

The Body in Narratives
and
Ritual Performances

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Performing God's Body

Bhairav is the central deity in a cult of ritual healing in the Central Himalayas that is closely associated with the lowest castes. This article discusses his embodied form, arguing that it is intimately related to the bodies of low-caste people, whose oppression and suffering it both reflects and ameliorates. This history of Bhairav's body is captured by in local memory and oral history; and its iconography is revealed in songs and rituals. Ultimately, Bhairav's appearance in the body of a "possessed" devotee is his most important mode of embodiment, and one that tells us a great deal about what it means to be a Harijan.

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How can one describe the body of god? In some non-literate religions, god's body is identified with the earth. For Christians, god's embodiment is the central event in history, offering the possibility of human salvation. For mainstream Judaism and Islam, the idea of god's body is nonsensical, unthinkable, even blasphemous. But in the numerous religions that make up what we call "Hinduism," god is frequently embodied, or, to put it more precisely, the numerous gods, goddesses, and demons of the Hindu pantheon have a startling variety of embodied forms, ranging from the zoomorphic (Vishnu's fish-, turtle-, and boar-incarnations; the "monkey-god" Hanuman), to the anthropo-zoomorphic (Narasimha the "man-lion;" Ganesha with his human body and elephant's head) to the human (Rama, Sita, Krishna), and the hyper-human (Durga with her eight arms, Brahma with his three heads, Ravana with his ten heads). In many Hindu temples, iconic representations of god are treated like human beings: fed, clothed, bathed, serenaded, and put to sleep (WAGHORNE/CUTLER 1985). Indeed, the sheer exuberance and fantastic variety of Hindu representations of divine embodiment contributed to the rejection of the very notion of embodiment by the various *nirguna bhakti* movements of the medieval period, who elevated the recitation of god's ineffable name over the worship of his embodied form (HAWLEY/JUERGENSMEYER 1988). The boundaries between divine, human, and demonic realms are quite porous in popular Hinduism, with humans often achieving divine embodiment, in myths as well as in popular practice (i.e. the striving to achieve an immortal, divine body through yoga, or alchemy, or meditation; the embodied performance of god's body that is the focus of this article), while the gods take on human bodies either to save human beings,

as in the incarnations of Vishnu, or to enjoy more earthly pleasures, as for example in the *Mahabharata* where Kunti summons various gods to impregnate her, resulting in the births of Karna, and four of the five Pandava brothers.

In this article, I discuss the body of the Hindu god Bhairav,¹ as it appears in popular myth and ritual in Chamoli District of Garhwal, a former Hindu kingdom that is now part of the north Indian state of Uttarakhand in the Central Himalayas. Bhairav is the central deity in a cult of ritual healing that is the subject of my recent research.² One of the forms taken by Bhairav in this cult is particularly associated with the lowest castes of the region, locally known as Harijans.³ These forms are described in myths, songs and rituals, and they are performed by low-caste persons when the god enters their bodies; that is, when they are possessed. It is that body, and these performances, that are the focus of this article.

In many parts of India, the oppression of the lowest castes is extreme. One reads regularly in the newspapers of atrocities of various kinds committed against them: villages burned down because low-caste persons dared to use the wells of higher castes, inter-caste lovers captured and executed by village councils, or even by their own parents, the sexual exploitation of low-caste women, the brutal persecution of those who stand up for their legal rights. The lowest castes in India are truly a “community of suffering.”

In addition, the lowest castes are often landless, with nothing to sell but their own labor, and caste prejudice is exacerbated by such extreme dependence. In Garhwal however, as elsewhere in the Central Himalayas, most Harijans have at least a small piece of land, and there are few if any reports of caste atrocities. In general, their situation is not nearly so bad as in other parts of the subcontinent. Still, the suffering of the Harijans in the region is very real. They endure constant humiliation and discrimination; they are not allowed to enter the homes of the highest castes; they are often addressed as “boy” or “girl,” using the familiar pronoun (“tu”) that is otherwise reserved for children and animals; they must wash their own cups at the village tea-stall; they are expected to defer to higher castes when they go shopping or ride the bus; and they must endure numerous other insults every day. They usually have much less land than the higher castes, and are therefore often compelled to work for them as dependent day-laborers, with all of the humiliation such labor entails.

1 In Sanskrit he is called Bhairava, but in the languages of North India, including the dialect of Hindi spoken in Garhwal where I conducted my fieldwork, the final “a” is omitted.

2 SAX 2009. The material in this article is drawn primarily from the second chapter.

3 The decision about which term to use for the lowest castes in Garhwal has political as well as epistemological dimensions. “Untouchable” is offensive to those so designated, and “untouchability” is in any case illegal in India. “Scheduled Caste” is a cumbersome and rather vague term, though it is popular among many people of this group. “Dalit” (literally “oppressed person”) is preferred by those who are politically active and aware, but the term is hardly used in the region where I conducted my fieldwork. In this article I use the term “Harijan,” a term coined by Gandhi that means literally “child of god,” because it is the most widely-used and ideologically neutral term in the region.

How do such forms of oppression affect the minds and bodies of low-caste people? Generalizations are difficult here, because the level of oppression varies greatly, even between neighboring villages. As POLIT (2005) has pointed out, when Harijans constitute the minority in a village and are surrounded by higher-caste people, they experience a high level of oppression. But the level of felt oppression in an exclusively Harijan village is much lower, since daily interactions are more likely to be characterized by relations of near-equality. Moreover, the youngest generation of Harijans has been thoroughly exposed to modern discourses of equality in school and in the media, and more recently in the activities of low-caste activists, especially those from the BSP or "Majority Socialist Party" (*bahujan samajwad parti*), a political party claiming to represent India's lowest castes. The Government of India has tried to eliminate or moderate caste discrimination by giving loans to low-caste businessmen, providing places for low-caste people in institutions of higher education and in government service (as teachers, judges, village headmen, regional council members), and taking many other measures. As a result, there is now a younger generation of low caste people—sorted by the government into such categories as "Scheduled Castes" (SCs) and "Other Backward Castes" (OBCs)—that has taken advantage of these programs and is more confident and assertive, more educated and articulate, than their parents ever were.⁴

But for that older generation, forms of insult and stigmatization are so much a part of life that they have been internalized by the Harijans themselves, whose very way of inhabiting their bodies—what Bourdieu would call their *hexis*—reflects their constant oppression and stigmatization. A friend of mine, a brilliant Harijan musician from Garhwal, inevitably bows and joins his hands in respectful greeting when he meets a higher-caste person. He habitually addresses such persons as "mom and dad" (*ma-bap*), and finds it intolerable to sit while they are standing. Other Harijans of his generation often display the bowed shoulders, the immediate folding of the hands in greeting, the ready smile, the obsequious language, and the avoidance of eye contact that are the hallmarks of Harijan *hexis*.

In what follows, I will discuss the cult of Bhairav, and especially a particular form of Bhairav that is closely associated with the Harijans of Chamoli District. I shall argue that this embodied form is intimately related to the bodies of local Harijans, that it both reflects and ameliorates the oppression and suffering that is part of their lives. Bhairav's body has a history, which I attempt to capture by means of local memory and oral history, as well as oral texts; and it has an iconography, which is revealed in his descriptions in songs and rituals. Ultimately, I shall argue that Bhairav's appearance in the body of a "possessed" devotee is his most important mode of embodiment, and that it tells us a great deal about what it means to be a Harijan.

4 This is one of the reasons why some scholars argue that anthropologists have paid far too much attention to caste (DANIEL 1987, pp. 1ff.; QUIGLEY 1993, pp. 12-20), and that it is time to move on to other topics.

Bhairav's First Embodiment

In the Sanskrit tradition one of the earliest, prototypical forms of Bhairava (lit. “the terrible one”) is the god Virabhadra, who led Shiva's followers when they took revenge on Daksha Prajapati. The story is one of the most popular Hindu myths: Shiva was married to Sati, the daughter of the sage Daksha, also called Prajapati, the “lord of creatures.” Daksha held a fire sacrifice and invited all the gods and sages except his son-in-law Shiva, whom he deliberately insulted by excluding him. Shiva was inclined to ignore the insult, but not his wife Sati. She attended her father's sacrifice and leaped into his sacrificial fire, thereby not only killing herself but also lending her name to the subsequent practice of self-immolation by widows. When Shiva heard what had happened, he was filled with grief and rage, and sent his followers, led by Virabhadra, to take revenge. They decapitated Sati's father, Daksha, and killed many of the sages who had taken part in the sacrifice.⁵ In tantric Vajrayana Buddhism as well, Bhairava is strongly associated with the themes of anger, revenge, and violence.⁶ In Garhwal, Bhairav takes a number of forms, but the one most closely associated with the Harijans is Kachiya, often called “Kachiya-Bhairav.”⁷ His most important cult center is the temple of Kaleshwar (colloquially known as “Kaldu”), a few miles east of Karanprayag on the Badrinath road. Here is how Shanti Lal, a particularly knowledgeable priest of Kachiya, described the god's origin.

The local story is that one of our ancestors came from Kumaon.⁸ He reached a place near Bhatoli village where two families lived: one of Smiths and one of Musicians.⁹ He had brought a very fierce god with him, and when he gave the command, this god would attack¹⁰ people. This kept happening, and the people in Bhatoli became angry. They said, “Either we get rid of this guy, or we murder him.” Someone told him that he should leave, because his life was in danger. So he took the god and his special things—the fire tongs and the Timaru staff near the temple—and left. He went to Karanprayag—for people in those days, it was as far as Delhi is for you these days—and then he came up this way. He slung his basket on his back, came here, and sat down. When he arrived he saw that the land was very good: broad fields, very nice land. He put down his basket, and when he tried to pick it up again, he found that he was unable to do so. He kept trying, but he couldn't lift it! Now he had a problem; he had to stay the night here. And during the night, the god spoke to him through a little bird, saying, “I like this place. I want to stay here.” And because he was a very spiritual man, he stayed here.

5 For more on the story of Daksha's sacrifice, see O'FLAHERTY 1973, pp. 214, 236; GOSWAMI 1982, pp. 4.II.13-15, 4.III.3-4, 4.IV.6-8.21, 5.11-16; MERTENS 1998.

6 For more on Bhairava, see STIETENCRON 1969; SLUSSER 1982; ERNDL 1989; SONTHEIMER 1989; CHALIER-VISUVALINGAM 2003.

7 I have been told that “Kachiya” means “the brilliant/shining one.”

8 Kumaon is a former Hindu kingdom, roughly the same size as Garhwal and lying to the east. Together, Garhwal and Kumaon constitute perhaps 90% of the area of Uttarakhand.

9 *Lohar* (smiths) and *Das* (musicians) are both Harijan castes.

10 Underlining indicates that the words were spoken in English.

They say that this old grandfather of ours was very powerful. He would tell the god to bring him tobacco, and the god would bring him tobacco! This was four or five generations ago. Later on the place became very famous, and everyone started giving much respect to the god. They believe that he has a lot of power, and that his decisions are just (*sahi-sahi nirnay*). But our ancestors thought it inappropriate to build him a temple, and so they didn't. This is because he was staying on the bank of the river, where the cremation ground is. They kept him just as he was. The *tantrik* method is that the god should be kept in the earth itself. And because there is a cremation ground there, with burning corpses and all . . . it's all under his control. Even today. He is the in-charge (of that place). . . He adjudicates problems, helps people obtain powerful positions, gets them promotions, saves them from destructive quarrels . . . He does all this work for people from the entire area (*kshetra*). People have faith in him. And the greatest thing is that he is the only power in the hands of the weaker sections of society, the Harijans . . .

There is one more very important thing that I want to tell you, something that is of great importance, not only for our nation but for the whole world, and this is that my ancestors joined two deities together: a Muslim deity and a Hindu deity. Bhairav is a god of the Hindus, Nar Singh is a god of the Hindus, and with them is a Muslim deity whom we call Maminda [a corruption of "Muhammad"] . . .

If one wants to worship the god, then we will be the priests. The god is pacified (*shant*) only when one of us is there. It's not even necessary that the priest is an adult—he can be a child as well. He can be anyone from the lineage. For example, if I'm in another village, but my son is here, and if by the way the god is angry or something, this can be resolved through our children. If some woman gets sick in that village over there, if the god is showing his anger, if he's punishing her, and if one of our children has gone there for some other reason, then someone may say, "He's a priest of Kaleshwar." And they may ask the child to apply some of the god's sacred ash (*vibhuti*), and if it's truly Kaleshwar's affliction, then she'll be cured by that ash.

W. S.: Earlier you told me the history of your ancestor. Was his name Kaldu? Is that why they call this place "Kaldu Beach"?

Shanti Lal: This god is Kal Bhairav¹¹. They used to call him "Kachiya of Kaldu." He was black, so we call him *kala* (black). And that's why this place is known as Kaldu Beach.

W.S.: An oracle near Nauti told me that the god originated in Dol village, and from there he spread here, and to Kankhul, and to other places.

Shanti Lal: The Kachiya of Dol is this one's class-fellow. What happened in Dol was this: someone buried a child—alive! Some enemy must have done it. The child screamed there under the ground, and died, and his *atma* took the form of a supernatural power, and he became the god of that whole area. And because he was very powerful,

11 "The Bhairav of time/death," one of the best-known forms of Bhairav. His most famous temple is in Varanasi (Benares), and he is often said to be the "policeman" (*kotwal*) of that city.

he went along with all his *disa-dhyanis*.¹² And that is why he was made the in-charge of the cremation ground here.

W. S.: Kachiya is that child?

Shanti Lal: That very child. Even now when he comes in a dream, he takes the form of a child. There are a lot of stories connected to this god—how can I tell them all?

Later in the interview, Shanti Lal told my friend Mr. Nautiyal that his work as a lawyer was rather similar to Kachiya's work: "He alone is our judge, and he is our surgeon. He is our everything. He is our deputy. He is our District Magistrate. I think that our ancestors who settled here, who were of a weaker section (of society) brought him as a helper. Even today, he is a powerful ally."

In this interview, Shanti Lal mentioned several things that are fundamental for understanding local forms of Bhairav, especially in his form as Kachiya. These include the fact that he is thought of as a god of justice,¹³ that his cult spreads when he accompanies his out-marrying "village daughters" to their new homes, and that he is strongly associated with the Harijans, who are his priests at this particular temple. (Shanti Lal himself belonged to the caste of *tamata* or Coppermiths who, along with carpenters, are one of the highest-ranked Harijan castes.) Subsequent interviews with other priests confirmed the centrality of all these themes in stories of Bhairav's origin.

The Appearance of Bhairav as a Savior

Low-caste people in Chamoli often tell stories of how Bhairav appears as a savior who intervenes to rescue weak people when they are exploited and abused by the powerful. Such stories are rarely, if ever, told by high-caste persons: they are in a sense the intellectual property of local Harijans, recited when high-caste people are out of earshot and thus examples of what SCOTT (1990) calls "hidden transcripts." One such story is that of Lalu Das, which I reproduce here exactly as it was told to me by one of the god's priests. It should be noted that in Chamoli District, the Das caste of Musicians is the lowest caste, while Bhartwal is one of the highest-ranking Rajput castes.

Lalu Das lived with his six brothers in Nagpur. He was a very small person. Jasu Bhartwal also lived in Nagpur. He was a very big person. He kept the handcuffs to bind criminals, and he kept the key to the leg irons as well. Lalu Das's family used to plough Jasu Bhartwal's fields and care for his livestock, take them grazing and so on, and they

12 *Disa-dhyani* is the term for "outmarried village girl." In other words, Kachiya's area of influence spread because he went along with village girls when they got married and moved to their husbands' homes.

13 Ideas of local gods as providers of justice are not uncommon in the region. One of the best examples is the Kumaoni god Golu (known in Garhwal as Goril; see AGRAWAL 1999). The god Pokkhu in the upper Tons valley is referred to by his followers as a "god of justice and injustice" (*nyay-anyay ka devata*). During the royal period, he was officially authorized by the king to settle local disputes. Even nowadays, people who consider themselves victims of exploitation go to him for justice.

lived on whatever they could scrounge from their labors. What happened? One day, one of their children had gone with Jasu Bhartwal's cows and buffaloes to graze, when Bhairav manifested himself. His *linga* appeared there, and the buffalo gave all its milk to that *linga*.¹⁴ Naturally Jasu Bhartwal was angry, because he wasn't getting any milk from the buffalo. He thought that the shepherd boy was sitting in the jungle and drinking the buffalo's milk, the bastard! So he took that little boy and cut off his hands and his feet! And when he did this, Lalu's wives cried, "He has amputated our child's hands and his feet!" And the men were very angry and upset, too.

After that, what happened? Bhairav took the form of a yogi and went to a stream of water. It was a cremation ground, with corpses lying around. There was a cave there, and he took up residence and lit his *sadhu*'s fire there.¹⁵ He just sat there, and didn't worry about his food and drink. He didn't beg for anything, he just sat. Lalu's senior wife went there to fetch water. She saw the *sadhu* and asked him what he ate. (She thought she should ask him, since he had been there for so many weeks and months.) She told him that she hadn't even seen him stand up in a long while. He answered, "Mother, I'm just sitting here and worshiping God on an empty stomach." She asked, "Will you eat something?" and he replied, "I will be the support (*vastuk*) of whoever feeds me something." So Lalu's wife went back to her house and took a bit of whatever was cooking there. They were poor, so they ate whatever came to them: sometimes lentils, sometimes boiled rice, sometimes simply roots and flowers. Now, the *sadhu* had an earthen pot (*handi*). He said "Mother, you keep putting food in my pot, and I will cook it and eat it." And the woman brought him food, morning and evening.

After that what happened? It was time to plough. And the *sadhu* spread cholera in the home of Lalu Das. The whole family got sick. Everyone's oxen were in the fields ploughing, but Jasu Bhartwal's oxen remained tied to their posts, because there was no one to plough his fields—all the Harijans were sick. Jasu Bhartwal took his golden staff in his hands, and climbed to the top of a big cliff, and shouted out, "Lalu Das! Lalu Das! Have your sons all died? Everyone is ploughing their fields, but my oxen are still tied to their stakes!" But the Harijans couldn't answer—they were dying! The *sadhu* disappeared. He hid himself. The woman brought food for him, but he wasn't there. She felt very sad, because the *sadhu* had become like a member of her family. But he was gone, so she picked up his pot and took it home and put it on her hearth. She cooked all her food in that pot. And that's how they ate. Then Jasu Bhartwal reached there with his golden staff, and saw that the whole family was lying on the ground, sick, and he put the handcuffs and the leg irons on Lalu Das, and led him away. He put him in his "silver courtyard" (*candni cauk*). It was mid-Winter, the month of Paush, and very cold. Snow was falling.

Now, Jasu Bhartwal had seven queens. They were so modest that they didn't bathe during the daytime—they didn't want the sun to see them. And they didn't bathe in the evening either, after the moon had come out. They were chaste wives (*pativrata nari*),

14 The *linga* is the phallic sign of Shiva, the god with whom Bhairav is associated. The motif of a *linga* spontaneously appearing and a cow offering its milk to it is extremely common in India.

15 A *sadhu* is a Hindu ascetic, or holy man. A *sadhu*'s fire is called a *dhuni* and is of particular importance for the cult and rituals of Bhairav, as well as for the Gorakhnath tradition of *kanphata yogis* with which it is associated (see below).

so they only bathed at dusk, when there was neither sunlight nor moonlight. When they came out in the evening, they saw that Lalu Das's handcuffs and leg irons were open, and that he had escaped and gone home. They went inside and told Jasu Bhartwal. He was furious, and said, "Where is the bastard who thinks he's bigger than me? I have the key! I'm his master! Who has let him loose and taken him away?" They said, "His wife took him away—Lalu Das's wife saved him!" So Jasu Bhartwal went and found Lalu Das's wife, and seized her. He shouted, "You whore! You helped him escape!" And he put her in his jail. But at night, Bhairav returned. He loosened the bonds of Lalu Das's wife, and helped her escape.

After that, the sickness in Lalu Das's home went away, and everyone improved, but then the cholera spread in Jasu Bhartwal's home. Now, Jasu Bhartwal had seven sons and fourteen grandsons. He had twelve twenties¹⁶ of buffaloes, twelve twenties of cows, twelve twenties of goats, twelve twenties of oxen. Gold, silver, riches, grain—he had everything! But still, they got cholera, so he went to an oracle. He reached a pass with a crossroads. Bhairav was sitting there; he had taken the form of a *sadhu*. Jasu Bhartwal said, "Greetings, *sadhu*!" and the *sadhu* replied, "Greetings, my disciple. Oh man (*narain*), where are you coming from and where are you going?" Jasu Bhartwal said, "*Sadhu-ji*, do you know how to read palms?" and the *sadhu* answered, "I've grown old reading palms." So Jasu Bhartwal said, "Read my palm, and tell me what my problem is." The *sadhu* read it and said, "Look brother, do the seven Lalu brothers take care of your livestock, and plough your fields?" Jasu Bhartwal said, "Yes." "Was there a boy in that family who used to graze your animals?" Jasu Bhartwal said, "Yes." "Did you amputate his hands and feet?" Jasu Bhartwal said, "Yes." The *sadhu* said, "He didn't drink your milk! There was a Bhairav shrine there—it was Bhairav who drank the milk! You did a great injustice when you cut off his hands and feet! And when there was cholera at his home, did you bind him and bring him to your square?" Jasu Bhartwal admitted that he had. The *sadhu* said, "It was Bhairav who let him go." Jasu Bhartwal said, "What must I do now?"

Now, Jasu Bhartwal used to do his evening worship while sitting above his big front gate. And the *sadhu* said, "You will have to build a shrine for Bhairav there, and divide all of your grain, wealth, gold, silver, cows, buffaloes, and land: seven portions for your sons, and seven portions for Lalu Das's sons. Are you willing to do it? For seven days, Lalu's seven brothers will dance at your home. And if they dance along with Bhairav for seven days at your home, and if you make the guru's ritual seat (*dulaici*) there, then you will retain your wealth—otherwise you will be ruined!" Jasu Bhartwal said, "I'll do it, Maharaj! I'll do just that!" And he divided all his grain, wealth, *maya*, *lakshmi*, and land into fourteen parts, and Lalu and his brothers danced at Jasu Bhartwal's house for seven days. And then Jasu Bhartwal's seven queens also began to dance! Bhairav rocked them, and they danced naked! He possessed those seven chaste wives. "You were so chaste, but now I have destroyed your honor!"

Here Bhairav appears as a renouncer from the Nath order of Yogis (see below), and as a savior who provides justice for the poor, low-caste people oppressed by the

¹⁶ Counting in units of twenty is a traditional way of reckoning land and livestock throughout the Central Himalayas.

cruel Jasu Bhartwal. One striking feature of the story is how Bhairav afflicts not only the oppressive Jasu with cholera, but also Lalu Das and his family, evidently as a mark of his favor. This conforms to a common pattern in Hinduism, where certain diseases—especially those associated with pustules and fever, such as smallpox and chicken pox—are regarded as a sign of “possession” or divine selection (EGNOR 1984; NICHOLAS 1981).

The story of Jasu Bhartwal was recited to me in prose, but many similar narratives take the form of songs. There are many such songs, but by far the most important is that of Umeda and Sumeda, which in many ways is the “mythical charter” for the cult, since it not only explains how Bhairav first came to Garhwal, but also contains features that appear in cult rituals. Here I reproduce the story in narrative form, as it was told to me by the god's priest Darpal:

Once upon a time, the high-caste Myur Rajputs of Panthi Bagwan were building a temple. Big rocks had to be cut for this temple, and the Myurs said to the low-caste Coppersmiths, “Fetch the rocks, you bastards!” The Coppersmiths lifted the lighter rocks and brought them, but they left the large rocks behind—they weren't able to lift them. So the Myurs seized them and beat them, and kidnapped their beautiful daughters Umeda and Sumeda, and sold them in slavery to the Gurkhas.

So the girls' fathers Udotu and Sudotu went to Tibet to visit their spiritual teacher, a Tibetan lama. They said to him, “Hey mother's brother, the Myurs have done us a great injustice; they have sold our daughters into slavery, and flayed the skin from our backs. We have no one!” Their story brought tears to the Lama's eyes, and he made a pot, a round red pot. He filled its belly with forty-two heroes (*vir*), fifty-two ghouls (*bahiyal*), eighty-four fierce goddesses (*kali*), sixty-four witches (*jogini*), and ninety man-lions (*narasimha*). He put all of them in the pot's belly, and told them to “play their game.” Then he covered the pot and closed its mouth by tying it with a cloth, and said “Lift it, sister's son: lift this pot!” Udotu tried to lift it, but it was very heavy. He couldn't lift it, and he said, “Guru, I won't be able to place this pot on my head.” So the guru himself lifted it and put it on the coppersmith's head! And he said “Go, sister's son, and take this red pot to the land of Uttarakhand! Take it to the land of your enemies!”

So the coppersmiths went to Tilkhani Bar. They lay down to sleep, but Sudotu heard a buzzing sound inside the pot. He was curious about what was inside, so he lifted the cover a little bit, and out came Bhairav. Now at this time they were performing a Pandav Lila¹⁷ in Dobari Village, and Bhairav took the form of a yogi and reached the village where they were dancing. He said to the villagers, “Give me a nice spot that I can call my own.” They said, “Where have you come from, you lazy son of a bitch?” and they beat him and drove him away. He joined his hands in supplication and said, “Give me a bit of land where I can raise buffaloes, goats, a few cows and some oxen.” They said, “Go! Get out! Where the hell have you come from?” So he took the form of a leopard, and destroyed all their cows, oxen, sheep, goats and buffaloes. He cursed them (*dosh lagaya*), and since that day, the Pandavas have never again danced in Dobari. From there, Bhairav went to Kob Bar where the Myurs lived, and exterminated

17 A ritual drama focusing on India's great epic *Mahabharata* (see SAX 2002).

them. He took the form of cholera and killed them all. Two corpses were carried to the cremation ground every day, until the Myurs were totally destroyed.

Once again, Bhairav appears as a renouncer, a Nath Yogi, who defends the weak and brings a swift and terrible justice to their powerful oppressors. It is interesting that according to the story, Bhairav came to Uttarakhand from Tibet, and not from the Indian plains. Bhairav is, in fact, an important deity in Tibetan Buddhism, and most if not all of the priests I met said that the tradition in general, and its rituals in particular, came from the other side of the great Himalayan range. They were said to have been brought to Uttarakhand by the so-called “Bhotiyas,” a high-altitude community that formerly conducted the trade between India and Tibet. And some of the language of the cult of Bhairav suggests a connection with the tradition of the “eighty-four siddhas,” which is closely associated with Tibet as well as with the Kanphata yogi tradition, as I explain in the following section.

The Iconography of Bhairav

Many of Bhairav's songs evoke a monk from the Gorakhnath tradition, one of the Kanphata (“split-ear”) Yogis, so called because fully initiated members of the order split their ears and wear large earrings. This order was very influential in north India during the medieval period. It was allegedly founded by the medieval Hindu ascetic Gorakhnath, who is also associated with the Siddha tradition.¹⁸ In Garhwal, some of Bhairav's mantras explicitly mention Gorakhnath, other mantras and stories make explicit reference to his guru Matsyendranath, and still others mention the names of unknown Nath yogis who presumably were involved in the founding of the cult. When oracles are possessed by Bhairav, or when they call upon him in trance, they often call out “*alak*” and “*adesh*,” terms that are associated with the Kanphata tradition. The adjective *alak* (from Sanskrit *alakshana*, “without characteristics”) is used by Nath yogis and theologians to designate the formless absolute, while the noun *adesh* (“permission”) is conventionally used by them when requesting permission to join or leave a group of fellow Nathas. The oracle's frequent use of these terms, along with other aspects of the cult, suggests that the Nath order was active at some time in the past in the Central Himalayas (cf. CHATAK 1990, p. 311), as indeed it was throughout North India. Other items mentioned as part of the iconography of Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav, and usually also found in their shrines, are associated with renunciation, the worship of Shiva in general, and the Nath order of Yogis in particular. These include:

1. a staff of Timaru wood (*tejmal ka sotha*)
2. the fire-tongs from “Dhuni Pass” (*dhunidhar ka cimta*—the noun *dhuni* refers to a renouncer's fire; see footnote 16)

¹⁸ For more on the Nath tradition, see BRIGGS 1973 [1938]; VAUDEVILLE 1976; LAPOINT 1978; CHALIER-VISUVALINGAM 2003; BANERJEA n.d. For the “eighty-four siddhas,” see DOWMAN 1985; ROBINSON 1996; DAVIDSON 2005, p. 14. For the relationship between Nath and Siddha traditions, see WHITE 1996, chap. 4, esp. pp. 80-85 and 107ff.

3. a saffron-colored cloth bag (*gerua ki jholi*)
4. a trident surmounting an iron pole (*danda trishul*)
5. a strip of saffron-colored cloth (*path ka mekhala*)
6. a loincloth of iron (*loha araband*)
7. a *langoti* (the cloth that renunciators use to bind their genitals) of stone (*shila ki langoti*), and
8. a *phavari* of stone (*patthar to phavari*). The *phavari* is used in ritual contexts, and is made of iron or tin, in the shape of palm with bent fingers (see fig. 1). It is heated until it is red-hot and then licked, in order to demonstrate the authenticity of the trance.

The priests I knew best nearly always began major rituals with a praise-song to Bhairav in which the image of a Nath renouncer with these accoutrements found its most complete expression. The following translation is taken from one such song, recorded live in performance.

1. Victory to the guru, victory to the guru, victory to the deathless swami
2. What game did the deathless swami play in this world?
3. Other gurus play other music, swami, (but) yours is the music of the Huraki-drum¹⁹
4. Which guru split your ears, which guru shaved your head?
5. Which guru showed you the path?
6. Who will go with you, who will speak with you, my deathless Siddha?
7. The [Timaru] staff will go with you, the fire-tongs will speak.
8. My Siddha Swami, you wear a *mekhala* cloth
9. A *mekhala* cloth, (and you carry) the fire tongs from Dhuni Pass
10. My deathless swami, the *phavari* of stone
11. Swami, you (wear) a *langoti* of stone.

(tune change)

12. Guru-ji plays the cruel-hearted music that makes you weep!²⁰
13. The sound of my drum and the words of my mouth reach your ears
14. Adesh, Baba! To the great world you created!
15. Adesh, Baba! To all your continents!
16. Of all the continents, Jambudvipa is the first

19 The *huraki* is a small hourglass-shaped drum with two goatskin heads, the tightening straps of which are attached to a harness which he wears around his back, so that when he plays the drum he can, by pulling on the straps, cause it to make an unusual sound, which is especially effective in invoking the spirits. Priests of Bhairav normally play this drum, and are accompanied by the *thakalyor*, who plays an inverted metal platter with two wooden drumsticks, and usually by a third man, the *bhamvar* or “bumblebee,” who echoes the final lines of each verse of the song.

20 *kuro dilo nad*,; also called *krodhi nad* or “furious music.”

17. Adesh, Baba! To your land of Uttarakhand!
 18. Adesh, Baba! To the Kailash of your mother's brother (Shiva)!
 19. Of whom you are the path-finding disciple!

(tune changes)

20. Adesh, Baba! To the Kob of your Bhairav!
 21. In the village of Kob lived Udotu and Sudotu

(tune changes)

22. The coppersmiths Udotu and Sudotu lived in the village of Kob
 23. Oh God! Their daughter was called "Cheta"
 24. And her beautiful daughters were named Umeda and Sumeda . . .



Fig.1: a *phavari* (drawing by Ariane Petney)

Having summoned Bhairav and praised him, the guru begins to sing the song of Umeda and Sumeda. In effect, the song has changed from an invocatory prayer to a narrative. But for now, let us return to Kachiya, the form of Bhairav that is most closely associated with the Harijans. If Bhairav is represented as a Kanphata Yogi, then Kachiya is represented as an Aghori *sadhu*, which is a type of "left-handed" tantric renouncer. Members of the so-called Aghori (literally "without fear") sect

live in cremation grounds, their meditative practices focus on death, they use the coals of cremation fires to cook their food, and occasionally practice necrophagy (BARRETT 2005; SVOBODA 1994; WHITE 1996). The point of their *sadhana* or spiritual practice is to train themselves to cease distinguishing between pure and impure, beautiful and ugly, food and filth; to become like infants, as they put it. The songs of Kachiya do not however concentrate on such theological details, but simply emphasize his impure, disgusting actions. This can be seen in the following song (rather freely translated)²¹ that is sung during Kachiya's rituals, particularly when someone is possessed by him:

- 1 Awaken! Father Kachiya, in your leather blanket
- 2 In your house of filth on the burning ground
- 3 With your demoness lovers, in the warm springtime
- 4 Where skeleton waists dance ever around
- 5 Awaken, O Kachiya! in this mortal world
- 6 Where the red-hot skillets dance ever around
- 7 Awaken, O Kachiya! at the meeting of rivers
- 8 In your leather blanket, in your house of filth
- 9 Ghosts wail in pain, but you hear sweet music
- 10 Awaken, O Kachiya! half the night here, and half the night there
- 11 At the burning ground, you light a torch
- 12 At the burning ground, the axe is resounding
- 13 The corpses are being chopped into pieces!
- 14 So awaken! O Kachiya, at the burning ground
- 15 Where a burning corpse is your fire altar
- 16 For many long days, no corpses have come!

(The priest continued in Hindi:)

Three-hundred and sixty corpses come from Jaunsar, they seize their shrouds and bind them on their heads. Kachiya wears a *bhagoya* (an archaic style of dress where the cloth crossed over the chest like an "X" and tied behind the back), he twirls the corpses by their feet; he fries the corpses' flesh and eats it; he cooks rice pudding in their skulls, and mixed rice and lentils on their funeral pyres.

Even Kachiya's perceptions are inverted and rather perverse. According to one verse, "Ghosts wail in pain but you hear sweet music." When I recorded this song, the priest spoke the line (probably by mistake) in Hindi rather than in dialect, and subsequently explained, "All the ghosts on the burning ground weep, but Kachiya hears an auspicious wedding song (*mangal git*)." Later, he said that when Kachiya chops up corpses, he uses the blunt edge of the axe instead of the sharp edge!

21 Recorded April 1999 by Darpal Lal Mistari.

Kachiya has other embodiments as well. Many people claim to have seen him at night, or in their dreams, where he appears as a black, hairy, dwarf-like figure. In some of his mantras, he is described as being extremely violent and threatening. When the priest summons Kachiya to appear at the séance, he sings out a series of commands, telling him to “tear up Mt. Meru and come,” to “drink the well dry,” to come “chewing iron pellets . . . breaking iron bars . . . roaring like a lion . . . roaring like a leopard.” He is told to take away the seats of other gods and replace them with his own. These are fierce forms, frightening forms, and so is the most basic form taken by Kachiya, when he possesses one of his devotees. It is this form—a person possessed by Kachiya—that Garhwalis most often see, and it is probably the one they think of when they picture the god. A person possessed by Kachiya falls to his knees, or crouches on the floor, twists his or her hands painfully—the effect reminds me of a bird claw (figs. 2 and 3)—and often scratches him- or herself uncontrollably. I was once told that Kachiya does this because, when Shiva sent Virabhadra and his minions to destroy Daksha Prajapati's sacrifice (see above), Kachiya was the last one to return. When he admitted to Shiva that he had not managed to accomplish much, Shiva cursed him to “eat his own flesh,” and he has done so ever since. Such images create an effect of supernatural horror and disgust, involving extreme impurity and the reversal of conventional norms of behavior, which is of course consistent with Kachiya's songs. I was told that until a decade or so ago, when local Harijans were possessed by Kachiya, they would sometimes go behind the house, to the place where dishwater and rotten food are tossed and where people urinate, and drink the water there, to demonstrate the authenticity of their possession. Once I was present during a brief pause in a major ritual, when the priest asked rhetorically, “What sort of people worship Kachiya?” And he answered his own question: “Those of low birth (*nic yoni*).” After one particularly impressive ritual in Kaleshwar lasting several days, a local Harijan leader gave a speech in which he said that his low-caste brothers and sisters should reject the cult of Kachiya, that they should give it up, because it was contributing to the negative stereotypes that high-caste people had of them; it was one of the reasons for their low status. Nevertheless he participated in the final ritual feast, and when it was over he told a fascinating story of how once, years before, a particularly effective priest had come to his hamlet and caused practically everyone in it to get possessed. They had all danced to the cremation ground, where they found a half-burned corpse on the riverbank, which some of them began to eat! The next morning, he said, they were in a state of shock. They could hardly believe what had happened, and swore that they would not participate in the cult any longer. But because Kachiya had such a strong hold on them as Harijans, they were unable to give it up.

Such ideas are not limited to the Harijans. When I asked upper-caste people about why Kachiya was so strongly associated with the lower castes, or why they seemed to be so much more deeply involved with these matters than the higher

castes, they usually said that the lower castes were “weaker,” more vulnerable, and therefore more susceptible to Kachiya. A local Brahman priest put it like this:

Bhairav is a divine being, an incarnation of Shiva. And Kachiya is his angry form—he is filled with rage. For example, you are peaceful. But if a certain kind of experience happens to you, you will become very angry. That itself is the angry form of Kachiya . . . He is the god of the lower classes. He does the dirty work, that's why his shrine is below the ground . . . Kachiya is nothing but *tamas*.²² Only the angry form . . . He goes everywhere. When a great injustice is done and there is no redress, he says, “Let's go,” and goes to save them . . . (Such gods) only have power over a weak man. But they don't have power over someone who knows the scriptures, someone who has knowledge. They belong to weak men. I know this, because I worship all these gods: Bhairav, Kachiya, Narsingh, etc. I worship them all. I am their priest. And in my view, based on my experience, these are the gods of weak people, people who have little spiritual power (*atmabal*). It's like a light-bulb. Light-bulbs are of different strengths. Some are high-power and some are low-power. If too much power comes into a low-power bulb, it will explode.



Fig. 2: a woman possessed by Kachiya (photo by William Sax)

A Brahman priest of the god told me it would be very unlikely that I would ever be afflicted by Bhairav. “You are strong,” he said. “You have a healthy body and lots of money, and you are intelligent. You are a big person. But these Harijans are

²² According to the Samkhya philosophy, everything consists of a mixture of three *gunas*, or “strands.” The *guna* of *tamas* is associated with darkness, decay, and sloth or inertia.

small people. They are poor and weak, and that is why they are vulnerable to all kinds of affliction from the gods and so on. They have no one.”

Performing God’s Body

The stories I have related above do not correspond to the classical Sanskrit myths about Bhairava, but are instead the “property” of the Harijans, their “hidden transcripts.” In these stories, as well as in his iconography (which does in fact resemble the more classical image of Bhairava), he appears as a Nath Yogi who helps the poor and the oppressed, while Kachiya Bhairav appears as a tantric Aghori renouncer who is closely associated with the Harijans. I have reproduced these myths and iconographies as words on a page, but this medium is far removed from how Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav are actually experienced in the lives of the people of Chamoli. Such stories are never read in a book; rather, they are *performed* as songs, and indeed the singing of these songs is one of the most powerful techniques for summoning the god and making him present. The songs are never sung in private, but always rather during rituals. Even when I asked the gurus to sing them into my tape recorder, we first had to purify the atmosphere, to pray and light some incense, before I switched the tape recorder on. And a full-scale ritual involves very much more than that. Many people, friends and relatives, gather at night, expecting to be visited by fierce and unpredictable deities. There is an atmosphere of excitement, a crush of warm bodies packed tightly together on the earthen floor. The music is strange and exciting: the high-pitched clanging of the inverted metal platter rapidly beaten with two wooden sticks, the voice of the guru reaching out above the weird sounds of his two-headed Huraki drum with its unmistakable “*vhoo-vhoo!*” sound, the hypnotic echo of the third musician, a singer who echoes the final words of every line sung by the guru. When the performance is effective, the atmosphere is charged, and many persons dance and/or become possessed. This is called *siddhi*, “supernatural power,” and it has an electrifying impact. The crucial line is “I have no one.” When this line is sung, it is a cue for possession to occur. Many listeners fall into trance; women loosen their hair so that it hangs loosely, then whip it back and forth in the air as they “dance” wildly, on their knees, to the beat of the drum; people roll about on the floor, grimacing and writhing in pain, their hands twisted into the shape of a bird-like claw, the characteristic sign of possession by Kachiya. This is the most persuasive and powerful appearance of the god, more compelling than any iconographic description and more immediate than any story. Kachiya possesses a person sitting next to you, and he is visibly transformed: the bared teeth, the bent waist, the dancing on his knees on the floor, the cramped and claw-like hands. This is a physical embodiment of Bhairav, and devotees see it often enough to persuade them that he is quite real. Indeed, when I asked my friends if they “really believed” in Kachiya, their most common response was, “Of course I do. How could I not believe in him? He comes and dances, and you can see him right there in front of you!”

This is the pivotal moment of the rituals, when myth and iconography, context and social memory, power and morality, all come together. It is the moment when, as GEERTZ (1973, p. 112) puts it, ritual fuses together “the world as lived and the world as imagined.” From the local point of view, such ritual possession confirms the power and presence of Bhairav. If possession does not occur, then the ritual has failed. Possession defines the moment of maximum ritual efficacy, and this is always a performative moment. But what, exactly, does it mean to say that possession by Kachiya is “performative”?

In the first place, it is performative because at the core of the ritual is a musical performance in which the guru summons the god by singing the stories of Puriya, Umeda and Sumeda, and the others. BAUMAN (1978, p. 11) has defined performance as “a mode of spoken verbal communication [that] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence.” For Baumann, such competence is demonstrated by the ability to speak in socially appropriate ways, and it is evaluated by an audience, which judges the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of it. Such a definition can also be applied to the ritual performances of gurus, who assume responsibility to an audience (their clients) for a display of ritual competence (a successful ritual). Such competence is not simply taken for granted, and a guru's success in summoning and controlling a deity like Bhairav is never guaranteed. The relationship between the guru and the god is often agonistic, so that the guru has to strive mightily to make Bhairav appear at all. This “striving” is primarily musical and performative—the guru uses his drum, his songs, and also his mantras to compel the god to appear and dance. And the markers of success, the signs of competence, are also dramatic and performative: in particular the *siddhi* or power that is generated by the guru's music. It is by such markers—especially an exciting atmosphere, and the appearance of the god—that the audience judges the efficacy of a performance, and the authenticity of the god's appearance.

There is another important sense in which possession by the god might be said to be “performative.” In recent discussions of ritual, Austin's theory of performativity in speech has received a great deal of attention. AUSTIN (1962) argued that many forms of speech, including ritual speech, are not merely descriptive statements about the external world that can or should be evaluated according to their propositional content. Rather, to make an utterance is usually also to perform an act, and should be evaluated as such. When I make a promise, take a vow, or greet someone, it makes no sense to evaluate my utterance in terms of its propositional content. In other words, when I say “Hello” to you, it makes no sense to ask of this utterance, “Is it true?” Rather, my utterance should be evaluated in terms of whether or not it has been successful (“felicitous” in Austin's terms). The appropriate question to ask of my utterance “Hello” is rather, “Have I successfully greeted you?” An important implication of Austin's model—but one that is not noticed as often as it should be—is that successful performative utterances (or “felicitous perlocutionary acts” as Austin puts it) index antecedent

social conditions. This is obvious enough in the case of ritual and ceremonial speech. When the priest says “I now pronounce you man and wife,” or the judge says “I sentence you to five years in jail,” the speech act will be efficacious only if particular antecedent social conditions have been fulfilled: the priest must be properly ordained and legally entitled to conduct weddings, the bride and groom must be willing to enter into the marriage contract; the judge must be legally empowered to pronounce the sentence, etc. Austin's accomplishment was to turn the attention of linguists and philosophers of language away from purely formal, linguistic analysis, and toward the social conditions and contexts of actual language use.



Fig. 3: a woman possessed by Kachiya (photo by William Sax).

Can we say that the ritual appearance of Kachiya-Bhairav in the body of a possessed person is “performative” in this Austinian sense? Perhaps, but only to a limited extent. Of course the rituals contain many examples of performative speech, and the summoning of the god is an illocutionary act (i.e. it is a

“summoning”) with hoped-for perlocutionary effects (the appearance of the god) that index antecedent social conditions (the guru must be a “real” guru who has knowledge of effective mantras, etc.). When the god is reluctant to come—and this often happens—the “summoning” becomes a command by the guru, or even a threat. Members of the audience on the other hand may plead, beg, and entreat the deity to have mercy on them, to come and hear their prayers (cf. SCHÖMBUCHER 2006). All of these are illocutionary acts, and thus by definition “performative” in the Austinian sense.

But our question is, “How do songs like that of Umeda and Sumeda work to bring about Bhairav’s embodiment?” In other words, how do they cause possession, sometimes so powerfully that *siddhi* seems to roll in waves across the audience? Why does the recitation of these songs have such an intense emotional impact? It seems to me that Austinian performativity does not take us far in answering this question. The appearance of the god is not the perlocutionary effect of an illocutionary act. In fact, it is not a linguistic phenomenon at all. Rather, it is a bodily phenomenon. The god “dances” (*nacna*) or is “made to dance” (*nacana*) by the guru; he “comes/sits on the head” of (*sir pe ana/ baithna*) or “comes over” (*upar ana*) the possessed person, referred to as the god's “beast” (*pasva*) or “little horsie” (*dungariya*). Kachiya Bhairav appears *in the body* of a possessed person: his appearance is a matter of embodiment, not of language. It calls for a hermeneutics of the body and not a hermeneutics of the text.

And yet a hermeneutics of the body is much more difficult to conceive than a hermeneutics of the text, for all the reasons that CONNERTON (1989, pp. 100f.) suggests in his brilliant study of social memory. “Inscribing practices,” he writes “have always formed the privileged story, incorporating practices the neglected story, in the history of hermeneutics”. Hermeneutics has always taken inscription as its privileged object, not only because it arose from philology and inevitably returns to it, but also because hermeneutic activity itself became a textualized object of reflection. And all of this—the interpretation of texts and the textual interpretation of the interpretation of texts—was facilitated by the fact that texts are fixed, that they have an independence and a solidity that body practices like possession lack. They are permanent and objectified, and thus lend themselves much more easily to the interpretations of a hermeneutic community. Similarly in the natural sciences, argues CONNERTON, the body was “materialised,” regarded as one material object amongst others, so that bodily practices were “lost from view.”

A newly-constituted object-domain, the communication of meaning according to rules, could in principle include the body in its domain but in practice it did so only peripherally. The object-domain of hermeneutics was defined in terms of what was taken to be the distinctive feature of the human species, first consciousness and later language . . . When the defining feature of the human species was seen as language, the body was 'readable' as a text or code, but the body is regarded as the arbitrary bearer of meanings; bodily practices are acknowledged, but in an etherealised form (1989, p. 101).

To put it simply, texts are easier to interpret than bodily practices, and this is why so much interpretive social science privileges the text; why, as JACKSON (1983, p. 328) put it in a brilliant article on the topic, “the ‘anthropology of the body’ has been vitiated by a tendency to interpret embodied experience in terms of cognitive and linguistic models of meaning”; why language rather than the body is taken as a privileged metaphor—or even as a model of—society; why “performativity” is for Bauman primarily linguistic and not bodily; why even this chapter threatened to become a discussion of texts and songs rather than of the embodied performances which are in fact the central mode of Bhairav’s appearance. I chose to begin with songs and texts because I address a community of readers whose hermeneutics is primarily textual, but even now, when I turn to bodily practice, I immediately transform it into text by *writing* about it. For an academic, the textual inscription of practice is (practically speaking) impossible to avoid.

Nevertheless I want to attempt a hermeneutics of the body, the contorted body, the body in pain, which marks the appearance of Kachiya Bhairav. This body is so utterly transformed, so disturbing and even frightening, and at the same time it is so central to the cult of Kachiya, that it calls out for interpretation. And the interpretation that suggests itself is the one that was made by many of my informants, and that is repeated over and over the songs and stories: that the suffering of Kachiya is the suffering of the Harijan. This, I believe, is what Guru Darpal meant when he said that only those of “low birth” worship Kachiya; it is the reason why the Harijan political leader urged his followers to give up worshipping Kachiya; it is the reason why, according to the Brahman priests, Kachiya attaches himself to “weak” and low-caste people; it even explains why Kachiya loves such people so much, and why he always comes to their rescue.

In order to understand this whole complex we can invoke yet another notion of performativity, that of Judith BUTLER (1990, 1993; see also SALIH 2002). It is important to emphasize at the outset that Butlerian “performativity” is neither dramatic performance nor Austinian performativity. For Butler, performativity is unconscious, unwilled mimesis. It is the way one learns to be a female or a male—primarily by imitating others, by conforming to the (heterosexual) “law” and *performing* masculinity or femininity until one becomes that which one has performed. One *learns to* be a man or a woman at the same time that one is *defined as* such, primarily through discursive practices such as speech acts. One of the more controversial of Butler’s assertions is that such discursive speech acts, along with the mimetic activity of the subject who performatively embodies the ideology (“the law”) lying behind them, actually *create* the gendered body. Accordingly, she has been criticized for defending the absurd proposition that physiological differences are socially caused. But in the end, Butler does not argue for pure social constructionism. Although discursive performativity appears, like an Austinian speech act, to produce what it names (that is, although gender appears to be performatively produced), its power to do so actually derives from a structuring law. For Butler, this is the law of patriarchy. Can we not also speak in this sense of

the law of caste?²³ Caste is also performatively produced, and that is why I began this chapter by describing the bodily *hexis* of Harijans, thereby illustrating how “being a Harijan” (or being a Brahman for that matter) is something that one learns to do, not by studying a set of rules, but rather in everyday interactions such as greeting, purchasing a cup of tea, riding a bus, etc.²⁴

For Butler, the strength and enduring nature of gender lies in its being continuously, daily performed, in a thousand little dramas of reiteration, interpellation, etc. But what about the extraordinary, non-mundane actions that we call “rituals”? As I have argued elsewhere (SAX 1991, 1995, 2000, 2002), public rituals are the sites *par excellence* where identities and relationships are created, re-affirmed, reiterated, and sometimes reconfigured. As self-defining actions, rituals are powerful precisely because they do not work simply at the level of language, but at the more fundamental level of the body. This is what CONNERTON means when he argues that collective, social memory consists of “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past . . . [that] are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (1989, pp. 3f.).²⁵ And that is, after all, how the story of Umeda and Sumeda is understood, as a founding event in the collective and religious history of local Harijans which, when recited in the context of a ritual, causes a profound change in the consciousness of the (largely or exclusively) Harijan audience, resulting in Bhairav's embodiment in a possessed person. But the possessed body is contorted and in pain, because what is being collectively affirmed here is not simply an historical event, but rather the whole experience of suffering and affliction that is the mutual bond of the Harijans. This is why the song is almost never performed in front of the higher castes.

In short, I am arguing that the songs of Puriya, Umeda and Sumeda, and more generally the appearance of Kachiya in the painfully contorted bodies of his subjects, constitute a collective creation of identity through ritual performance. But is the memory only a memory of suffering? Is the Harijan body only a body in pain? Is there no way out of this circle of embodied suffering and injustice? Here again we can draw on Butler, who insists that because the gendered subject is itself a product of disursive performativity, it cannot transcend the law that fashions it. One does not choose one's caste or gender role like an actor in a play; rather one is more-or-less constrained to play a particular role. If there is agency, says Butler, if there is to be subversion and change, then it must express itself in those practices themselves.

23 See LIECHTY 2003, p. 23 for a similar notion applied to class.

24 For a brilliant discussion of such caste-based *hexis* in a ritual context, see OSELLA/OSELLA 2000.

25 For a discussion of possession as historical consciousness in Africa, see STOLLER 1989; for the “alternative” consciousness of subalterns, see CHATTERJEE 1989, pp. 169-209; HAYNES/PRAKASH 1992; OMVEDT 1995.

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