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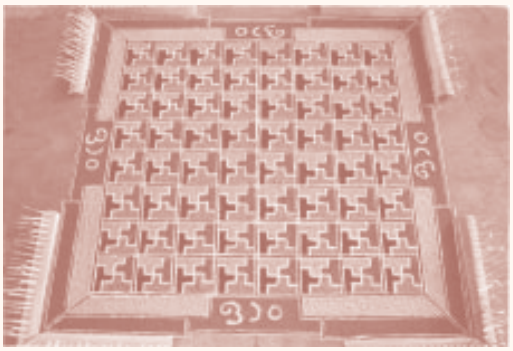

The Memory of Gods: From a Secret Autobiography to a Nationalistic Project

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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 felt 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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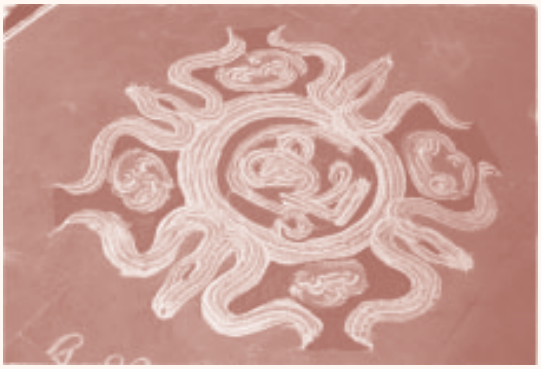

Drawing a Genealogy of Western Nepal's Genealogies

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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 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,