, Prince Vijaymal playing the *gulli danda*, or Raja Kunvar Singh cutting himself his wounded arm in the middle of the Ganga River, are quite famous, and embody the bhojpuri pathos. They add a dramatic dimension to the oral performance, and increase the veracity of the character whose exploits are sung. The public has favourite passages of a story, like the arriving of Udal in the court of Alha, or the begging of alms by Bhartrihari from his mother. How the singer will perform, is the moment they expect. As long as the singer comes only once or twice a year in a village, reading the sung story in a chapbook recreates the intimate atmosphere of the oral performance and helps awaiting for this magic moment.

The question of the fidelity to an oral tradition is not very relevant in a domain where creativity constantly defines itself in the fertile space between oral and written forms. This circulation, back and forth, both of wandering singers and chapbooks, shows a pattern of sociability as rooted in an urban culture and in a rural one. It is a sign of the vitality of a popular literature which has managed to sustain itself despite massive social changes and competition.

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The Memory of Gods: From a Secret Autobiography to a Nationalistic Project

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A form of oral repertory, widespread in many regions of South Asia, is what has been called “divine autobiographies” by anthropologists (cf. Campbell 1978, Unbescheid 1987). These involve stories which are supposed to be revealed by the deities themselves who, when speaking in the first person through the voice of their institutional mediums, recount the episodes in their life, where they come from, how they came to settle in their temples, what relations they established with local kings, and so on.

In Kullu Valley of Himachal Pradesh, these divine autobiographies are called *bharthas* (lit. ‘news’) and concern a special category of temple deity who exercise their sovereignty over a territory. They control the weather, arbitrate conflicts, and establish rules. Though extremely valorised, *bharthas* are presented by local people as secret and as a kind of knowledge to which they have, in principle, no access. Moreover, *bharthas* are considered to be simply revealed, therefore neither learnt nor memorised.

First, I would like to discuss how the process of transmitting and (re)producing these *bharthas* is conceived and how it can be dealt with from an anthropological point of view. Second, I will focus on the historical and functional transformations of these divine stories which, from being secret, revealed, and closely linked to the locality, have recently appeared at the very core of a research project promoted by an RSS organisation whose aim is to propagate Hindu nationalism.

I

Bharthas are considered secret in two different and sometimes alternative ways. First, because in many cases they are recited once a year by the medium in an isolated place, in the only presence of the temple’s priest and using what people call the ‘gods’ language’, *devta ka basha*, which makes their understanding enigmatic. Second, even in the rare cases where the *bharthas* are performed publicly, they are recited in a very low voice, that nobody can hear. The enigma and the secrecy around these *bharthas* may be surprising if compared with the extreme accessibility and communicability of these deities during daily consultations held in village temples, when they

interact with people in a very colloquial and spontaneous way (Berti, 2001). By contrast, when they have to tell their own story, deities hide themselves, either because people cannot attend the *bhartha* or because they cannot understand it.

Bharthas - when deities are said to be speaking directly - overlap with other kinds of stories about these deities

which are not at all secret and are recited by villagers independently of any ritual context. On the contrary, having been revealed, *bharthas* are not supposed to be transmitted— no medium will say that he has learnt the *bhartha* of the god he is speaking for. To know the god’s *bhartha* without having learnt it is indeed the very proof for a medium of being the god’s genuine receptacle - though this remains a statement of principle given that no original *bhartha* has been memorised which the medium has to abide by. It is indeed a common specificity of possession rituals to play down learning in favour of revelation, of spontaneous manifestation.

During my fieldwork, in 1996, I tried to collect *bharthas* by asking the *pujaris*, since they are the ones in charge of assisting the mediums during the performance. But the *pujaris* always told me that mediums speak very quietly and in a difficult language. As for mediums, they are not supposed to have any knowledge of the *bharthas* when they are not possessed. It means that, in principle, *bharthas* cannot be collected outside a ritual context when the deity manifests itself.

It is in fact on ritual occasions, during ordinary temple consultations, that mediums disclose some snippets of *bharthas*. The degree to which these snippets are understood varies from one god to another: in some cases, such as for the god Jamlu, the *bhartha* may include some unarticulated sounds, something like “*icchaichichaichi, ucchayicchicchaia*”. This is supposed to be “the god’s language” *par excellence* and the very moment when the god Jamlu manifests himself in his “complete form”. In other cases the language used in these snippets is commonplace but includes poetic or metaphorical sentences the meaning of which can easily be grasped. This is the case, for example, of the goddess Shravani’s *bhartha*, from Shuru village:

Oh men ! These words are those of the *sat-yug* (epoch of truth). I destroyed a basket of incense as I destroyed a basket of poison. For eight days I brought down rain, for eight days I brought out sunshine. I transformed the dry into green. You hold the truth, I hold the power....

Having collected snippets of *bharthas*, my aim in the field was to attend a real one. That did not seem impossible, since along with the general idea that *bharthas* are secret, people know that, in some places, the god allows villagers to attend the performance of his own *bhartha*.

The *bhartha* of goddess Shravani, for example, is publicly executed during the temple's annual festival. As I was very close to this goddess's medium I was once able to attend the performance. But, in fact, this "real" *bhartha* was much shorter than the snippets the medium pronounces during ordinary consultations and nobody could hear anything. Here the medium, who speaks very loudly during "ordinary consultations", was just **murmuring**; his eyes downcast in a very inward-looking posture. Although everyone was straining their ears and trying to grasp some of it, not even the *pujari*, who was sitting in front of the medium, could catch a single word!

A kind of tension runs thus through the *bharthas* performance: they are incomprehensible though at times likely to be understood; they are secret though sometimes partially revealed; they are sometimes public, though impossible to be heard.

Different interpretations might be put forward here and also, they are not exclusive of each other.

A first hypothesis may be that there has been an impoverishment of knowledge in passing on the *bharthas* repertory, due to the fact that what people call a *gur ka khandani* (the lineage within which the medium's role is passed on) is nowadays more rarely maintained from one generation to another and may easily shift from one caste to another. Or, even if the succession is maintained within the same lineage, the role of temple medium may not be regularly ensured. The medium's role is less "attractive" today than before and it may happen that a temple deity may remain without a medium for many years. With gaps in succession and changes in caste, it is difficult to guarantee the transmission of ritual knowledge – especially of *bharthas*. In certain cases a *bhartha* may have lost its content or this content has been reduced, while remaining unchanged, as a ritual performance.

Another hypothesis, which does not exclude the previous one, takes up what Ashley (1993) observed in his study of *teyyam* in Kerala where divine autobiographies are, there also, extremely difficult to understand and rarely sung in their entirety. The author concludes that "their function as a 'story' is less important than their capacity to cause or create (*tottuka*) the presence of the divine" (Ashley 1993: 84). The recitation aims less at letting people know about the gods' story than at manifesting his existence to them. Ashley does not speak of these stories being secret but he noted the voluntary intention of making them inaudible and incomprehensible.

The obscurity of the gods' language has also been observed in ancient India by Malamoud (1995), with reference to Vedic gods. The author noted how the Brahmanas tell about the slight modifications certain words undergo in order to become secret. According to him, it is as if the gods wanted to possess a jargon of their own, distinct from the language of men (Malamoud 1995: 106). He defines this as a sort of clair-obscur, since the revealed text itself indicates which deformations it

has been subjected to (p. 107). And the reason why gods want to introduce obscurity in their language, as appears in the texts, is to acquire some consistency, to let their words become solid, and substantial, through the very mystery they introduce by deforming them. (Malamoud 1989: 244) Compared with the Kullu *bharthas*, however, the obscurity of the god's language does more than introduce consistence, i.e., it confirms in people's eyes that it is really the god who expresses himself through his human receptacle.

By broadening the comparison, the obscurity and secrecy of the gods' autobiographies may be interpreted in the light of what Bazin (2004) observed about the secret surrounding the king's face in the African royal audience, where the king receives his subjects by hiding himself behind a curtain. His subjects may sometimes perceive the king's silhouette, if the curtain is a little transparent; or they may just see the curtain, if it is opaque. But, in fact – notes Bazin – "this dissimulation device does not make the king disappear: rather it manifests the king's presence, it signals it publicly" (*ibid.*: 15) As Bazin wrote: "to hide is a (royal) way of showing oneself: only a foreigner might ask if the king is really there" (*ibid.*). This is what happened to me in Kullu when I started to doubt the existence of a *bhartha* which would have been more than what could be seen in snippets of them...while nobody else even gave a thought to this!

Now, the first hypothesis (of an impoverishment of knowledge) does not exclude the second one (to give some consistence by introducing obscurity) as is shown by the works of Barth (1975, 1987) who makes a relation between the secrecy (in his case of initiation rituals) and the constant fear of losing knowledge, of failing to transmit what is considered to be a vital knowledge. To make this knowledge secret is thus a way for the people of maintaining its cultural value (Barth 1987:48). The value of the information indeed seems to be perceived as inversely proportional to the number of people who share it, up to the point of creating the paradox whereby maximum value is given to a piece of information when it stops being information, i.e., when only one person possesses it and does not pass it on (1975:217).

Similarly, in the case of Kullu, secrecy keeps intact the idea that *bharthas* is the authentic story, a story which, being revealed by the deity, has not been transformed in the course of time.

II

This brings me to the second point I want to discuss. How these secret and inspired stories figure today in the project run by an RSS organisation whose aim is to propagate Hindu Nationalistic feelings?

The organisation in question is the *Akhil Bhartiya Itihas Sankalam Yojana* (hereafter *ABISY*) which may be translated as "Plan (in the sense of Committee) for the collection of History throughout India". *ABISY* is a *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* affiliated organisation created in 1973 by the *pracharak* Moropante Pingle in memory of

Baba Saheb Apte, another full-time *pracharak*. In conformity with other RSS affiliated organisations (like the *Vidhya Bharti*, etc.) one of the main issues in the ABISY's programme is to show that Aryans have not come from the outside but were the original inhabitants of India. This fits in with denouncing the thesis of an Aryan invasion as a distortion of Indian history strategically provoked by Westerners. In the ABISY vision of history, regional or tribal diversities are considered to be a sort of screen behind which this 'Aryan past' may be disclosed. Indian diversities are thus superficial, since at grassroots level they may be linked to one unique (Hindu) culture which is the one handed down by Sanskrit texts (the Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharatha and Ramayana).

The ABISY has tried to propagate its project on history throughout the national territory by creating local "units" at province, state, and district level. Once a unit is created the unit president, together with the unit secretary, has to draw up a specific project starting with what is perceived to be specific to the region and as a strong element of people's local identity. For the Kullu's unit, the stories of local gods, and especially their *bharthas* have been placed at the core of the project.

The project was formally announced during a seminar held in Kullu in 1998, when the king's son, Davendar Singh, was nominated president for the ABISY Kullu branch. Davendar Singh is in the privileged position of asking for the gods' *bharthas*, since his father is considered to be the *mukhya kardar* (chief administrator) of village gods. During the seminar, he formally requested temple people (priests and mediums) who have access to these "secret" performances, to facilitate collecting their respective god's *bhartha* and to write it down on paper, even if they do not understand its exact meaning. The work of ABISY leaders will be indeed "to decipher" these *bharthas* (often just some snippets of them), and to reveal their similarity with Sanskrit texts, by focusing on specific words or expressions. This would reveal the Sanskrit identity of the village gods. For example, the *bhartha* of Katrusi Narayan Bhalayan of the Tarapur region is said to correspond to a passage from the *Bhagvat Dasham Skanda*, which allows them to identify this god with the ('pan-Indian') god Skanda. The fact that the *bhartha* is recited not by an erudite Brahman who knows Sanskrit, but by an illiterate and low-caste medium is presented as an evidence that it is directly recited by the god.

For ABISY leaders, the *bhartha* becomes the original source as well as the proof (*praman*) of the deity, for the very reason that it is revealed by the deity itself. In this sense, they consider *bharthas* similar to the Veda which being revealed knowledge is supposed to be a discourse of "truth" *par excellence*, as Malamoud writes.

Moreover, the fact that *bharthas* are pronounced in a secret or metaphorical language, which can be deciphered only by specialists, bestows on these specialists a special authority in proposing different kinds of parallelism

between, not only the *bhartha* and the Vedas but also - and consequently - between *bhartha* and science. ABISY's discourse is indeed similar to the general claim among Hindu nationalists that "Hinduism is simply another name for scientific thinking" and that Vedas converges "with the contents and methods of modern science" (Meera Nanda 2003: 65).

Let us take the example of Atthara Kardu [lit. Eighteen Baskets] which is the object of many seminars held in the district. According to a local myth, Atthara kardu are eighteen god-snakes who lived inside an amphora in *Goshal* village and received *puja* every day by a local priest. One day the *puja's* light fell down inside the amphora provoking a fire which forced the snakes to come out and run here and there in different villages where they are still now living. This local myth is not much taken into account by ABISY scholars, who base their theories on the Atthara kardu's *bhartha*, which they have collected in one of the Atthara Nag's villages and published in one of their volumes (Bhagat Ram, 1999).

There was obscurity. The world was full of water. We fell down from the sky, and grew up on the earth. We made the earth, made the man. Made from gold, could not speak, made from silver could not speak, made from copper could not speak, made from god's dirt then he was able to speak. From one we became two. From two, ten. From ten hundreds and from hundreds many thousands and from thousands the earth was filled up.

They claim (without giving further details) that these passages of *bhartha* have to be placed in relation to the Sanskrit "Ganapati story" which would show how they are "Vedic gods, like Indra, Rudra, Soma who came from the power of Vishnu when he was lying on the Shesh nag's body in the ocean" (*ibid.*).

The same passages of Atthara kardu's *bhartha* are then said to correspond to something that has also been proved by geologists' findings:

According to geologists, when the earth temperature dropped a thick mass of snow melted, the earth turned into water and creation came to an end. Then the water level dropped and a new creation came about. Atthara kardu entered the body of Manu [the first man] and made the model for the development of mankind... (*ibid.*)

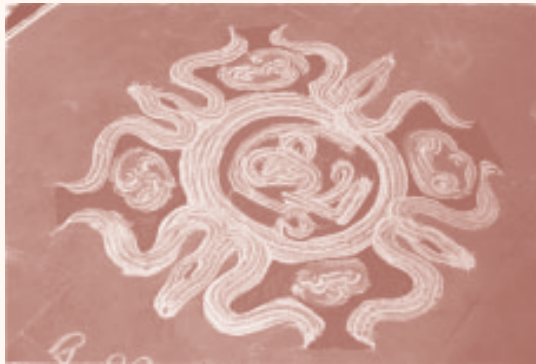
Kullu village gods are systematically going to become the gods of Sanskrit texts in ABISY's publications, and a local form of gods' autobiography is used as proof - revealed but also "scientific" - for building, at regional level, a national "Hindu conscience". The result is moreover that the gods' *bharthas* are ridden of their "secret character" by those who saw in their secrecy the very condition for their authenticity.

While studying oral traditions, the points made above suggest the importance of taking into account, on the one hand, the context of production and transmission

of these oral traditions, which may throw light on a possible difference between how oral texts are conceived by people and how they are actually executed. On the other hand, instead of looking for the “traditional” or “authentic” version of these oral traditions, one has also to consider how the concept of “tradition” or “authenticity” may be historically transformed and even ideologically used.

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While found only in written forms in Central Nepal, genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) are transmitted in both oral and written forms in the Western parts of the country. I will argue that a key to understanding genealogy is to consider its social dimension. It is revealed by the conditions of their production in the case of written texts, and by observing the bardic performance of which genealogies form a prelude, in the case of oral ones.

Genealogies from Western Nepal were first published in the 1960s, but till the present day, these texts have been reproduced in the local language and none or only very few comments about their local uses and the conditions under which they were recorded or found are provided. We are thus left with a raw material, without any idea about who ordered these genealogies, for what purpose, on what occasions, by whom were they composed, augmented and read or recited, how were they transmitted, and even more, what they mean.

The uses of written genealogies

In fact, the people who own or know these texts have also few comments to make on them and do not seem puzzled by their obscure contents. This suggests that their value does not lie exclusively -or even mainly- in their

Drawing a Genealogy of Western Nepal’s Genealogies

MARIE LECOMTE-TILOUINE



narrative meaning. However, practical aims appear in the contents of some written genealogies. It suggests that they were used as proof of status to be presented to the authorities during the XIXth century, after unification of this remote territory by the Gorkhali army. The end of the genealogy of the Deuba (dated 1845)¹, for instance, reveals this goal:

“(…) *Mānu Deuvā* arrived at *Upallātāprā* and lived there. *Mānu Kumāl* was also living there then. As *Mānu Kumāl* had no son, he was without an heir. When he was aged 60, he told *Mānu Deuvā*: ‘I have no son, having received my heritage, would you accept to support my house and to live with me?’ To this request from *Mānu Kumāl*, he answered: ‘well, I agree, I will support your house’, (...) and from that day on he became *Kumāl*. (...) We the *Kumāl*, have worn the holy thread since ancient times. We are warranted (*sadar*) with not being a “drunkard caste”, *matwālī jāt*. In the past during a 9-year examination period, our caste was warranted with being *Deuvā* since long before [but] we have supported the house of a *Kumāl* without offspring, and having lived on his properties, we were called *Kumāl*. Our caste, as always, is *Deuvā*, that is for sure.”

If proof of the pedigree and heresy of status may have been a frequent motivation for producing genealogies, this purpose is in fact seldom explicit. More numerous are the genealogies describing in detail land properties of different branches of a lineage, suggesting that they may have been used to legitimate property rights. This is further ascertained by frequent allusions to very remote generations in written claims on landed property, such as reference to a gift of land made by King Malai Bam four centuries later.² Usually only one or two generations of past kings’ names are recalled in this type of claim,

but they are sometimes shaped as a genealogy parallel to a royal genealogy. Thus a text written at the time of the king of Dullu, Bhakta *Bahādur Śāha*, in 1871 recalls (and documents) the history of the Raskoti kings when retracing the ancestors of three ironsmiths, *luhār*, in order to reclaim the privileges they had received in the past.

If we consider the royal genealogies, a political goal is an obvious aspect of their composition and inscription, as can be shown in the case of the imperial Malla dynasty.³

However, a great number of genealogies are not self-explanatory, and shall thus be understood in the very context of their enunciation, when the text is recited.

The genealogies between literacy and orality

Apparently, the genealogies were already transmitted in both written and oral forms during the Malla period (XII-XIVth centuries). Thus, in the genealogy of the kings of Acham, King *Aśok* Malla is said to have provided his grandson with a “fictive” lunar clan genealogy after having it recited and written it down himself. Other elements reinforce the probability that the kings themselves would write or recite their genealogies. Thus the *Jumalā nareś vaṃśāvalī*, genealogy of the kings of Jumla (Naraharinath IP: 111-113), uses the first person twice, for the evocation of King *Jvālāndhari's* and King *Jitāri's* reigns.

“(...) the minister of *Lāsā* arrived at *Sijā Lāmā Thādā* to pay us tribute, [we] told [him]: ‘Do not bring me as a tribute anything other than horses, silver, embroidered fabrics and gold.’ We also killed the Tibetan King *Āmāpālā* and have been respected for 364 years. As we had no son, the one named Bairimal, of the *Mathurā* forest, having helped us a lot, we told him: ‘I give you my kingdom, your name is now *Sijāpati*. (...)’ Having given the kingdom to this *Sijāpati*, we, King *Jālyālandhari*, went to practise austerities in the jungle hermitage of *Badrināth*. The son of Bhairi Malla [was] Kesari Malla. His son was *Prithī* Malla 1. His son *Ujir* Malla 1. His son *Māhāri* Malla 1. His son *Vimārī* Malla 1. His son *Jitārī* Malla 1. Under our reign, *Jitārī* Malla, *Chicī lāmā* [of] Mugu entered our service. During the month of *asoj*, while we were playing at *caupiḍā* with the *lāmā*, when we were winning, the *lāmā* laughed and we asked him: ‘Why do you laugh, O *lāmā*, when we win?’ (...)”

This very lively evocation of the dead kings, who directly address the reader or listener, may have corresponded to something more than a mere figure of style, since it recalls a real invocation of the great kings of the past. It actualises this past and turns the *vaṃśāvalī* into real journeys back in time. It also suggests that this component might be present when the style is less explicit. Indeed the simple evocation of a dead individual's proper name (or any spirit's name) is conceived as an invocation. It evokes the widespread worship of past kings in Far Western Nepal and Kumaon, who still possess their descendants and speak through their mouth. Though they are considered as a very personal matter, strictly bounded to a particular patriline, in today's practices, genealogies are learned and

recited by specialist orators of low status: the bards or *huḍke Damāi*. From the most immediate form of communication between the living and dead members of the patriline in the form of a genealogy using the first person, a relation mediated by a low-caste specialist was thus privileged and we will try to understand the logic of this triangular link.

Bard as identity keeper

The *huḍke* sing the genealogies of their patrons before the performance of heroic ballads and this séance is called *baḍhāi*, “praise”. When oral, genealogies are thus explicitly conceived as eulogies, panegyrics, and as such, they mark identity and status. Their strong iconic and emblematic feature may explain that they have partly lost their meaning in the course of time, and have taken - or remained in - a cryptic form. It may also explain that local users do not perceive the situation as annoying. On the other hand, as living texts, they play a central role in the functioning of local society, and cannot really be understood outside their context of performance, which provides their most important meaning. It is probably more sociological than historical.

The bards are employed by high-caste families, especially Thakuri, during weddings, and sometimes also during funerals. The bard is a glib talker who not only flatters the audience but also makes them laugh by belittling himself or making fun of his assistants. He makes them laugh by caricaturing the social order, pleasing the “*rājā*” who then shows his generosity. The role of the bard is undoubtedly to please the Kshatriya patrons, but beyond this immediate pleasure, he is also viewed by the latter as the guardian of their history and identity. This dimension is crucial. While history has often been presented as a mere tool of domination for the elite within the context of Nepal, oral history in Western Nepal appears to be much more complex.

As revealed by their genealogical knowledge, the bards seem to be attached to one clan in particular. Other families can call them for weddings, but they do not sing their genealogy, only epics. Given this fact, we could expect each bard's corpus of epics to be specific and to be connected with the history of his attached high-caste family, in the same manner as their genealogical knowledge. Apparently this is not the case and some texts are known from Garhwal up to Western Nepal, such as the epic (*bhārat*) of Rani Rawat. As in most of the epics, heroism is mixed here with cunning and violence.

In “Rani Rawat”, as in many other epics, the mediation of the bard, and his knowledge of cunning, brings victory to the Kshatriya hero while facing the enemy whom his father could not defeat. Thus, Sobha, the orphan son of King Ranai Rawat, who was killed by Meluva Rana, meets Pesio, the *huḍke* bard of his father who is of the opinion that this boy looks like his dead master. He asks him where he is going, with golden clothes and a sword in his hand. The boy tells him about his plan to kill his father's murderer, but the bard warns him that he will be killed and that he should rather hide in a basket and that he himself would carry to Meluva. When the bard gives

the basket to King Meluva, the boy jumps out of it and kills him.

This story contains the leitmotiv which may help to interpret the meaning of the genealogical knowledge: the patriline may be broken, especially when the father dies without offspring. In the Western Nepal epics however, the breaking of the line is never complete. First, the funeral rites of the dead hero are postponed by the capture of his head by an enemy, which prevents the funeral rites from taking place. Secondly, the hero has a son, who usually takes birth after his death. The son is then considered as a negative being, the one “who ate his father”, since the latter met death when he was entering life. To recover a normal, prestigious position, the son needs to substitute himself for his father and to accomplish in what he failed, that is, to kill his father’s enemy, an action which forms a *sine qua non* condition to bring back the father’s captured head. This substitution is fully developed and the child needs his father’s horse, dogs, clothes and sword, to succeed. His first difficulty is thus to be recognised as his father’s son, when his father cannot attest to it, in order to get his paraphernalia. Obviously, in contrast with the high-status individuals who scorn the orphan, as the son of a widow, or son of a bitch, his late father’s servicemen remain faithful even after their patron’s death. They are the ones who attest the boy’s descent by their sense of observation (“this boy looks like my master”) and by their intimate knowledge of their patron’s psychology (“this boys reacts or behaves like my dead patron”). Thus the integrity, identity and prestige of the Kshatriya lines are maintained by the bard and the other service men, rather than by their kinsmen or matrimonial allies. The family bard is also presented as the one who enables his master’s victory by teaching him the tricks of war. Interestingly enough, these tricks are often related to the hero’s identity as well. The bard hides the Kshatriya hero’s identity from his enemy when putting him in a basket, when dressing him up as a bard, or by throwing pepper in the enemies’ eyes. Thus, on the one hand, the bard restores the hero’s lost identity by recognising his descent through physiology or psychology and empowers him by giving him the ancestral weapons and attire. All this is kept secret and forms the cunning nature of the bard. It enables the scorned hero to recover his dead father’s severed head, perform his death ritual and thus restore the patriline as well as his own social position as its member.

Narrated as a prelude to this type of narrative, genealogy in Western Nepal is thus understandable only when placed in its traditional context of enunciation. Sung principally during the establishment of alliances, genealogy forms a kind of prelude to epics, whose contents highlight the whole of the performance of praise and the relation between the bard and his patron. In addition to the contents of the epics, the rituals of the Thakuri wedding reinforce the crucial position which is conferred on the bard by and for his royal patron. Indeed, the *āsikā*, a short form of genealogy, is first sung by the bard at the auspicious time called *lagan*, which is marked in this region by the first cut of scissors made by the

Damai on the fabrics which will be used for the wedding. It should be noted that the bards (or *huḍke*) belong to the Damai caste (tailors and musicians). Then, the bard opens the groom’s wedding procession and sings along the way. Mid-way, it is the family bard from the bride’s side who comes to meet and lead the allies, and when the procession reaches the bride’s courtyard, the groom’s bard once again sings his patron’s *āsikā*. After the wedding rituals, the bride’s family bard again accompanies the bride and groom in the procession up to the mid-way point, and when they reach the groom’s house, his *huḍke* sings the longer genealogy, *vaṃśāvalī*, and then resumes the epics.

The bard is thus a mediator, an intermediary between the different Kshatriya clans as well as their representative. Bound closely to one of them, he accompanies his patron, sings his praise, and most importantly his prestigious pedigree at the difficult times of the meeting with other Thakuris, with whom he is, by definition, in competition, at times of war in the past, during matrimonial alliances today.

The bardic séance may be viewed as ego-boosting therapy, during which the bard evokes the ancestors’ names and brave deeds of his patrons, which flatter their Ego so much that they pay for that. They even pay extra money when personally praised for their beauty, their majesty or their lofty function. The genealogy is part of this séance, since to be born into a prestigious and ancient family is certainly one of the most important features of the Kshatriya identity. In many ways, the bard seems to act as a psychoanalyst for the Kshatriyas, he knows who they are and the art of asserting it. But he also seems to be playing with their vulnerable patrons, who are never sure enough about who they are, and how great they are, in the same way that they portray themselves in a grotesque and miserable way to remind them how poor they remain in spite of their ancient loyal services. To pay is part of the Kshatriya’s grandeur, which is again conferred on them by the bard beggar.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Nepali text is published in P.P. Nepal Yatri (1978: 300).
- ² A claim on pasture rights dated 1870 recalls that they were received at the time of Malai Bam, 14th century (Naraharinath 1956: 346-49).
- ³ See M. Lecomte-Tilouine ed., forthcoming: *Bards and mediums in the Himalayan kingdoms*. (This collective volume explores the bardic and mediumic practices of the Central Himalayas. It is illustrated by several videos included in a DVD Rom).❖



Variation and Interaction between Musical and Visual Components in a Kerala Ritual for Snake Deities

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The question of multisensoriality or interaction among senses, has been subject to many researches in anthropology and history (Corbin 1990, 1994, Howes 1990, 1991, Leavitt and Hart 1990). Ethnomusicology has favoured most of the time the unique dimension of hearing, underestimating the constructive role other senses - in particular visual - might play in musical performance. The domestic rituals I have observed in Kerala (South India) offer a challenging example of intersection between sound and visual idioms. Some specialists from low caste communities are using a transversal concept, the notion of "form", i.e., *rupam*, to describe composition process in music and graphic repertoire as well.

This paper focuses on a domestic ritual known as "*pambintullal*", literally "trembling of the snakes". This ritual is performed by a low status community, the Pulluvan, who is in charge of the cult of snake deities, *naga* or *sarppam*. These musicians work for upper castes families and provide several kinds of rituals and musical services in order to cure sins and to keep misfortune away. The aim of Pulluvan's activities consist in maintaining the fertility and the prosperity of the landowners through the worship of family snakes deities.

This ritual is also known as *kameluttu pattu'*, literally "song and writing of *kalam*". The *kalam* "area" or "space" is a drawing on the floor made of colours and powders. It represents the deities invoked in complex interlaces which are several metres large. Epicentre of the whole ritual action, it is used as a privileged means to call the deities or make them appear. It is erased after each night of ritual. This ephemeral drawing is always accompanied with music, both instrumental and vocal. The songs, *pattu'*, usually narrate the origins of the deities and their acts. They comment also upon the ritual actions which are performed simultaneously, for instance the details of offerings, prayers and the attitude of the audience.

Two media, visual and sound, form a very unique way of worship. The Pulluvan specialists are musicians and drawers as well. How to analyse the intertwining between music and drawing in this particular ritual?

The songs

The corpus consists of strophic songs with a fixed text. Musicians identify each song mainly by its text. Since, the tune and rhythm change from a performance to another. In Malayalam, the language of Kerala, the term *rupam* (form) denotes the tune. The way of rendering the text follows a single melodic line reiterated along the entire text. The rhythm consists of a cycle, *talam*, constant during the entire song.

The detailed analysis of the corpus reveals that each musician has his own way to render a same text. I have identified ten rhythmic cycles and about twenty melodic profiles, the two main stocks in which the musician draws from. At each performance, the singer composes a new combination of a cycle and a tune according to his own inspiration. The musical expression varies according to a principle of interchange and variation.

FIG.1A ET 1B: Two versions of the song *Naveru'* (Throwing the tongue) performed by Padmavati and Janaki. The purpose of this song is to protect upper castes families from the influence of evil eye and evil tongue. The singer accompanies herself with a musical pot, *kutam*, in which a string has been fixed. The rhythmic cycle follows three pitches (low, medium, high) according to the tightness of the string.

Fig. 1a : Padmavati's version. Tune 1 combined with a cycle of 7 beats (3+2+2).

Fig.1b : Janaki's version. Tune 2 combined with a cycle of 2 beats.



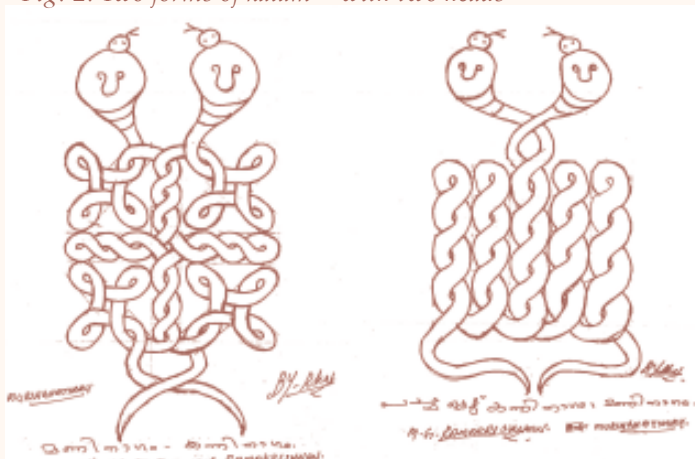
Aesthetics of variation

The musicians describe the two versions (See figs.) as the same song because of the similarity of the text. Many Pulluvan explain: "This is the same song, but it is different". They underline the unity of text but the difference in musical realisation. Pulluvan musicians have developed a specific discourse about variation. To the question "Why the tunes are different?", they usually refer to *kalam*, the drawings made on the ground:

"According to the imagination of the artist, any form of *kalam* can be drawn. Our ideas must be discussed with people who are with us otherwise the *kalam* form will be of a different type. For that, mutual instructions will be given. The snake *kalam* is one, but we are drawing it in different forms, *rupam*. This is the same for songs, the story is always the same, but the tune changes!" (Interview with Pulluvan Ramakrishnan, 2000).

The musician-drawer Ramakrishnan states a principle of variation in music and graphic activity as well. During his explanation, Ramakrishnan took a small notebook in which he drew many sketches of *kalam*. Musicians usually use this support to memorise song texts and graphic techniques. The notebook is the main support of their reflexivity. It is also a way to create new forms of *kalam* and to "test" the interlaces before drawing them in the courtyard of the patrons.

Fig. 2: Two forms of *kalam* « with two heads »



These are two forms of the same *kalam* "with two heads", also called with the name of deities "Jewel snake *Maninagam*/ Virgin snake *Kanninagam*" (fig.2). We note the two heads of the snakes, common to both sketches. The number of snakes usually denotes the category of *kalam*. Pulluvan categorise the drawings through their fixed elements and similarly they identify the songs by a fixed text. In the same way, specialists use different stocks of visual elements (colours, form of motives) just as they choose different possibilities of musical elements (tunes, cycles).

Pulluvan's search for variation, both in music and *kalam*, refers to the ritual action as a whole. In this context, the variation of music and drawing guarantees the ritual symbolic efficacy. Musicians explain that what is "beautiful", *bhamgi*, concerns mostly the variation. The more it varies, the more beautiful it is. If the *kalam* changes from a ritual to another, the deities will be pleased and the ritual will be successful. The search for "beauty" is embedded in the ritual necessity to please the deities. Here, aesthetics and ritual efficacy proceed from the same intention. In the same manner, the patrons of upper castes families are really sensitive to the beauty of the music and images. They usually select the "best" Pulluvan for his skills both in song and drawing.

About "Intersection"

The ethnographic account of the "audiovisual" activity of this caste of musicians shows complex interplay between visual and sound, which must be thought here as two interdependent variables. Music and image appear in a process of "intersection", a concept developed by French musicologist Jean-Yves Bosseur (1998), in the context of Western contemporary arts of the twentieth century. According to, the concept of intersection denotes "the intervals that can be understood as unifying and/or distinguishing different artistic practices" (1998 : 8). Such definition raises a broader discussion about the different modes of convergence between visual and sound idioms. Intersection, as an analysing tool, enables us to qualify the different techniques or processes used to link visual and sound, as synesthesia (ibid: 9-48), interplay between space and time (ibid: 49-90), "structural homologies" (ibid: 91-131) or "plural activities" (ibid: 91-131).

In the Pulluvan example, music is part of a composite practical knowledge. The study of musical and graphic repertoires enables us to throw light on one aspect of "intersection" only. Here the intersection denotes a composition process. Indeed, besides music and graphics, there is also sophisticated interplay between space and time on the ritual space. These are also formalised as an intersection by the musicians and other actors of the ritual (Guillebaud 2006ip).

The most striking aspect of Pulluvan's theories is the status which is given to the music itself that music is always defined as non existing by itself, but only by referring to another art and knowhow. Referring to an external component, the visual medium, or the plasticity of drawing, provides the music with its concepts.

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**The theme of January 2007 issue of
Indian Folklife is
The Legend: Conceptual Issues
and Pragmatics of Telling**

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The folklorists have paid relatively little attention to the legend compared to the privileged genres like the myth, epic and the folktale. It happened because the genre was not utilised for nationalistic or colonial politics like many other items of folklore. Its definition is based on western experience and does not exactly correspond with Indian reality or situations outside Judeo-Christian societies. Therefore, it is necessary to address the issue of cross-cultural definition of the genre. Similarly classification of legends also posits problems. This issue of *Indian Folklife* will deal with the comprehensive understanding of the genre in folklore scholarship, the functions of legends in different cultural contexts, the relationship between legend, belief and politics. Moreover, so far little attention has been paid to Indian urban legends and there will be an attempt to outline the stock of Indian urban legends also.

PURUSHARTHA, SOCIAL SCIENCES IN SOUTH ASIA

MARIE FOURCADE, chief editor

<http://ceias.ehess.fr>



Purushartha 18, Oral Traditions in South Asia (Catherine Champion, ed.), 1998, 448 pages

This thematic volume on oral tradition privileges the notion of circulation of texts and inquires on urban forms of civility in which folk literature is involved. Three relevant questions arise here :

- Evolution and transmission of traditional repertoires in a context of growing urbanisation.
- How to face the competition among massprinting, « filmi git » and cassettes.
- Orality as a mode of expression of a collective imaginary or of a more individual and emotional style.

Purushartha 20, Indian Theatres (Lyne Bansat-Boudon, ed.), 1998, 368 pages

India has a love for theatre. This is what this volume accounts for, in its plurality and from various points of view, such as, philology, literary analysis, history, sociology, actresses' testimonies and even poetry.

The scope to the scene of ritual as well as to aesthetic and philosophical reflection allows for an analysis of the relationships between theatre

and reality, together with an exposition of arguments on degrees of embodiment: theatrical characterisation and ritual possession.

Purushartha 24, Literature and Cultural Poetics in South Asia (Annie Montaut, ed.), 2004, 268 pages

Classic literature, oral « folk » literature, cinema, painting: the approach of these cultural subjects can be inspired by ethnology, stylistics, philosophy, or can use the methods of cultural anthropology, of textual analysis, of sociocritic, or of the theory of reception.

This book combines the contributions of researchers and famous artists, writers and painters. Its diversity gives an idea of the aesthetic creation in contemporary India. The glance of the artists themselves, parallel to the critic's one, answers to the general plan of this volume, i.e., to grasp the modes of consciousness and knowledge in the aesthetic shapes, today, in India.

Purushartha 25, Hindu Rites. Transfers and Transformations (Gérard Colas & Gilles Tarabout, eds.), 2005/2006, 504 pages

Rituals are generally understood as repeating expected patterns of movement and utterance, either transmitted within one's own group or borrowed from others, but always originating from within a "tradition". They are "age-old" practices. However, even when a ritual is said to have been preserved, or carefully reproduced in case of borrowing, its relative importance, motivation and "meaning" (for the people concerned) necessarily vary. The contributions in the present volume, document and critically analyse "Hindu" rituals as social and historical constructs, by focusing specifically on their circulation in space, society and time: what determines the fate of rituals across history and cultures? what is at stake behind their continuous (re)appropriation / rejection by a given society? and which are the mechanisms involved in their constant interpretation? The approach is based on epigraphy, history of religion, history of literature, sociology and anthropology.