

akten des Dresdner Museums leider nicht vor. Diese Feststellung gilt allerdings ebenso für zumindest zwei weitere der anderen drei behandelten sächsischen Ethnologieinstitutionen. Der Vorgang scheint zumeist nur mündlich verhandelt worden zu sein, und es liegen daher keine offiziellen Schriftstücke vor. Dieser auffallend informelle Charakter der Beschlüsse rund um die offiziellen Erkennungszeichen würde sich bei zukünftigen Recherchen sehr nachteilig auswirken. Wenn nämlich bereits zum gegenwärtigen Zeitpunkt ein "Nichtwissen" um die Entstehung der sächsischen Ethnologielogos zu konstatieren ist, kann man sich ausmalen, wie es in Zukunft darum bestellt sein wird. Diesem drohenden Wissensverlust um die Logos soll mit dem vorliegenden Artikel Einhalt geboten werden, denn nicht zuletzt handelt es sich bei diesen emblematischen Erkennungszeichen auch um eine im deutschsprachigen Raum angesiedelte Facette ethnologischer Fachgeschichte.

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## Sanskritization of the Upper Castes

### The Case of Mahāsū Followers

Hagar Shalev and Asaf Sharabi

### Introduction

Mahāsū *devtā* (deity) is one of the major deities in the Indian Western Himalayas. It is the common name of four brothers who rule parts of the Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh and parts of the Deh-

radun and Uttarkashi districts of Uttarakhand.<sup>1</sup> Like many other *devtās* (deities) in the Western Himalayas, Mahāsū enacts its (political) agency through ritual representation in a method of theistic rule that is locally called *devtā kā rāj* (government by deity). He governs people and places through signs (*nisān*) of theistic sovereignty, e.g., a pole, tongs, jars, wooden blocks (Sutherland 2006; Sax 2002: 157f.). Like many other deities in the region, he performs movements within his territory (called *ghorī*) to mark his sovereignty as a king (*rājā*). Nowadays, Mahāsū functions mainly as a supreme judge and healer of the villagers. He decides both secular and religious issues, and he does so through one of the important dimensions of the local religious culture – the immediate connection of the people with their god-king, effected through mediums and the cyclic performances of festivals (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 17). In Mahāsū's realm this function of mediumism is called *mālī*. There is at least one *mālī* in almost every village in the area under discussion.

Most of the population in Mahāsū's realm belong to the two dominant castes (Rajputs and Brahmins), and are known as Khas or Khasiya. The minority belongs to the class that used to be called Untouchable, Dom, Dalit, or Harijan, and nowadays – scheduled castes or tribal castes (Berreman 1964; Bhatt 2010). Together they are known as the Pahārī (of the mountains) people. Based on the premise that changes in the character, nature, and ritual world of a deity reflect changes in the religious experience of his believers, this article focuses on how people in the area under discussion understand and interpret religious experiences relating to Mahāsū. The article attempts to explain how hegemonic pan-Hindu notions of divinity are accepted and integrated into the epistemological conceptions prevailing in Mahāsū's territory, and the social process now occurring in his area. We maintain that a specific process of Sanskritization attaches to the religious experience of Mahāsū *devtā* followers, and we shall describe it through two dimensions: the epistemological level and the practical level. At the epistemological level, we will describe the change in the notions of divinity surrounding Mahāsū, such as the way he is linked to Śiva. At the practical level, we will describe the changes in two main rituals – *bali* (animal sacrifice) and Jāgra (annual festival).

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Mahāsū's realm. During August–October 2013 and March–June 2014 we conducted dozens of semi-structured in-depth interviews with people in

the field. The age range of the interviewees was between 18 and 84, most of them men.

### Sanskritization in India's Caste System

Sanskritization is a particular form of social change through ritual behavior that denotes the process whereby lower castes seek upward social mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes (Jayapalan 2001: 228, quoting Srinivas). Sanskritization takes place in caste (Hindu) society as well as among tribal and semi-tribal communities (Jayapalan 2001: 228f.). Srinivas (1952) defined this concept when he found evidence that the local village customs of the Coorgs, which derived from ancient non-Hindu rituals, had gradually changed over a period of centuries to more closely resemble Brahmanic Hindu practices. The effect of this was to raise the caste level of the Coorgs and to narrow the social distance between themselves and Brahmins in the Hindu hierarchy (Wilcox 2006). Srinivas emphasized that Sanskritization was not only Brahminization, but could be based on the emulation of rituals and social practices of other castes as well (Jayapalan 2001: 228f.).

Another important aspect of Sanskritization is highlighted by Srinivas in extending Sanskritization beyond the mere adoption of new customs and habits to include exposure to new ideas and values that appear in Sanskrit literature, both sacred and secular. *Karma* (action), *dharma* (moral religious law), *pāpa* (sin), *māyā* (illusion), *saṃsāra* (circle of rebirth), and *mokṣa* (liberation) are examples of the most common Sanskritic theological ideas used by people who underwent the process of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1962: 48). This process consists of renouncing some customs that are considered to be impure by the higher castes, such as meat-eating, animal sacrifice, and alcohol consumption (Singh 1973: 5), which are frequently encountered among the higher castes of the Western Himalayas. As Berreman (1964: 54) mentions, even the two dominant castes in the area, Rajputs and Brahmins, “tend to exhibit religious and social behavior which on the plains is associated primarily with low-caste groups.”

The importance of the term Sanskritization can be measured by the enormous responses and uses of the term since its appearance in the early fifties (Shah 1996). Thus, according to Yogendra Singh (1973: 5–7) the process of Sanskritization is an endogenous source of social change. Harold Gould (1961: 947) writes that the motivating force behind Sanskritization is often not one of cultural imitation per se, but an expression of challenge and revolt against socio-

<sup>1</sup> Bhatt (2010), Sutherland (2003), Handa (2004), Elmore (2005).

economic deprivations. McKim Marriott (1959) observes that Sanskritic rites are often added to non-Sanskritic rites without replacing them.

The most relevant treatment of Sanskritization for our discussion was made by Berreman (1963: 139–141), who emphasized the Sanskritization of the “hill” people towards the “plains.” With the modernization of the subcontinent, “improved means of communication, increased movement of people between the hills and plains, more easily available schooling, and increased financial capabilities,” Sanskritization emerged as “an active tendency toward emulation” of the greater Indian community by small villages in the hills (Berreman 1963: 139). He called their motivation “plains-ward mobility.” This means: “the trend toward adoption of the behaviors of plains dwellers. The goal of many hill people is to be acceptable or respected in the eyes of plains people with whom they are increasingly in contact” (Berreman 1961: 338).

The extent to which this transformation occurs reflects the level of interaction between the village and the plains, and it occurred to various degrees across many villages, as access increased between the hills and plains. In this form, “plains-ward mobility,” Sanskritization, is most evident among the upper-class hill people, who emulate the upper classes of the plains. Despite their predetermined position of authority in their own villages, plains Brahmins and Rajputs (the two dominant castes in the area) often reject the caste status claims of their Pahārī caste-fellows, largely because of their unorthodoxy (primarily in ritual practices, as ritual expressions of caste status are the central concern here). By adopting some of the symbols of plains culture, Pahārī people hope to improve their status in the eyes of the plains people; the more a family conforms to Sanskritic orthodoxy in life-cycle ceremonies, the more highly it is regarded (Berreman 1963: 139–141). This Sanskritization enabled the authority in these villages to be seen as legitimate from the outside, without any challenge to their internal hierarchies.

The process of “plains-ward mobility” is highly relevant to the changes in the religious experience in Mahāsū’s cult nowadays. In this article, we maintain that half a century after Berreman’s work, Sanskritization is at play and with greater intensity, as a result of modern influences, such as technology, economy, and political order. We will present this process in two dimensions: first, at the level of the divinity notion, and second, at the level of ritual practices.

## Divinity Notions

The widespread notion of divinity in the Western Himalayas is directly connected with concrete notions of divinity such as the status of the God-king who wanders in his territory and can talk to his followers through mediums.<sup>2</sup> In our fieldwork we were able to detect a process of change with relation to divinity notions which have become less concrete and more abstract in accordance with monotheistic and Advaitic epistemology. These notions regard the *devtā* as a single omnipotent and omnipresent power. They can be observed in the appearance of Mahāsū in reality, in the type of divine power he wields, and in the manner in which he is linked to Śiva and connects with his followers.

The presence of Mahāsū has become less concrete and more abstract. For example, when trying to ascertain exactly where the different Mahāsū brothers live today, we were told that in fact Mahāsū is everywhere, but mostly in Hanol (the village where the main temple is). A drummer of Pabāsī (one of Mahāsū brothers) in Thadiyar village said: “This is how it is in all India. There is more than one *mūrti* (image). So you can say Mahāsū is mostly in Hanol, but he is everywhere.” The drummer was trying to explain this idea of abstraction of the *devtā* by connecting it to the way he believes God is perceived all over India.

Another example is the explanation we heard in Khashdhar village regarding the presence of Caldā (one of Mahāsū’s brothers). Caldā Mahāsū exemplifies the Pahārī notion of *devtā kā rāj* – government by deity – (Sutherland 2006), as he (used to) travel from village to village in a routine cycle, staying in each village between six months and two years.<sup>3</sup> During our fieldwork Caldā was staying in Koti, a small village near Hanol. Far away (in local terms) from Koti and Hanol, in the northern area of Mahāsū influence, is the large village of Khashdhar. In Khashdhar there is a local Caldā who stays only there. When we asked a local *pūjārī* (priest) about that, he told us that there is only one Caldā: “There is nothing like a big or small Caldā. All are same.” When we asked where is Caldā now – in Koti, Khashdhar, or Hanol? – the *pūjārī* answered: “These are stations which he has made, like we have bus stops.” A young Brahmin completed his answer, saying that “these are the stations for physical staying, but otherwise he is everywhere.” The last exam-

2 Sax (2000), Bindi (2012), Sutherland (2006), Vidal (2006), Berti (2009).

3 Change in his manner of rotation has been at play in the last 15 years.

ple was recorded in Sundli village while talking to a Brahmin family. When asked where the *devtās* live, the oldest son replied: “The big God is Lord Śiva. He is everywhere. The little parts are four Mahāsū. Mahāsū is one part of Śiva, he is spread like that.” We replied: “But where is Pabāsī right now? People told us he is in Thadiyar?” Then he answered:

The people who tell you that Pabāsī is in Thadiyar and Bāṣik (one of Mahāsū brothers) is in Maindrath don't understand the meaning of God. How can that be? The temple in Thadiyar is only seven years old, but the *devtā* is much older, he is eternal ... the human mind needs to take their things and worship them. They give them the power.

From his answer it is clear that he understands the *devtā* as an abstract, eternal, all-pervasive, and omnipresent power rather than a concrete god who travels between the villages. By the analogy of Mahāsū with Śiva he could easily explain the way Mahāsū is spread and exists everywhere at any time. In the same manner, the *pūjārī* of Sundli village located the deity in its universal connection. Using a fable from the Chāndogīa-Upaniṣad, he described how the honeydew turns into honey and how the god lives within all living beings like a bird or a tree. He emphasized that the god cannot be seen or understood. In the same manner, Mahāsū is the whole body and we are his organs. Śiva is the abstract god and Mahāsū is the concrete form that man can see and experience. He also said that Mahāsū is the Pahārī name for the Sanskrit Śiva.

The concretization of the *devtās* is reflected in the different character of each *devtā* as perceived by their followers. Nevertheless, as one of the *pūjārīs* of Caldā Mahāsū told us, the Mahāsū's “nature [character = *svabhāv*] is a little bit different, but their essence [*sār*] is the same.” A similar Advaitic idea was heard in Dhar village from Boṭha's (one of the Mahāsū brothers) temple *pūjārī*. We asked him about the different powers (*śakti*) of the different brothers. After gazing at the wall for some time he said:

In the whole universe *there is only one power*. It is the same power in every religion, no different. From this power, there are branches. Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. They manifest this one power, but it is the same power, only one. It is like a tree and its roots. The universe is the tree, its roots are in the ground. They are the power. But the branches are seen from outside. We can see them.

His answer is in line with the Advaitic notion of divinity and the political-theological idea of “unity in diversity” that has become the popular conception of modern India. He aspires to see his own belief and way of life as correlating with pan-Hindu

belief and Western ideas regarding divinity. This is why he repeatedly emphasized that there is only one power (*sirf ek śakti hai*). To him, our question seems to miss the basic idea about God and life – there is only one God and his power is manifested in all living and non-living beings.

A school teacher from Chiwan exemplified this unity of God (by analyzing it through Saṃkya perspective): “Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahma. Satya-gun, Raja-gun, and Tama-gun. Electron, proton, and neutron. These are three powerful elements; these are three qualities of Hindu mythology.” He stressed that the *devtās* are not gods. He further explained the difference between God and *devtās* such as Mahāsū:

God is the invisible Śiva. Śiva is the particular God. There is no birth, no place. God is some other power. But they [the *devtās*] are the representatives of God on the land. ... They are provided by the God to keep the men near the God.

The connection between Śiva and local deities (like Mahāsū) interoperated as his manifestation is a historical process that began with the spread of Kashmir Saivism during the 9th century. Nevertheless, we were able to detect two main voices regarding the connection between god(s) and local *devtās* in general and between Śiva and Mahāsū in particular. The first voice made a clearer distinction between the former and the latter, emphasizing that the power of the former is greater and regarding the latter as a concrete function of the god(s). The other voice sees the *devtās* as a pure manifestation of the god(s), as the same identity. Either way, theology notion becomes more abstract and connected to Advaitic epistemology and in some cases even to the monotheistic notion of divinity.

Another aspect reflective of changes in notions of divinity is the growing dominance of Śiva elements in the religious experience of Mahāsū followers. In some places, the identification of Mahāsū with Śiva is becoming clearer and more explicitly connected to a Brahmanical perspective. The strong connection to Śiva nowadays can be seen in some Mahāsū temples, where signs of Śiva are present more than they were before. Such is the case in the new Pabāsī temple at Thadiyar. When the temple was consecrated on June 6th, 2003, the temple strongly identified Mahāsū with Śiva. For example, the sign at the front entrance says: “Mahā Śiv Mandir” – the temple of Śiva. Nandī (Śiva's cow) looks over the view and Śiva's *triśul* is also present. It seems that Thadiyar set the tone, because since 2012 at least two more villages in the area of Pabāsī territory, Khashdahr and Chiwan, have built Nandī in their temples.

Growing Śaivistic elements can also be seen in the myths surrounding Mahāsū. The most famous myth is the immigration story known as the “Mahāsū ki kathā.” In the main narrative of the immigration myth (*kathā*) the area was ruled by a man-eating demon (*rākṣasā*) who demanded human sacrifices from the locals twice a year. In a local village called Maindrath lived a Brahmin named Hūṇa Bhātt with his wife Kīrtika and one son. The demon wanted Hūṇa’s son as sacrifice. Kīrtika told Hūṇa to call Mahāsū *devtā* from Kashmir for help and so he did. Once the four brothers of Mahāsū came to the area, they killed the demon, settled down, and established Hanol as the capital of their kingdom.

During our fieldwork we collected seventeen versions of the *kathā* from fifteen different villages<sup>4</sup> and compared them with old versions recorded by British officers and scholars<sup>5</sup> and by more recent sources.<sup>6</sup> In general, almost all the versions from our fieldwork narrated the same version, with minor changes. Almost all of the versions recognized Mahāsū as a form of Maha-Śiva, but did not focus on that fact.

Our finding indicates, however, that the last twenty years have seen increased penetration of Sanskritic elements (Śaivistic and Avdaitic notions of divinity) into the immigration story. Such a version was told to us by the *pūjārī* of Sundli village. He said that Hūṇa went to Kashmir to the Amarnath-Caves to call Śiva. In this way, he connected the *kathā* to a pan-Hindu pilgrimage and one of the important places sacred to Hindus in north India.

Another interesting version containing Śaivistic details was heard in the main temple in Hanol from the local goldsmith of the temple.<sup>7</sup> This version is particularly interesting because it does not change the *kathā* at all, but only connects it with the borrowed tradition of Purāṇic stories. In this version, Śiva had two sons: Kārtik swami (known in the “Śiva-Purāṇa” as Kumāra) and Gaṇeśā. They fought about who would be the ruler after Śiva.<sup>8</sup> They decided to compete: who would be the first to circle the world seven times? Kārtik swami had Garuda

(eagle) as his vehicle while Gaṇeśā had only a rat. They set out but Gaṇeśā, seeing he was about to lose, complained to his mother. She told him that Śiva is like the whole universe and circling him is like circling the whole world. Gaṇeśā won the contest by following her advice, but Kārtik swami felt abused and sad, for his mother had preferred his younger brother over him, so he cut himself into four pieces of flesh (*māms* in Hindi. This term is etymologically connected to the name Mahāsū), from which the four Mahāsū brothers were created. They lived in a pool in Kashmir. The rest of the *kathā* continues from the point it usually starts from. This version shows the hybridity of traditions – without damaging the autonomous story of Mahāsū it connects it with the Brahmanical tradition. In this way, local tradition enters existing traditions without losing prestige.

We heard a unique version in Pronti. In this version, Hūṇa does not meet Mahāsū or any of his *birs* (soldiers or ministers) in Kashmir, rather he meets only Śiva *a*. Lastly, one of the versions we recorded in Jubbal linked the *kathā* to Viṣṇu. A *mālī* of Chauni Bir (one of Boṭha Mahasu’s *birs*) mentions two demons who ruled the area. One of them was Kirmir (in accordance with the usual narrative) and the other one was Sastaval (Hindi: hundred arms), but at that time he had only two arms because Viṣṇu had cut off the other 98. At this point, it is important to mention that three times, in different villages, we heard that Mahāsū is some kind of Ragunath or Ramchandra (Rama) (two of the ten avatars of Viṣṇu). In two cases the informants recognized that Mahāsū was connected to Śiva, but they added that in their opinion Mahāsū is connected to Viṣṇu. This new connection of Mahāsū to Viṣṇu can exemplify the deeper ties of the local notion of divinity to the Indian plains, and the profundity of the Sanskritization process in this area.

The Sanskritization that takes place at the level of the divinity notion applies not only to the nature of the *devtās* or the growing connection to Śiva and Viṣṇu, but also to the way people communicate with them. It is commonly asserted (and confirmed by our experience in the field) that young people (aged between 20–30) are beginning to challenge traditional beliefs in the credibility of the *mālī* – the medium through whom the *devtā* speaks with his/her followers. Although it is difficult to determine to what extent these voices actually represent a major overall change, it is clear that today they are present in Mahāsū’s *deś* (territory), especially in the Jubbal area. A thirty-year-old educated man in Dhar told us that everything that is corrupt in Mahāsū’s system today is related to the *mālī*:

4 Villages in Himachal Pradesh: Jubbal, Shari, Sundli, Sirthi, Dhar, Kashdhar, Pronti, and Sraji. Villages in Uttarakhand: Thadiar, Hanol, Maindrath, Koti (Bawar), Bastil, Chiwan and Dagoli.

5 I.e., Atkinson (1884), Emerson (1930), Rose (1919).

6 I.e., Handa (2004), Zoller (2001), Elmore (2005), Bhatt (2010), Saksena (1962), Jain (1995), *Katha Sri Mahasu Devta Ki* n. d.).

7 This story, with some altered details, was also related to us by a school teacher in Chiwan. It also appears in the CD collected in Hanol (*Katha Sri Mahasu Devta Ki* n. d.).

8 In the Purāṇic story they fight about who would conduct the *agrīm pūjā*, i.e., to be worshipped first by Śiva.

Nobody can see *devtā*, so people need to trust the *mālī*. ... if someone has a problem like money, or job or health condition, they will think it is related to *devtā*, so many times they have to believe [the] *mālī* ... *they never speak the truth*. Everybody can pretend, like an act or a show. How can we trust that without proof? [The] *mālī* told me I will get a certain job – and then it didn't happen. *Mālī* told me that someone who is about to die will get better and an hour later he died. So how can we trust him?

This young man represented the opinion that mediumism is a fraud.<sup>9</sup> This opinion does not challenge the *devtā* himself, his power, or his symbols; it only rejects the transformation of divine power through a human mediator. It is not a secular voice, but rather a voice searching for a more abstract expression of divinity, which views the *devtā* as a distant element to be accessed through prayer and ritual, and not through direct conversation.

### Rituals

The transition from concrete to abstract perceptions of divinity is also evident at the level of ritual. First, we will discuss the changes taking place with regard to the practice of animal sacrifice (*bali*), and then we will present the changes in the most important annual festival (Jāgra).

As part of the common Himalayan system of *devtā kā rāj*, religious worship entails offering *devtās* sheep, goats, and rams (*bali-prathā*). The offerings are meant to please the deity and are aimed at either receiving something in return or simply as an expression of loyalty (*śradhā*). However, in the territories of the Mahāsū brothers there is a constant change in the acceptance of *bali* on the part of the *devtās*. In 2006, *bali-prathā* was banned from the main temple in Hanol, but it is still customary to offer *bali* outside the temple. This also holds true for temples in other parts of Mahāsū's territory.

During the interviews, we detected ambivalence toward the *bali* system. It can be vividly seen in the dilemma of a Rajput couple in Sirthi village. The couple tried to have children for many years without success. Being educated and relatively well off, they endured many expensive fertility treatments in the city of Shimla. After almost losing hope, they turned to Mahāsū for help. When we met them, they had two children. We were invited for a special *rātri-pūja* the night after Jāgra (annual festival). The next day they offered *bali* in return for the *devtā*'s help with their fertility problems and held a celebration for the whole village. Food (both vege-

tarian and nonvegetarian) was offered and everyone sat together for a big meal. The wife was vegetarian. We were curious about their offering of a goat and asked them how they felt about the slaughter. Confused and embarrassed, they smiled and looked at the floor as they answered (talking together):

You see there is a struggle because of the *bali-prathā*. There are the Radha-swamis and gurus – they don't believe in the system of *bali-prathā* ... they belong to Satsang<sup>10</sup> ... You see in the villages there are *many people who don't believe in it, but we have to do it. We don't want to, but we have to ... this is our tradition.*

We asked how many people in the nearby villages are vegetarians and they replied together: the husband said 20% and his wife 40%. This story highlights the tension surrounding the change in ritual customs. This tension is caused by outside Sanskrit influences that force society to challenge and reflect on its own habits and traditions. While being exposed to the pan-Hindu notion of purity and *āhimsa*, Mahāsū's community is slowly changing its concepts of divinity or what it considers to be "proper" religious behavior, applying the human actions of its followers (who are vegetarian) to the deity. Saying that "they have to" offer *bali* despite being vegetarian, points to the strength of Pahārī tradition in Mahāsū's territory.

We heard one explanation for the change in *bali* practice from a young Brahmin from Sundli village who tried to explain why, until his grandfather's generation, everyone in the area ate and sacrificed animals:

People now understand that all Mahāsū can't be happy if something is getting killed for them. They used to eat only sheep. They raised only sheep and goats. What else can they eat? What can they give to [the] *devtā*? Today we have apples to sell; we have everything we want to eat. People are beginning to understand that now. But it takes time before it will disappear. Brahmins like us do not eat goat and sheep, but other people do.

Through his words he makes a connection between the food of the people and the food of gods. He rationalizes the change in eating habits with the penetration of economical means that facilitate a theological change in notions of divinity. He also draws

<sup>9</sup> For more about the authenticity of mediums see Sax (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Radha Soami Satsang Beas is a philosophical organization based on spiritual teachings and dedicated to a process of inner development under the guidance of a spiritual teacher. RSSB was established in India in 1891 and gradually began spreading to other countries. The philosophy teaches a personal path of spiritual development, which includes a vegetarian diet, abstinence from intoxicants, a moral way of life, and the practice of daily meditation (RSSB 2014).

a symbolic boundary between the Brahmins and the lower castes, who still eat animals.

The most important shift in the *bali* system is at the theological level. When asked about the *bali* system, almost all the interviewees told us that the *bali* is offered not to the *devtās* themselves but rather to their *birs* (soldiers or ministers). Mahāsū, we were consistently told, has to deal with demons and ghosts; therefore, his soldiers (*birs*) must be satisfied. It is an interesting theological solution, offered by the people, to resolve their ambivalence toward the *bali* system. This solution places the *devtā's bir* in a mediatory category. In order to avoid offering an "impure," non-Sanskritic oblation for Mahāsū, they continue to do so, but to Mahāsū's *birs* rather than to the main deity. This solution preserves Pahārī ritualistic traditions while at the same time bringing it under the umbrella of Brahmanistic epistemological lines of thought. The role of the *bir* as a mediatory category can be seen as a concept that brings the deity and its "holiness" closer to human experience, another way to connect the rational with the numinous (Harvey 1950 [1917]).

A good example comes from a conversation with Mahāsū's *guru-jī*,<sup>11</sup> a local Nāth shopkeeper living in Hanol. He said that the *bali* could never be for Mahāsū, only for his *birs*:

There are three types of *birs*; tamsic *birs* that take *bali*. The sattvic *bir* does not need anything like that to be happy. *Bali* can be *bakrā* [goat] or *kaddu* [young goat] – but this is only for tamsic *bir*. Sattvic (*irs*) will take *hallwa* [dense sweet], rajasic will take *chatni* [sauce], cashew, peanuts, and such ... but only the *bir* will take *bali*. Mahāsū is a god – he is pure in mind, so he has to be sattvic. Tamasic *bir* like Rang-Bir, Jang-Bir, and Uddam-Bir – they can take [*bali*].<sup>12</sup>

This example highlights the penetration not only of the different items used for ritual, but also of the use of theological terms taken from the "Great Tra-

dition." It is also important to note that it differentiates Mahāsū from the normative *rājā-devtā* concept, since it identifies him with sattvic (Brahmanistic) notions and distinguishes him from the rajasic aspect of the "Kshatriya-devta," the warrior-king.

The harshest criticism against the act of slaughtering animals was heard in Dhar village, expressed by the local Boṭha and *Santopya pūjārī* and his son, a well-educated historian living mainly in Shimla. When the *puajārī* came from Rohru area to Dhar he banished the *bali*-system from the village. He believes it to be the worst aspect of the system today:

The people of the new generation do not believe in sacrificing, because you don't need to sacrifice an animal or a person for personal use, how can it satisfy the *devtā*? He is not cruel, he is merciful and kind. The system is corrupt and abusive, it takes the people's property and uses their belief ... Before, people were uneducated and that's why they had the *bali* system ... education influences the awareness, times are changing, this is why the young people don't accept the old system, it brings them to backwardness.

From his perspective, fostering modern (as opposed to traditional) ideas that regard animal sacrifice as antiquated and undeveloped is the key to getting rid of the old, corrupt system. He associates the *bali* system with backwardness. This fact emphasizes that the tension created by the syncretism of tradition also expresses the encounter between local traditions and what seems to be regarded as "modern" education. It highlights the fact that the outside influences that challenge the traditional way of life are both pan-Hindu and a modern development.

Another ritual that has undergone some religious changes in the last ten years is the annual festival and most important holiday of Mahāsū, the "Jāgra," which literally means "staying awake (all night)." This central public ritual has lost some of its importance and centrality in Mahāsū's community, both in his religious center Hanol and Maindrath Valley and in the peripheral zones of Jubbal and Rohru.

We shall now describe the process of the ritual as we observed it in Jubbal temple on September 9th, 2013. The specific date is decided by the *gyotish* (astrologist), but it is always on Bhadon (August–September) between the fourth and sixth of the white fortnight (*tithi*). Preparations are made during the day – such as cleaning the *devtā's* idol and the people bathe in cold water (especially Rajputs and Brahmins) as a means of spiritual and physical purification. The people of the village followed the *pūjārī*, walking barefoot to the *nauli* (source of holy water), where they washed the palms of their hands and their feet. In the evening, everybody gath-

11 *Boṭha* Mahāsū has a human adviser (a Guru) who assists him with important decisions. This role is transferred through lineage (*paramprā* system) from father to son. According to our fieldwork, it also exists in the Kotkhai area with regard to Devta Baidra and in the Hāṭkoṭī area with regard to Banar Devta.

12 Inspiring this theological notion is the dualist epistemological thought of Sāṃkhya; the foundation of Sāṃkhya philosophy is a dualism between *puruṣa* (spirit) and matter or "nature," which is called *prakṛti*. *Prakṛti* consists of the physical and the psychological. It is composed of three features or qualities: *sattva* (light, purity, joy, peace), *rajas* (passion, excitement, hyperactivity), and *tamas* (darkness, heaviness, tightness). The state of salvation comes when these three moments are balanced and then a distinction (*vīveka*) between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* takes place (Michaels 2004: 264).

ered in the temple square, talking and laughing. For about half an hour, the *pūjārī* and a few other religious figures performed rituals inside the temple, while music was played. After the son of the current Rājā of Jubbal arrived, the men lit torches from a burning pole made of pinewood and straw. The men walked around in circles holding their burning torches, while the women, the children, and a few (low caste) men sat near the enclosing fence. The fire symbolizes the authority and holiness of Mahāsū. They sang a special song in honor of Boṭha Mahāsū. This song, sung only once a year during Jāgra, refers to Mahāsū's genealogy and praises him and his family. After about forty minutes, the torches faded away and burned into a main torch that was first lit by the *pūjārī*. Then everybody gave a small offering and received some blessed food (*prasād*), praying and receiving blessings from Mahāsū. When this part was finished, traditional folkdances started. The men danced in a big circle while the women danced separately in a small circle. This part also finished rather quickly and after a total of three hours everybody returned home.

The earliest description of the Jāgra festival appears in Emerson's manuscript (Emerson 1930: chap. 4; fols 41–44).<sup>13</sup> Similar to the ritual today the *devtā* and his possessions are washed in water before nightfall, and people dance and sing around the pine-tree pole with burning sticks. Like today, people were prohibited from entering the temple courtyard if they were intoxicated. People also offered *prasād*, in the same manner that is currently practiced. In contrast to the above description, a ram or a goat would be sacrificed for the *devtā* in the temple courtyard (not inside the actual temple). Another major difference is the fact that in Emerson's description villagers became possessed by the *devtā* (Rose: 1919: 314f.), whereas in the ritual we observed such actions were absent. The last two elements, the *bali* and *devtā*-possession, clearly show how Pahārī modes of divinity were erased from the ritual performance between Emerson's time and the present day.

A more recent description of the Jāgra appears in Bhatt's account (2010: 255–266) of the ritual's enactment in Hanol in 1999. Bhatt mentions that the ritual included alcohol consumption. He adds that the burning torches are meant to expel evil spirits (that visit frequently during the dark half of Bhaḍon). As for the ritual itself, he only mentions that the *prasād* is offered first, and that it is followed

by dancing near the pole. The torches are burned the previous day to ensure the success of the ritual. The people spend the entire night celebrating and dancing.

Herein, we argue, lies the cardinal difference in the performance of this ritual. It clearly indicates the devotion and importance of the event in the life of the society. Another important difference is that in Jubbal Boṭha's *nīsān* was not removed from the temple, while in Hanol Boṭha's *doriya* (bowl) was taken out (similar to Emerson's account) and carried around for a short period. This reflects the people's need to experience the presence of the *devtā* in a concrete manner and it also adds prestige to the event. By no longer parading the *devtā*'s *nīsān* in public in Jubbal (or in Sirthi, Sundli, Dhadi, or Dhar, according to our informants), the social importance of the ritual is reduced.

As in Emerson's description, a goat was offered to Boṭha as part of the ritual in Bhatt's (2010: 260) account. The reason, however, was different. Because women were permitted to enter the temple up to the second space (*āṅgan*), purification had to be carried out. The next morning, a she-goat was slaughtered and its blood was smeared on the floor of the room. Since slaughter is now banned in Hanol temple, this ritual does not take place anymore, despite the fact that women are allowed as far as the third space of the temple. One reason for these changes is the temple committee decision in 2004, which also permitted women to enter the temple.<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of our discussion, it is important to note that changes in ritual performances are progressing rapidly and they are closely tied to the modern state (consideration of the rights of women and low castes) and to Pan-Hindu notions regarding pure and impure actions (animal sacrifice) and the notion of *āhimsa*.

In addition to the written sources (i.e., Emerson, Bhatt, and Saksena) and our own observations, this process of changes in ritual tradition can also be discerned in our informants' opinions. All the interviews alluded to the fact that until several years ago Jāgra was celebrated all night long. People would stay awake and dance in a display of devotion to Mahāsū, praying and meeting with each other. One young Brahmin (Sunar) from Nehnar Village who accompanied us on many of our trips in the area said: "It used to be like that, we all stayed awake

13 Although not mentioned by name, it is identical in its date of celebration, in the way it is constructed, and in some of its rituals.

14 As seen in this short article: "The ninth century Mahasu temple in Hanol, Chakrata is set to reverse its age-old custom of not allowing women to worship inside and sacrificing animals. It is believed that the deity appeared in the dream of a devout and ordered him to allow entry of women and stop sacrifices inside the temple" (*The Tribune* 2004).

all night. But now only five or six villages do that.” When asked if a goat is sacrificed during the ritual, he replied: “They don’t do that anymore. You see, people don’t believe in ghosts (*bhūt*) like they used to.” From his answers we can clearly see the weakening of Pahārī tradition, which is expressed in a shortening of the ritual. Furthermore, it is clear that he links *bali* performance in the ritual with the widespread Pahārī beliefs in ghosts.

Another thirty-year-old Brahmin from Dhar also mentioned the shortening of the Jāgra as a measurement for a weak community life. He blamed the corrupt system for differences and inequality between people:

When I was a kid people came and danced until morning. There was community life. Today, our tradition is disappearing and the celebration is not interesting. The purpose of the Jāgra is to unite people, but the system is intentionally creating differences between people ... the system is old-fashioned. Why it is not allowed for women to worship the *devtā*? Women are more intelligent than men, more powerful, so why? They are all corrupted with money.

From his words, it is clear that he regards the Jāgra as a means to connect people. He points out that tradition is decaying because of the mismanagement of religious institutions, because of politics and finance; that is, for reasons that are not connected with the tradition’s essence but with modern capitalist influences.

A young teacher in Jubbal spoke sadly about the disappearance of the tradition regarding the weakening in the performance of Jāgra, saying that within fifteen years they are going to lose their own culture:

As kids we saw so many festivals and celebrations. Every month there was some kind of drama with wooden masks. But in the last ten years you can hardly see any. People are busy with work.

The important point is that, at least, in the societal memory of people today, local-folk tradition is decreasing. However, the reason people still feel obliged to participate is connected to their strong identification with the “Little Tradition,” as evinced in the informant’s pointing out that people today are busy, that the stresses of modern life clash with traditional life and are making it hard for people to stay committed to their religious obligations.

As can be seen from the above review, a diminution of Jāgra is present in Mahāsū’s territory and is being manifested in a shortening of the event, the physical absence of the *mūrti*, an absence of ritual actions associated with Pahārī tradition (e.g.,

*bali*, possession), and the most crucial element, that people do not stay awake all night unless they are forced to or specifically asked to by Mahāsū.

These changes in the *bali* system and in the Jāgra are linked partly to pan-Hindu tendencies and partly to the modern ideas and habits that make up daily life. The dividing line between the two is hard to establish, since, for example, it is impossible to determine whether *bali* was banned because of the *Satsang*’s activity in the area (and its propagation of *āhimsa*) or whether it was due to the penetration of modern Western ideas that connect animal sacrifice with backwardness. The community itself offers both explanations when speaking about the decline of tradition.

## Conclusion

Sanskritization has been used to describe social changes in India in which a particular group adopts Brahmanical customs and values in its quest for upward mobility. As the article shows, Mahāsū’s community is indeed subject to sociocultural changes that include the assimilation of Sanskritic habits and religious patterns of thought. It does so in two levels – the theological level and the practical level. But does this process fit the definition of Sanskritization? We maintain that the process we witnessed in Mahāsū’s realm is somewhat different from what was defined by Srinivas and others (Singh, Marriot, and Gould) as Sanskritization and closer to Berreman’s observation of “plains-ward mobility,” which is most evident in the upper-class hill peoples’ emulation of their peers in the plains. By adopting some of the symbols of plains culture, Pahārī people hope to improve their status in the eyes of the plains people (Berreman 1963: 139). In this process, there is no volition for upward social mobility within the social structure of Mahāsū’s realm. The majority of Mahāsū’s community nowadays is composed of the elite segments of Indian society, i.e., Brahmins and Rajputs (Bhatt 2010: 184). The motive that was mentioned in the literature relates to an improvement of social status inside the local-village structure. However, the process of social change in Mahāsū’s realm connects to the attempt to improve social status within a wider socioeconomic structure. That is to say, Mahāsū’s community tries to adapt to national, pan-Indian consciousness by changing its rituals, myths, divinity conceptions, etc. The majority of Mahāsū’s community does not attempt to improve its caste or social status in order to be considered higher among Khas people, since no higher upward mobility exists. The wider scope

of the Sanskritization process that takes place in Mahāsū's realm reflects the current reality, where villages are connected more intensively (by roads and by internet) to the pan-Hindu culture prevailing in the plains.

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## Men and the Menstruation Dynamic

### Anthropology, History, and Body without Organs

Mina Meir-Dviri

In the semi-commune “Little Home,” studied by participant-observation method in 1993 (Meir-Dviri 2009, 2013, 2016), the communal house is conceptualized as a female body subject to fluctuations between purity and menstrual impurity. During its periods of “purity,” the house embodies an ideal, stable, gendered-division of territory and authority. In contrast, during “menstruation,” the borders of the body, the territory, and the self-dissolve and interpersonal relationships become distorted. The Little Home residents hence degenerate into a chaotic lifestyle symbolizing social atrophy and death.

Changes in the commune’s purity state were orchestrated by the head of the commune (from here on: Father) in ritual processes which activated structures of identity thief, exchange (symbolic or not) of partners, and resurrection. In this article, I want to examine these processes from the viewpoint of Jewish mysticism, kabbalah, then I want to disconnect this structure from the context of “Little Home,” from Judaism, from the micro-analysis of participant observation, and present it on the large screen of macrohistory. In what follows I will first review relevant Jewish mysticism, introduce and analyze “Little Home” and its ritual processes, and then

I will try to locate traces of this structure in history. In the discussion, I will ask about the seeming similarity of this fertility structure to Deleuze’s concept of “Body without Organs.”

### Menstruation in Kabbalistic Thought

While impurity in the Bible was a part of the ritual laws restricting access to the Temple and to the family of the high priest (Meacham 1999), misogynous attitudes toward menstruation developed in the first millennium (Koren 2009) and were exacerbated during the period of kabbalah which developed in the Middle Ages, at around the 13th century. According to the kabbalistic view, the human landscape reflects processes occurring in the divine body. Medieval Jewish mysticism regarded God as an androgynous being from whom emanates a hierarchy of ten masculine and feminine *sefirot* (spheres). Between them flows water that accumulates in the *sefira* known as *yesod* – which represents the divine phallus, which ejaculates them into the sea of the lowest *sefira*, the *shekhina* (Koren 1999: 166 f., 152, n. 6).

The highest *sefira* – *bina* – and the lowest – the *shekhina* – are female in nature, the first being associated with the matriarch Leah, the second with her sister Rachel. While *bina* represents passive, fecund, and eternal femininity, the *shekhina* is mercurial, not always fertile, menstrual, and predisposed to adultery (Koren 1999: 153). The *shekhina*, the last *sefira*, nourishes the non-divine world. A problematic dimension also exists, namely, the *shekhina* is linked not only to the divine and non-divine world but also to evil, the Sitra Ahra. In this respect, it contains the possibility of an independent status – of dissociation from the world of the *sefirot* (Tishby 1989: 371–375). The *shekhina* also menstruates (Koren 2009). At the time of her menstrual cycle, God’s masculine aspects separate from His feminine ones, causing the divine phallus to cease watering and the sea of the *shekhina* to fill up with the evil who dominate her during that time, Sitra Ahra’s slimy effluence (see the image of *miqveh* – Koren 1999: 165–168). The menstrual cycle is thus responsible for causing the human world to degenerate and Israel to be exiled. Human beings, however, who are connected to the world of the *sefirot* via the *shekhina*, can influence cosmological processes and restore the *shekhina* to her husband’s bosom, thereby uniting God’s body so that He can banish the Sitra Ahra – by maintaining the laws of purity.

The kabbalists posit an analogy between the female fertility cycle and the *shekhina*’s menstrual cycle. On the basis of this analogy, the kabbalists