

## T(r)opologies of Rule (Rāj): Ritual Sovereignty and Theistic Subjection

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When west Himalayan drummers play, power presents itself in everyday settings. Objects, people and places are transformed. Things become gods, gods become kings, and oracles give voice to their royal persons. As gods dance and move through the landscape, buildings, trees, persons, and rocks are reconfigured as sites of power in an otherwise unseen web of relations. What is this dance of transformation? What does it mean, and how is the effect of empowerment produced?

In this essay, I argue that the choreography of *pahāḍī* (lit. mountain) gods constructs a rural variant of divine kingship that challenges the way we think the relationship between sovereignty, subjection, and space. Inverting the usual Hindu institution, in which kings rule kingdoms in the manner of gods, here we are dealing with gods that rule peasant communities as kings in a political idiom that problematizes oppositional conceptions of the ruler and the ruled.

Throughout the west Himalayan region from Chamba to Garhwal, "despite the demise of kings and kingdoms [since democratization] kingship lives on", as Galey (1989) suggests, embodied in the practices of Pahari religion. The political life of peasant communities in the region is organized not only by democratic party-politics, but also by a parallel indigenous idiom that villagers call "government by deity", the modernized translation of "*deotā kā rāj*" (lit. rule by gods) offered by an English-speaking, university-trained informant. In addition to ordering the internal political economy of rural communities, local gods also represent the latter in all kinds of external relations – with peers, others castes, remembered rulers, the Government of India, demons, and the great gods of heaven.<sup>1</sup> While divine agency may sound implausible to empiricist observers – as it has from the time of British colonial authors (see Inden 1990) to contemporary historians (Hobsbawm 1978) –, the rhetorical slippage between kingship and divinity it exemplifies should come as no surprise to scholars of Hindu culture. As Christopher Fuller

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<sup>1</sup> West Himalayan local gods are understood to be the representatives or "watchmen" (*caukidār*) in the human world (*prithvī*) of the great gods Shiva and Kali, who rule the world from heaven (*svarga*). Once a year, in the winter, they gather in heaven for a great assembly at the court of Śiva and Kali.

explains (1992:106-27), Hindu deities such as Indra or Rama are represented as kings – i.e. as royal gods, while human kings are ritually constructed as divine – that is to say, as the incarnation or representative of a state or dynastic deity.

A different set of relations obtains, however, in west Himalayan local government by deity. Rather than constructing human rulers in terms of transcendent relations with heavenly gods, we have earthly gods constructed in immanent relations with human rulers. What I find unusual in this idiom is not the symbolic construction of the divinity of kings – a widespread form of legitimation with which we are quite familiar –, but rather the political construction of gods as rulers. How exactly can a god be said to govern? What ritual and psycho-spatial practices are involved? What cultural conception of agency is performed? What kinds of political subjectivity are produced?

Following a constructivist line of inquiry, I pay close attention to the tropes that make gods into political agents – a process that includes not only turns of phrase, but also what we might call turns of practice – i.e. ritual tropes. The arts of west Himalayan ritual, I propose, enact a symbolic field of empowerment – a liminal space, where discourse is performed as collective agency in practices of memory that reproduce the effects of traditional local rule.

When we place government by deity in cultural context, we find that it belongs to a varied repertoire of ritual practices, which have long given shape to the historical landscape of west Himalayan regional polity. Elsewhere (Sutherland 2003), I have shown how the processional movements of local gods, riding in palanquins in the manner of kings, describe the domains of a former regional polity – local caste militias, chiefdoms, kingdoms, even a quasi-imperial formation – whose intersecting spaces are neither neatly bounded, mutually exclusive, nor hierarchically nested. The overlapping fields of power and political discourses so defined lend weight to Ronald Inden's proposal to examine historical Indian polity as a "scale of forms", a concept Collingwood developed in *New Leviathan* to rethink history in terms of the emergent categories formed by human agency. This essay is not the place to describe again the entire scale of sovereignties defined by this regional geography of movement. Suffice it to say that the remembered landscape of local, chiefly, royal, and imperial domains is reproduced at festival times by the ritual agency of gods in an idiom I characterize as theistic sovereignty.

To understand how theistic sovereignty works in a political sense, I analyze the ritual processes that enable local gods to govern rural caste assemblies as kings or rulers (the Sanskrit/Hindi *rājā* has both these meanings). I then briefly compare the latter with the theistic sovereigns of

two superordinate formations: the now-defunct so-called *gana* of the Tikaral confederacy, and the king of Bashahr.<sup>2</sup> Combining my own fieldwork in two of the Bashahr state's three former districts, Rohru and Chini<sup>3</sup> (now Kinnaur) (see Fig.1), with British colonial accounts of Pahari states and religion, I shall demonstrate how the mixed metaphorical construction of sovereignty as simultaneously divine and kingly in all three cases is ritually performed, in and by a common repertoire of what I call t(r)opologies of *rāj* – the topos and tropes of rule, its characteristic spaces and commonplaces. In order to understand theistic sovereignty, it is necessary to explain two apparent paradoxes: on the one hand, the construction of gods as rulers: on the other hand, the formation of the sovereign as subject. To do so, I adapt Foucauldian theory to the analysis of Hindu ritual practice.

### **T(r)opologies of *Rāj***

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997:3-4) following Michel Foucault uses the term "tropology" to describe the rhetorical construction of inner landscapes of the mind by figures of *speech* in modern, European theories of subject formation. In what follows, I use the modified spelling, t(r)opology, to suggest a complementary political process: the ritual construction of outer landscapes of collective subjection by figures of *space* in Himalayan practices of governance and state-formation. By collective subjection I refer not only to the production of political subjects, but also to the formation of gods as rulers – i.e. as sovereign subjects, by "inspirational practices" (Thomas and Humphrey 1994) involving what is normally called spirit-possession. In the western Himalayas, the colonization of persons, or "seizure" by divine power (*śakti*) as locals call it, that produces political subjection extends also to objects, animals, buildings, and places. To better explain the agency of gods as rulers, it is necessary to rethink the individualist paradigm of spirit-possession in more general terms as theistic subjection, that is to say, as the ritual means by which gods are made to act as rulers by (and of) the ruled. I propose that such practices are best conceptualized in performative terms as a multi-media set of tropes and techniques of empowerment, whose ritual articulation may be understood to describe a world-ordering circuitry of power.

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<sup>2</sup> There are many spellings for the name of the former kingdom: Bashahr, Bushahr, Bushahar, Bushahir. In using the first, I follow Emerson's spelling which most closely approximates what I heard in the field.

<sup>3</sup> I use the standard spelling of places-names as found on current Indian maps.

Butler uses the term tropology to describe the discursive construction of the individual subject by tropes of reversal, or turning, in the writings of Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Althusser and Foucault. According to this metaphor, power in the form of dominant norms and disciplines is understood to be "internalized" and "turned against the self" in the production of subjectivity as conscience or self-awareness. Butler underscores the discursive nature of this process by pointing in an important note to "Hayden White's remarks in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) that the word *tropik* derives from *tropikos*, *tropos*, which in classical Greek meant 'turn'", and to subsequent understandings of Quintillian and Nietzsche that tropes "generate figures of speech or thought" (1997:201-2, n.1). She draws out the significance of this as follows:

That this turn is considered generative and productive seems especially relevant to our consideration of the production or generation of the subject. Not only is generation what a trope does, but the explanation of generation seems to require the use of tropes, an operation of language that both reflects and enacts the generativity it seeks to explain, irreducibly mimetic and performative (ibid).

My adapted spelling of the term, t(r)opology, is intended to spatialize and historicize Butler's rhetorical analysis of individual subject-formation by shifting attention to the linked formation of collective subjectivity and political domain, in this case by Pahari ritual practice. I endeavor to do so by expanding her Foucauldian focus on texts and discourse to include a practical analysis of the projection of power as sovereignty in space and action – that is to say, an analysis of theistic subjection enacted by the ritual empowerment of objects, bodies, and places. The parentheses I use in my spelling of t(r)opology are used to suggest that both tropology and topology are involved in the political construction of subjects and space, and that the same process constitutes sovereignty and subjectivity in the three competing idioms of government by deity, *gana*, and king.

To understand how gods can act as rulers in political practice, we have to learn what kind of agency this involves. In addition to asking how human political subjectivity and action can be viewed in terms of the agency of a god, it is also necessary to examine an aspect of subjection not studied by either Foucault or Butler, namely: the construction of the sovereign as subject. As the west Himalayan sovereigns in question include both human kings and royal gods, it will also be necessary to interrogate the parallel means by which kings are deified and gods are made kings. I shall focus mainly on the latter, not only due to its unusual nature, but also because the same set of conventions were used to perform the theistic sovereignty of kings. In both cases, it is necessary to understand how gods are made present in physical form and thereby

inserted as agents in political relations with humans. To do so, I propose to examine the ritual t(r)opes, by means of which cosmological and theological conceptions of power are politically articulated: on the one hand spatially, by the localization of unmarked power in objects, buildings, and places as markers of domain – political objects; on the other hand psychically, by the embodiment of theistic power in the persons of both ruler and ruled to make them (in different ways) political subjects.

With respect to the homology in Hindu polity between human kings and divine kings, we find that theistic sovereignty is paradoxically constructed: in the case of the human Pahari king, by subordination to the state/dynastic deity as the latter's minister (*vazīr*) – a fairly common Hindu notion; in the case of the royal god, by a circular logic of self-subjection, to which I return below. In tracing the t(r)opologies of rule involved, I want to show (pace Butler) that the formation of subjects is not limited to textual practices of discursive performance, but is also materially formed and ritually enacted in a multi-media regime of "spatial practices"<sup>4</sup> (de Certeau 1984): "disciplined operations" such as story-telling, building, drumming, dancing, processing, and assembling, that configure relations between landscapes, persons and things. It is these multi-media arts, I propose, that constitute the ritual repertoire of divine habitus.

### Tropes of reversal

Bearing in mind the ambivalence of subject-formation noted by Butler, according to which the individual subject is formed by power simultaneously as both agent and patient, it is necessary to pay close attention to the ambivalence of power (*śakti*) inscribed in the origin myths of west Himalayan gods. I refer in particular to the various narrative and ritual *reversals* of power that inaugurate the establishment of theistic sovereignty by the transformation of affliction into empowerment, and curse into blessing.

Two contrasting "figures of turning" characterize competing mythologies of government by deity in Rohru. On the one hand, the narratives of gods classed as *nāg* or *nārāyaṇ* evoke the ontological *transformation* of a deity's "curse" (*doś*) into the blessing of "increase" (*lābh*) that constitutes local theistic rule. This reversal marks the emergence of collective political identity and agency in the figure of a god,

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<sup>4</sup> Following Michel de Certeau's (1984: 91-130) usage, "spatial practices" refer to such "operations" as walking in the city, story-telling, city-planning, map-making, and touring, by means of which places and spaces are constructed and contested.

who subsequently acts as the benefactor, ruler, and representative of a local rural community.

On the other hand, the origin myths of gods classed as *mahāsū* describe a political *transition* from "government by demon" (*rakash ka rāj*) to government by deity involving military conquest and a ritual contract. After subduing the demon-*rājā*, Kirmat Danu, Mahāsū agrees to continue to protect the regional population by performing a perpetual territorial progress, in return for an annual share of the harvest (Ibbetson, MacLagan and Rose 1919: 414). Throughout Himachal and western Uttaranchal, such rituals of territorialization are one of the primary tropes, by which theistic sovereignty is projected in space by deities touring their domains in palanquins (see Sutherland 2003).

Given that traditional Pahari knowledge about local gods is orally rather than textually transmitted, I prefer not to distinguish "myth" from "ritual" as if they belonged to separate domains of experience – one textual and discursive, the other practical and embodied. Although the indigenous equivalents, "history" (H. *itihās*, P. *bār*, K. *cironing*) and "god's work" (H. *devākārya*) are distinguished in speech, narrative is inseparable from the other practices with which I began, that turn knowledge into power, things into gods, gods into kings, and oracles into their royal persons. In the west Himalayan arts of government by deity, I shall argue, sovereignty is a multi-media effect produced by t(r)opes of power in motion – many, but not all, of which involve reversal.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I use the flow of power (*śakti*) between objects, persons and places set in motion and directed by ritual practice to understand how the idiom of theistic sovereignty is formed and performed in networks of connectivity. A full account of the process would describe an expanding scale of sites of ritual empowerment from the smallest of objects, through bodies and buildings, to landscapes, and the triple Hindu cosmos. The following analysis focuses on the first three scales in examining the theistic construction of sovereignty and subjection in local government by deity, then applies the same principles to the *gana* and the Bashahr king at increasingly larger scales. I shall argue that conventional views of spirit possession, based as they are on modern individualist epistemologies and ontologies, are inadequate to theorize the complex colonization by power of objects, persons, animals, buildings, and landscapes, that constitutes Pahari theistic sovereignty. Given the

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<sup>5</sup> Other important ritual tropes that construct the spaces of the political arena by the processional movements of gods are: 1) circumambulation of a local polity; 2) exchange between local polities so defined, and 3) assembly of many local polities at a center (see Sutherland 2003). In this essay, I only examine the latter.

violent indigenous construction of power this involves, I prefer to view all of these as sites of subjection.

### Government by Deity

In west Himalayan peasant polity, collective agency is imagined and enacted in vernacular terms of government by deity – the royal art of ordering and empowerment. Throughout the former territories of Bashahr – the contemporary districts of Simla, Rohru and Kinnaur – rural caste assemblies called *khūnd*, resident in multi-village domains called *ghori*<sup>6</sup>, are understood to be ruled by local gods called *deotā*. In other words, local gods stand for, govern, and act on behalf of rural communities in the latter's various world-ordering relations – with peers, former rulers, the nation-state, demons, and the great gods of heaven. Before examining how this institution works, its three constitutive elements need further explanation, namely: *khūnd*, *ghori*, and *deotā*.

#### *Khūnd*

The Pahari term, *khūnd*, used in the singular means "warrior", but in Rohru and Tukpa it is also used both collectively and spatially to signify two complementary formations.

On the one hand, *khūnd* denotes a traditional rural political community, namely the assembly or militia of a local agropastoral cooperative. Three caste groups are incorporated in the community of a *khūnd* – albeit unequally. The dominant majority are Khash-Rajput agropastoralist landowners [formerly titled *kanait* (or Kanet) under British rule, a term that is now considered pejorative]. Two other castes traditionally serve them: Brahman agropastoralist landowners [formerly called *bhāt* – also now pejorative] who act as hereditary priests, and subaltern Kohlis, a pejorative title that still competes with the now more politically correct Harijan or Dalit, and which collectively designates individually named castes such as carpenters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, musicians, weavers, and basket makers.

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<sup>6</sup> Instead of "territory", I prefer to use the term "domain" to describe these and other political spaces formed by the ritual projection of theistic power. Whereas territory is a modern concept associated with the bounded homogeneous space of the nation-state, the older European notion of domain better describes the centrally organized heterogeneous space of Hindu polities.

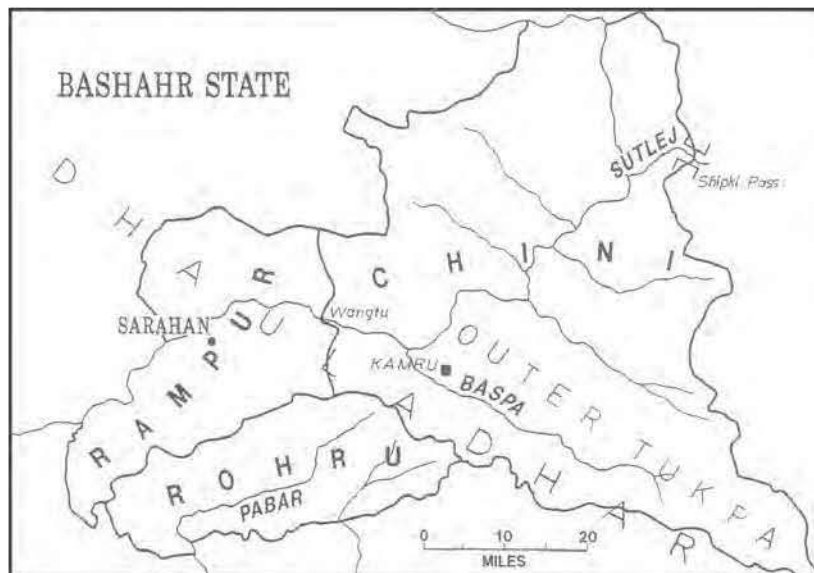


Fig.1: The Kingdom of Bashahr

On the other hand, *khünd* refers to an archaic form of state administrative territory, one of the six original divisions of the Bashahr kingdom that royal foundation myths describe as independent chiefdoms prior to their conquest. I take these alternative uses to be metonymically related as the basic political units, from which the Bashahr kingdom was formed. This early Kanait geography of *khünds* was subsequently re-territorialized by the Bashahr kings according to a Mughal vocabulary of *parganās* and *tahsils*.

#### *Ghori*

The usual Pahari term for a minimal political space in Rohru and Tukpa, however, is *ghori*, defined in each case as the domain of a *khünd* and its ruling deity or *deotā*. Usually a *parganā* contains several *ghoris*. Avoiding Eurocentric connotations of "territory" based on international law, cadastral surveys, printed maps and boundary-markers, I use the term "domain" to suggest the incorporation of villages and land in a



"centrally oriented" polity (Tambiah 1976).<sup>7</sup> While the Rohru usage of *ghori* refers to a multi-village domain, in Tukpa it designates the smaller space of a single village. What is interesting about the *ghoris* of Rohru and Tukpa is their differing histories of political incorporation in Bashahr. While the *ghoris* of Tukpa belonged to the original core of the kingdom, formed after Tibetan regional imperium began to decline in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the *ghoris* of Rohru were not annexed until 1865, after the imposition of British "protection". Immediately surrounded by four great states, formerly rivals for regional paramountcy – Kullu to the west, Bashahr to the north, Garhwal to the east, and Sirmaur to the south – Rohru's more than forty *khūnds*, each resident in its *ghori*, together with a handful of chiefdoms or *thakurais*, remained administratively and ritually autonomous until 1865 – sheltered in the space "between the tentacles" of the state, as Tilman Frasch (2003: 110) nicely puts it – where centralized power was weak. Thus, until that time, the *ghoris* of Rohru may be conceptualized in non-evolutionist terms as an indigenous form of political organization that preceded the establishment of kingdoms in the region and continued to exist as quasi-autonomous or tributary polities after the establishment of kingdoms.

#### *Deotā or devata*

According to the traditional idiom of the "Pahari system of goddesses and gods" (*pahaḍī devī-devata* system), each *khūnd* and its *ghori* is represented and ruled by a local deity (*deotā* or *devatā*) belonging to one of two divine "species" (*jāti*). One species comprises deities classed as Nag, Narayan and Jakh, the other is composed exclusively of Mahāsūs. According to a rich corpus of local origin myths, both species of *deotā* with seats in Rohru are represented as foreign powers, immigrants from elsewhere, who inaugurate local governance by violent acts of intrusion: either by taking possession of persons and place in the absence of a previous ruler or, in Mahāsū's case, by defeating an incumbent demon-*rājā* or challenging incumbent local gods.

#### **Spatial Narratives of Empowerment**

Origin myths describe how deities became rulers or *rājās*. Born in distant locations, usually mountain lakes, and sometimes associated with a named mother-goddess, most Khash-Rajput *deotā* (with only a handful of exceptions) are described as initially belonging to a divine brotherhood,

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<sup>7</sup> In his study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand, Stanley Tambiah (1976: 112) characterizes the field of power in the Indic kingdom as "centrally oriented" rather than territorially bounded in the manner of the modern state.

leaving home, then wandering in the form of a "holy man" or "ascetic" in search of a "seat" (*kursī*), in which to settle and found a kingdom. Accidentally discovered in the form of a "spontaneously generated image" (*utpatti mūrti*) by either a hunter, shepherd, or ploughman, this otherwise invisible "forest power" (*jāngali śakti*) initially makes its presence felt in rural society by disrupting order – stealing a sacrificial offering, causing disease, or introducing an epidemic of female possession. A diviner is summoned, a deity is named, and his curse (*doṣ*) is diagnosed – caused, usually, by the sin of misrecognition.

To re-establish order, an entirely new order must be established, organized around the figure of a *deotā* as king. To do so, the disordering presence of wild forest power must be reconfigured in well-ordered form as a tutelary god, then "seated" in a temple. After the deity is established in his seat, an entourage of "officers" (*kārdār*) is appointed to manage temple affairs – each office chosen from a different lineage (*khāndān*) by the deity. While some origin myths are silent on how this is done, others state that the deity himself appoints his officers from different lineages. According to the evidence of contemporary practice, deities still chose their temple officers by a process of theistic subjection. This may happen either indirectly by a possessed oracle who nominates the officer, or directly by some form of divine affliction (*doṣ*) or curse experienced by the nominee himself (it is always a man), which can only be lifted by compliance with the deity's wishes. In both case, selection is understood to be the work of the deity, whose power acts either directly through affliction or indirectly through oracular inspiration.

As embodiment of the deity's power and voice of his will, the temple-oracle, or *mālī*, is central not only to the process of selecting the officers of the temple committee, but also to the performance of theistic sovereignty in public practices of ritual politics. New officers are named by the deity through the "shaking speech" (*cheriyā bolī*) of the oracle and, whenever a new oracle needs to be appointed, the deity is said to select him directly by spirit possession – a process of subjection often involving affliction that may last years, if the candidate is unwilling to comply. This system of oracular appointment and representation is central to the legislative aspects of government by deity as well as to the maintenance of social control and the formation of "docile subjects". Failure to comply with the deity's laws and commands, for instance, also results in affliction by the deity's curse for ordinary members of the *khūnd* or, to put it in other words, by the psychosomatic experience of theistic subjection.

In this new local order, objects, bodies, buildings, and places are ritually empowered as the "signs" (*niśān*) of theistic sovereignty – as will be seen below – and the person of the deity is politically constructed by a discourse of kingship. The temple is represented in royal terms as a

"palace" (*mahāl*, *deorhā* or "treasury" (*bhaṇḍār*) and the temple officers are conceived as the deity's court or "cabinet of ministers", as my English-speaking informant put it. These include chief minister or chamberlain (*mahāttas* or *vazīr*), oracle (*māli*), priest (*pūjārī*), treasurer (*kājamcī*), and storekeeper (*bhaṇḍārī*) – all from high-caste lineages – and in addition a low-caste peon (*halamandī*). Usually unmentioned in the "official" high caste narratives I gathered in Rohru<sup>8</sup>, this temple establishment also requires the indispensable services of subaltern drummer-bards, variously called *dhaḡī* or *turī* in Rohru, without whose knowledge of rhythm and songs the deity's power can be neither evoked nor harnessed in ritual practice.

In comparing variants of divine kingship below, I hope to show that this temple regime of local theistic governance with its deity, *vazīr*, oracle, officers, and drummer-bards forms a constant structure of command, to which supplementary figures such as the *gana* and the king have been added as more complex political formations were formed. Where *khūnds* are concerned, the deity acts as king/ruler and the *vazīr* as both his minister and temple manager. Before the introduction of democratically elected local headmen (*pradhān*) after Independence, the *vazīr* was also the human political leader of the *khūnd*. In more complex traditional political formations, as we shall see, the deity embodies the sovereign power, a human king or *gana* acts as the deity's minister cum political leader, and the role of *vazīr* is reduced to temple management.

The deity's sovereignty is not only mimetic, however – that is to say, formed as a copy of Hindu kingship. It is also performed by the ritual management and direction of power (*śakti*). Oral narratives of temple-foundation describe the establishment of government by deity in terms of a two-phase trajectory of power. As I describe elsewhere (Sutherland 2004), the primary *introjection* of wild power from the forest that inaugurates government by deity is reversed in a secondary *projection* of power, now in its ritually reordered form as divine, in a movement that constitutes collective political agency – typically by the looting of sheep and goats from a neighboring *khūnd* for the temple consecration sacrifice (*abhiṣek*). What I take this to mean is that the collective agency of *khūnds* is imagined as the effect of empowerment by cosmological power (*śakti*). Unmarked and unmediated by name, form or site in its original condition, *śakti* is given particular social characteristics, first by personification as a god, then by political location in a network of competition and conflict among *khūnds* as a ruler or *rājā*. Thus, narratives of government by deity

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<sup>8</sup> By contrast with my experience in Rohru, the indispensable magical power evoked by low caste drummers is acknowledged further east in the official divine histories of Garhwal.

are shaped by a double figure of reversal: the immobilization of wild forest power as a god in a temple, and its subsequent remobilization as a ruler in ritual practice. This is why many origin myths end with a similar trope: the construction of a palanquin (*palgī*) as the deity's ritual vehicle. The palanquin is the primary means of mobilizing and projecting power in ritual, when the deity as *rājā* tours his domain, visits other gods, or attends assemblies accompanied by his *khūnd*.

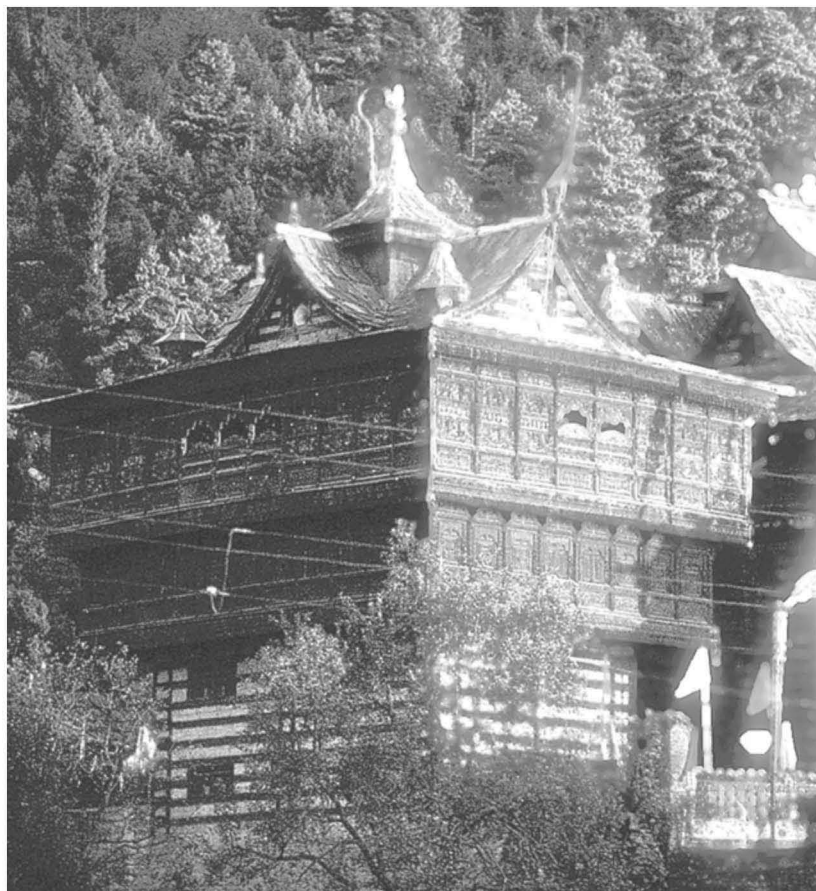
But origin myths alone are insufficient to understand what it means to say that Pahari gods act as rulers. Only by paying close attention to the practical evidence of material culture and ritual action can we understand precisely *how* the mythic discourse of divine power, *śakti*, is made palpably present as political agency in small-scale and large-scale t(r)opologies of *rāj*.

In the next two sections, I argue that ritual produces the sovereignty of gods. It does so through a repertoire of formative and performative arts, that once shaped political life in west Himalayan Hindu states prior to democratization. In contemporary temple and festival practices, theistic governance is embodied in the architectonics of theistic power and enacted in the choreography of oracular consultation. After describing these practices that make gods into rulers, I demonstrate, in the final section, how the same ritual t(r)opes are reconfigured in constructing the theistic sovereignty of human rulers: the *gana* of Tikaral and the Bashahr king.

### **Material Formation: The Architectonics of Power**

If a local god is the ruler of a *khūnd*, his capacity to govern is first and foremost that of a "ruler of magic" (*jādū kā rājā*). This is to say that theistic sovereignty in political affairs represents only one moment in the broader movement of world-ordering power, *śakti*, by means of which local gods also heal illness, control the weather, protect flocks and promote good harvests. If similar functions also fulfilled the duty (*dharma*) of Hindu kings, it is only by means of collaboration with deities that kings were formerly able to discharge them. Thus, the visual regime of props in terms of which local gods ritually present themselves as rulers is more than a spectacle of semiosis. It also constitutes a material array of magical instruments or "signs" (*niśān*), in each of which the deity's power is fixed in form by specific architectonic conventions. Without such signs, as Ram Rachpal Singh of Sangla explained, the *śakti* of a deity is dangerous and impossible to control. "It wanders around in the fields, lodges in walls, and hassles people (*ādmī tang kartā*) by fastening onto their bodies and causing possession". To prevent this, *śakti* must be grounded in objects formed by one or both of two conventional designs. One of these is the Indic square

geometry (*yantra*) of the center and four directions, the pervasive form in which Pahari world-order is imagined in discourse, enacted in ritual, and realized in the shape of sacred objects and buildings. This geometry is clearly exemplified in the patterns of dots signifying the number five on the side of a die – one in each corner and one in the middle.



**Fig. 2: Sarahan temple roof. (Photo: P. Sutherland)**

The other design is the widespread Indic figure of the parasol, or *chakra*, which marks the presence of a king.

These two key architectonic forms are embodied in the four principal kinds of theistic sign (*niśān*) used in ritual practice in Rohru and Tukpa:

1) small hand-held signs such as the dagger (*katār*) or the "mace" (*charrī*) are embellished with a *chatra* to signify the presence, and transmit the power of, the deity's sovereignty;

2) various kinds of ritual vehicle, in which deities are mobilized for temple rituals and festival processions [see below] also incorporate one or more *chatras*;

3) cosmic diagrams (*maṇḍalas*) constructed for temple consecrations (*abhiṣek*) or sacrificial assemblies (*jag*) are formed by the geometry of the 5-point *yantra* out of colored powders on the ground;

4) the roofs of temple and palace buildings also constitute three dimensional *maṇḍalas*, whose layout is based on the same ubiquitous *yantra* and whose center and four corners are marked as cosmological symbols either temporarily by ritual actions or permanently by architectural elements such as miniature pitched or conical roofs called *chatra*.

Most important among these techniques of signing power is the architectonics of ritual vehicles, due to their centrality in theistic governance.

### Ritual Vehicles

Ritual vehicles present both a visual system of classification and a practical idiom of theistic governance. I begin with the former. In the rituals that organize the political life of *khūnds* as what elsewhere I have called "very little kingdoms" (Sutherland 2003), the design-forms of ritual vehicles are coded by the categories of divine caste and species. Of the three castes that form the population of a *khūnd*, each is represented by a tutelary god of similar caste, whose status is visually displayed by the design of his vehicle (fig. 3). Not all these local gods are classified as rulers or kings, however; some are considered priests or warrior/exorcists. All three castes and their gods have their own separate temples and officers, who both serve their own local caste communities independently and participate in the rituals of the ruling god. Only the gods of the landowning Khash-Rajput caste are considered to be *rājās*. As the ruler of his *khūnd* and their domain (*ghori*), a royal god's sovereign status is indicated by the sumptuary symbolism of the palanquin in which he rides. By contrast, acting as the latter's theistic priest (*purohit*), Parashuram, the god of all Rohru's Brahman communities or *bhātolis*, is transported in a "pitcher" (*kalāśa*) carried on the head of his priest. Lastly, Kilbalu, the god of most but not all subaltern Kohli hamlets, rides in a vehicle that emulates either the royal or the priestly design in his multiple ritual capacity as the royal god's minister (*vazīr*), warrior (*bīr*), exorcist,

bodyguard, or policeman (*pulīs*). Thus, *ghoris* are constructed as very little kingdoms by the theistic organization of ritual by caste and vice versa.

Caste category	Social space (or group)	Palanquin design	Species-name (or place of origin) of god	Ritual Function
Khash-Rajput ( <i>Kanait</i> )	<i>ghori khūnd</i>	Roof-type	Mahāsūs	Ruler/king
		Long-hair	Nags, Narayans & Jakhs	
		Chair-type	(Navar valley, Kullu & Kinnaur)	
Brahman (Bhat)	<i>bhātoli</i>	Pitcher	Parashuram	Priest
<i>Harijan (Kohli)</i>	<i>Kohlwāri</i>	Long-hair & pitcher	Kilbalu	Exorcist, warrior, minister, bodyguard, policeman

**Fig. 3: Ritual vehicle designs by caste, location, deity and ritual function.**

In addition to caste, the ruling gods of *khūnds* are also distinguished in terms of divine species (*jāti*) or brotherhood (*birādari*) by three different kinds of palanquin (fig. 3). Members of the Mahāsū brotherhood, headquartered in Garhwal, ride in silver palanquins named "roof-type" (*chatvālā*) or "box-type" (*sandūqvālā*) for their characteristic shape. By contrast, gods classified as Nags and Narayans (with distant places of birth in Kullu, Kinnaur, Tibet, or Dodra Kwar) ride in "longhair" (*jhāmgruvālā*) or "chair-type" (*kursivālā*) palanquins. Rohru district constitutes a cultural border-zone, where these regional conventions intersect and hybrid variants are produced such as the heteroprax use of longhair palanquins by Mahāsūs.

The kingship of gods is also conveyed by the symbolic construction of their ritual vehicles.

#### *The roof-type or box-type palanquin*

In Mahāsū's characteristic box-type palanquin, the deity's image (*mūrti* or *mūrat*) is hidden inside the box. Usually made of silver and sometimes inlaid with gold, both box and roof are typically ornamented with *repoussé* images of "great tradition" figures such as Shiva, Ganesh, the Pandavas and Kauravas, or Krishna and the Gopis. The placement of a silver parasol at the peak of the roof and a silver ball at each corner of the box reproduces the mandalic geometry of center and four directions, the visual signature of world-ordering sovereignty already noted for some temple roofs. Here, it gives visual form to Mahāsū's paramount status as "king of the gods" (P. *devā ro rājā*) in the Uttarakhand region. A woven silver cummerbund tied around the box, through which the deity's sword

is slung, indicates the palanquin's anthropomorphic construction as the martial body of a demon-slaying ruler.



**Fig. 4: Roof- or Box-type Palanquin. (Photo: P. Sutherland)**

#### *Longhair palanquins*

Brotherhoods of Nags and Narayans in Rohru are distinguished by their so-called "longhair" palanquins (fig. 5, 6, 7), named for their characteristic mop of yak-tail hair. By extension, the gods that ride in them are called "longhair gods". Unlike Mahāsūs, the images of longhair gods are visible.

Mounted in circular array on a wooden frame, facing outwards in all directions, their moustachioed "faces" (*mohar*) made of gold, silver, and bronze are partially covered by the yak-tail hair, that is understood to



protect these deities of valley settlements from attacks by the *sarāwanī* or *sāunī*, the violent multiple forms of Kali that inhabit the mountain peaks. In addition to faces, moustaches and hair, longhair palanquins are also informed by such bodily imagery as skirts and swords and even a cap to protect their hair from rain. At festivals, garlands are placed, as it were, around the deity's neck and head, and worshippers, temple officials and oracles alike treat the palanquin as the deity in person, addressing him as "*rājā*".

While box-type and longhair palanquins are anthropomorphically constructed as individuals, other symbolism suggests that longhair palanquins also represent an assembly of persons. In addition to the single, "authentic" bronze image of the deity, which according to origin myth the god spontaneously generated, other images mounted on the palanquin are conceived of as "copies" made by human hand and donated by royal and chiefly patrons. These secondary images are variously said to depict the deity's entourage of "ministers", "family", and "helpers",<sup>9</sup> and sometimes include the goddess Kali and the spirits of powerful dead temple officers. Thus, a palanquin constructs the deity collectively as a *rājā* and his court thus constituting a mobile political center, whenever the deity goes on tour. This is well illustrated by the long-hair palanquin of the hybrid deity Jakh of Janglik, whose mobile images include the regional god, Bashik Mahāsū, thirteen local "authentic forest powers" (*asli jangali śakti*) and a famous former *vazīr* called Razuwan. This overlapping of regional and local powers nicely illustrates the reconfiguration of categories, boundaries and relations associated with local resistance to a dominant regional genre.

### Divine Habitus

In addition to material form, mobility is also semiotically coded in the ritual practices of government by deity. Thus, Nags and Narayans are distinguished from Mahāsūs by their characteristic manner of moving. Because of the considerable weight of their palanquins, and the length and flexibility of their wooden carrying-poles, longhair gods are said to "dance" (*nācnā*), moving with a stately bounce and sway that at any moment can turn violent. Due to the shortness and stiffness of their carrying-poles, Mahāsūs, by contrast, do not dance. Instead, they display two alternative modes of movement. Their lightweight palanquins characteristically "shake" (*chernā*) in a more nervous manner, accompanied by the rattling and jingling of their metal fringes, and often

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<sup>9</sup> The terms I heard were: "ministers" (*mantrī*), "family" (*parivār*), "helpers" (*madadkarnevale*).

move with sudden and unexpected changes of direction. In a second characteristic manoeuvre, they move backwards and forwards in a linear movement called "the knife" (*churī*), which choreographs Mahāsū's projection of military power and memorializes his establishment of government by deity. Mahāsū's oracles also perform the same linear movement in trance, running backwards and forwards while ceremonially pressing the deity's sword into their stomach as the drummers play the 21-beat royal rhythm, *jhoritāl*, and the temple-bard declaims in Mahāsū's voice: "This is the rhythm my drummers played, when I killed the demon-king Kirmat Danu".

While no one I asked could explain this striking gesture of the reversed sword, it seems on reflection to give visual form to the mythic ambivalence of power already discussed, in particular to the classic Vaishnava figure of Mahāsū's transformation from demon-slaying conqueror to benevolent sovereign. Apparently generalizing this interpretation, the oracle of the god Lankura Bir of Kalpa performs the same gesture of reversal in using the hilt of Lankura's sword as an instrument of benediction. Another striking trope of reversal also uses the deity's sword, in this case to indicate an ontological transformation, when the oracle in possession runs the sharp edge of the sword three times across his tongue without causing any bleeding, in order to indicate the bodily metamorphosis caused by theistic subjection – i.e. he is now a god not a man and therefore cannot be wounded.<sup>10</sup> This brings us to ritual choreography.

### **Subject-formation: The Choreography of Oracular Consultation**

Having understood how wild powers are stabilized in the static form of objects and vehicles as local gods, we can now examine the latter's mobilization with persons in the ritual dance of oracular consultation – the means by which gods are made present and given voice as the rulers of *khūnds*. To do so, it is necessary to distinguish two closely related ways in which the otherwise invisible power of a god is constructed as the person of a sovereign by ritualized choreography and theistic subjection. I start with a child's view of ritual and its basic repertoire of roles, props, gestures and movements.

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<sup>10</sup> William Sax confirmed this interpretation in the ritual practices of neighbouring Garhwal (personal communication 2005). "In Nanda Devi's processions, the reversed sword shows the invincibility of the bearer: others pound on it with sticks and rocks, but he remains unhurt".

The most conspicuous children's game in Rohru is played with toy palanquins. On many occasions, in Rohru and Tukpa, I have watched boys making them from blocks of wood, sticks and off-cut bits of cloth, then imitating the characteristic body movements of oracular consultation (*pūchnā*). Significantly, playing with palanquins is not a girls' game, because women are excluded from the public rituals of government by deity. To be more precise, upper caste women play no part in temple-management or sacrifice – with one significant exception. In public rituals in Kinnaur, upper caste married women pass under the deity's palanquin with censors filled with smoking incense, to purify the god of any alien powers that might have attached themselves to his vehicle. The wives of subaltern-caste musicians, by contrast, are indispensable to Mahāsū's processional practice as singers and dancers (*devadāsī*).

Seizing an unusual opportunity, I once asked a group of ten or twelve boys, who were making toy palanquins, to stage a performance for my video camera of Rohru's most prestigious sacrificial rite, Śānt mela. Suddenly, it was a production number – "children's śānt". Fathers emerged from nowhere to act as directors, assigning children different roles as temple officials. Some acted as palanquin bearers, bouncing their toy palanquins up and down or making them bow to one side. Others played the part of the oracle, shaking wildly as if possessed or running back and forth, while holding a stick pressed into their stomach. Still others took the role of the deity's *vazīr*, and one adult even brought a sacrificial sheep. Then, with all the parts assigned, officials and palanquins were choreographed in a simplified version of the Śānt sacrifice. First, the toy palanquins were seated side by side in a ritual assembly (*khumbli*), then the children danced in a circle around them imitating the characteristic ritual trope of circumambulation (*phīr*). With this child's grammar of ritual habitus in mind, we can now turn to the thing itself.

### Theistic Subjection

It is monsoon time and Jabali Narayan, god and ruler of the Androethi territory (*ghori*), is halfway through his annual progress (*daurā*). The procession has stopped at a small village called Maktot, where a desperate husband is seeking the deity's help. Why has his wife suffered three miscarriages?

The drummers strike up a gentle four-four rhythm. The palanquin is lifted, and rests without moving on the shoulders of its bearers. As the pace of the drumming intensifies the oscillations become increasingly vigorous and the palanquin starts to bounce up and down. This means that the deity "has arisen" (*utthagayā*). Standing to one side of the palanquin, next to the

*vazīr*, the oracle lightly caresses the god's yak-tail hair with his fingertips as he concentrates his attention. As the bouncing of the palanquin gets increasingly wilder, its carrying poles creak and squeak in their wooden sockets. When it gets off balance, the *vazīr* reaches out a hand to steady it, being careful not to lend any particular direction to its spontaneous motion. The oracle is still holding the yak-tail hair. Suddenly, his head flips back, his cap flies off and his long hair is exposed. "Seizure [of the oracle] has occurred" (*pakrai ho gayā*). The god's power "has come to his head" (*sīr ā gayā*). With arms stretched down and hands clasped together in front of his belly, the oracle violently shakes his balled fists up and down as if wrestling some powerful animal by the tail. Now the *vazīr* addresses the god and poses him a question, which the god answers through his oracle's voice. Transformed by theistic subjection, the oracle's speech sounds tense and high-pitched, and his phrases come in rapid bursts. "Narayan is communicating through the oracle's shaking-speech", someone next to me explains. "He says there's been a sin. A goat must be sacrificed". After the oracle has delivered this pronouncement, he "counts" barley grains in order to divine the final outcome. When the session is over, the shaking stops, the oracle comes to his senses, and someone casually replaces his cap.

In consultations such as these, Pahari deities intervene in everyday life in order to determine the best course of action to take in all kinds of affairs. In personal matters, *deotās* diagnose misfortune, heal sickness, welcome brides, bless first-born males, settle legal disputes, or mete out punishment in the form of *doś*. In communal matters, *deotās* select new temple officials, formulate group policy, distribute grazing and irrigation rights, define territory, fix dates for festivals, issue invitations to other gods, engage in diplomatic relations, and formerly waged war with their magic. In ecological and cosmic matters, moreover, *deotās* control the weather (Nags in particular have power over rain), ensure the fertility of crops and flocks, protect against demonic disorder, maintain the presence of life-giving *śakti* in their domains, and predict the course of the coming year. All these decisions are determined on behalf of the community by oracular consultation – the means by which a god gives his orders as king by dancing with his temple officers.

The choreography of oracles and palanquins is the focal ritual of theistic governance. The palanquin and oracle each present a different embodiment of a god by giving him material form, voice and movement. Like a Himalayan version of the *deus ex machina*, the palanquin provides a material interface between an otherwise invisible ruler and his subjects. It is, quite literally, to adapt le Corbusier's definition of a house, a machine for ruling.

As with palanquins, there are different styles of oracular practice. Nags and Narayans from Kinnaur have single oracles, whereas Mahāsūs from Garhwal have several. All oracles, however, are understood to be "chosen by the *deotā*" from male members of the same lineage, according to a logic of

hereditary privilege inflected by theistic subjection. When an oracle is replaced or dies, he is succeeded by whichever one of his relatives has the ability to embody and give voice to the power of the local god. Recalling Rosalind Morris's (2002) account of the elision of "mediation and mediumship in Thailand's information age", one villager suggestively described the oracle to me as the deity's "radio station" (*akāśvānī*, lit. voice from space or heaven). Rethinking spirit-possession in constructivist terms as theistic subjection makes it possible to link the Foucauldian concept of subject-formation with which I began to the other concepts of material-formation and state-formation that my t(r)opological analysis of *rāj* includes.

First, I describe the ritual choreography of oracles and palanquins in oracular consultation, the means by which gods are constructed as sovereign subjects (i.e. *rājās*), and important communal decisions are made by "asking [the deity]" (*puchnā*). Oracular consultation is organized as an exchange of questions and answers between the *vazīr* and the deity. The latter is made ritually present in two kinds of body: a palanquin that dances and an oracle who speaks. In each of the *ghoris* of Rohru and Tukpa, the *vazīr* (also *mothvīn mandīr* or *mahāttas*) is the traditional leader of the *khūnd*, whose work as head of the temple committee consists in making sure that the deity's needs are satisfied and orders are carried out. Modeled on the chief minister of a human king, the deity's *vazīr* acts as the administrator of the divine *rājā*'s commands. It is not his job to determine policy, but rather to execute it, by organizing the *khūnd* to put policy into practice. To learn the divine sovereign's orders, the *vazīr* poses a question to the god, addressing him in his palanquin form, and the god gives his answer in visual and verbal signs – that is to say, through the movements of his palanquin and the trance-speech of the oracle.

The dance-moves of the palanquin are conventionally coded to convey the mood of the god, but are mute. The oracle embodies the deity's power and gives voice to his "orders" (*hukm*) using everyday Pahari vernacular speech peppered with conventional oracular tropes and some occasional Hindi.<sup>11</sup> In this way, decisions are made on behalf of the community by their divine ruler according to an oracular idiom of sovereignty. In Rohru and Tukpa, the process is conceptualized as a five-step chain of command linking:

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<sup>11</sup> In some parts of Kullu, especially the remote valley community of Malana, the oracle speaks in a divine language that no one else understands except the *vazīr*, who translates what he says into everyday speech. The authenticity of oracles is therefore assessed on the basis of whether they can speak this language of the gods. This was also the case I witnessed in Sangla, Kinnaur in 1988, where the *mahāttas* translated the divine speech of the oracle (*groksh*). On a more recent visit to Sangla, William Sax reported that only the oracle could understand the divine speech (personal communication 2006).

1) deity, 2) palanquin, 3) oracle, 4) *vazīr*, and 5) the *khūnd*. In his capacity as head of the temple committee, as well as traditional political leader and spokesman of the *khūnd*, the *vazīr* acts both as "the one who asks" (*pūchnevālā*), addressing particular questions to the deity-in-his-palanquin-form, and subsequently also as the "one-who-gives-the-orders" (*hukmdenevālā*) (see fig. 5).<sup>12</sup>

### Drumming and the mobilization of power

In all this, drumming is the crucial means of evoking the deity's power (*śakti*) in order to animate the oracle, palanquin, and palanquin bearers. In oracular consultation, drumming orchestrates different moments of multiple empowerment as the god's *śakti* is: 1) *embodied* by the palanquin bearers; 2) *voiced* in the oracle's shaking-speech; and 3) *choreographed* in the palanquin dance, whose conventional movements both reflect and perform the god's mood and wishes in a ritual language everyone understands.

When the deity hears the rhythm of the drumming, I was told, he wants to dance. Being a disembodied person, however, he can only do so by using the bodies of his palanquin bearers, through whose legs he is enabled to move. While this sounds like a partial possession of the bearers, no loss of consciousness is involved as in the case of the oracle, who typically cannot recall what he says. But frequent reference to the "automatic" [sic] movements of the palanquin suggests that its bearers at least relinquish their volition by allowing the palanquin to move of its own accord and lead them wherever it will in a spectacle of automatic dancing.

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<sup>12</sup> I learned of another more complex idiom of oracular consultation while visiting Rawain in 1988 and 1996, a western district of the former Garhwal kingdom not far to the east of Bashahr. Raj Mohan Ranga, *vazīr* of the Kaurava deity Karaṇ, described it as comprising "one deity and one oracle, but two *vazīrs* and two *khunds*" [see also Sax 2002]. The ritual roles resembled those in Rohru and Tukpa. The oracle is "the one who speaks" (*bolnevālā*) giving voice to the deity's wishes. As well as being "the one who asks" (*pūchnevālā*), the *vazīr* is also "the one who gives the orders" (*hukmdenevālā*), interpreting the deity's words to the people by issuing specific instructions and making sure they are carried out. Unlike in Rohru and Tukpa, however, there are two *vazīrs*, because the "warriors" (*khūnd* used in its individual sense) of the territory's dominant-caste community are conflictually organized in opposed moieties respectively named for the five Paṇḍavas and sixty Kauravas, heroes and villains of the *Mahābhārata* epic.



**Fig. 5: Consulting Jabali Narayan. (Photo: P. Sutherland)**

Everyone I consulted connected the spontaneous movements of the palanquin with the bodily perception of weight. Yogendra Chand, elected Member of the Legislative Assembly [M.L.A.] for Chaupal and son of the last reigning king of the former Jubbal state, gave a vivid description of "dancing" the deity.

The palanquin moves of its own accord, regardless of the conscious will of its bearers. Your job as a bearer is to respond and not drop it. Suddenly, it will become heavier on one side and you have to lower that shoulder, so the palanquin tips over and we think that the "palanquin is bowing" (*palgī jhuktā hai*). This is a sign of respect to another deity, a temple, a palace or a *rājā*. It is as if the deity moves the palanquin and you have to follow wherever it takes you -- around the temple, to a particular shrine or tree, through fields and streams, down embankments, over walls and rocky places. Your job is to keep up with the *deotā*, manage your footwork, not slip or let the palanquin fall.

The dancing of longhair palanquins combines four normal conventional moves -- resting, moving forward or backward, bouncing up and down (see fig. 6), and bowing to the side -- each of which conveys a sense of the deity's subjectivity by expressing his mood.<sup>13</sup> In a fifth less frequently used move, the palanquin seems to escape its bearers' control

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<sup>13</sup> See Gell (1980).

as it keels over on its side and lies on the ground, its skirts in disarray. The meaning of this depends on context. The same gesture, when violently performed, indicates the god's extreme displeasure, but when gently executed allows the deity's power to be transferred to a recumbent patient in an act of healing. The palanquin is also laid on its side to enable a god to recharge his power, whenever he periodically returns to his mountain-lake birthplace, where his serpent-goddess (*nāgini*) mother dwells.

### **The Paradox of the Sovereign Subject**

Foucault's social explanation of subject-formation by the internalization of norms and disciplines is initially useful to conceptualize the collective aspect of west Himalayan theistic subjection. Throughout the western Himalaya, social order is traditionally maintained by the threat that everyone in a *ghori* is liable to possession by the power of the local deity, if they incur his displeasure. The latter is strikingly exemplified in an extraordinary epidemic of mass possession among the women of Shil village reported by Emerson (Ibbetson, MacLagan & Rose 1919: 310), as well as in the quotidian temple rituals of Mahāsū, which normally involve the possession of multiple oracles. Individualistic or psychological conceptions of possession are of little help in theorizing such cases of mass theistic subjection. Yet social conceptions of collective subjectivity are similarly misleading in attempting to theorize the simultaneous lodging of theistic power in sites other than human, namely: objects, animals, food, palanquins, buildings, places, songs, rhythms, or drums, that is central to the performance of government by deity. Moreover, Foucault's relational model of power is inadequate to convey the substantialist nature of indigenous conceptions of *śakti*. It is precisely in the inter-media flow of power between human and non-human sites, however, that our peculiar object of study is formed: the subjectivity of theistic sovereigns. How then can we conceptualize a mode of subjection that involves not only human subjects and their divine rulers, but also the objects of material culture and the natural environment? What relation is thereby defined between subjectivity and objectivity?

To the extent that the presence of a god as a sovereign agent may be understood as a ritual effect, performed by the coordinated interaction of different ritual arts – theistic subjection (i.e. spirit-possession), trance-speech, palanquin movements, drumming, and so on – it is necessary to recognize the circularity involved in the process. In government by deity,





Fig. 6: Jabali Narayan Dances. (Photo: P. Sutherland)

the subjectivity of the sovereign is apparently constructed in and by the paradox of self-subjection – that is to say, the deity as sovereign is simultaneously presented as both subject of power and object of subjection. This personal doubling is both visualized and ritually enacted. Unmarked power (*śakti*) is made ritually available for political practice in the deity's dual embodiment in material and human forms – in particular, the palanquin and oracle.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the palanquin objectifies the theistic sovereign as agent – the subject of power, as it physically dominates its bearers, moving them apparently automatically where it will. But the sovereign power so embodied is mute, without political subjectivity. Filling this absence, on the other hand, the oracle enacts the subjectivity of the sovereign by giving him voice. But the oracle can only do so by becoming a patient – that is to say, by being the object of subjection, subjected to power, a mere medium. In this way, the subjectivity of the god as ruler is produced by a trope of splitting that seems to avoid the paradox of self-subjection. Power expresses itself as both agent and patient – simultaneously embodied as both subject and object of power. Theistic sovereignty is thus internally constructed by a figure of reversal, in which supreme power is subjected to itself as ritual other.

This simultaneous conjunction of sovereignty and subjection in the ritual performance of the ruler's subjectivity presents a striking variant to Butler's tropology of subject-formation. If subjectivity is produced by subordination to power, as Foucault and Butler propose, what kind of a subject is the sovereign? Instead of the discursive figure of the subject "turning against itself" to produce the interiority of individual subjectivity, west Himalayan origin myths describe the formation of theistic sovereigns by a double turn – the reversal of reversal. Power is initially turned back on itself to order its original wildness, when introjected into social space as a god. Subsequently, it is projected (often violently) outward in a ritual regime of exterior forms and performance that makes the god a figure of collective subjectivity – the community's externalized icon of identity, agency, and power. Far from being the symbol of the Hindu essences of piety and superstition as colonial authors argued, the figure of the theistic sovereign in Rohru turns out to be the product and instrument of collective agency. That is to say, the community actively constructs its sovereignty in divine terms (here we are close to Durkheim) and, as we shall see, manages its foreign relations in similar terms, through ritual practices of divine action. A far cry from the orientalist image of Hindu India as "priest ridden", "mired in

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<sup>14</sup> The deity takes material form in many ritual objects other than the palanquin. The mace and sword are especially important manifestations of his power.

superstition" and therefore incapable of rational world-ordering agency, we find in Rohru that the ritual effect of theistic sovereignty exemplifies and performs the circular process of creativity, in which groups become historical political agents as subjects of their own self-objectification (and here we are closer to Marx).

Thus far, we have learned that local forms of theistic sovereignty are constructed as the ordering of wild power by kingship – that is to say, by mythico-ritual tropes such as the conquest of demons and the domestication of gods. But what orders the power of royal gods so constructed, given that their local sovereignty is apparently self-legitimizing? In particular, what regulates their external relations with each other? By way of conclusion, I answer this question by sketching the construction of three competing modes of theistic sovereignty, all associated with inter- or trans-local modes of political incorporation.

### **State-Formation and the Scale of Divine Kingships**

Historians of the Indian state, who have sought to explain how peasant groups were incorporated in Hindu kingdoms, have persistently been hampered by their use of essentialist epistemologies. Thus, post-Independence accounts by Dumont, Heestermann, and Stein, according to Inden (1990: 211-2), echo the views of colonial authors in "see[ing] divine kingship" in pathological terms as "a symptom of India's deficient political institutions" – the "victim" of irreconcilable oppositions between transcendent cultural values and immanent social forms.

Dumont treats it as a symptom of the systematic subjection of the political and economic to transcendent social and religious values...Heestermann looks at it as a symptom of India's foredoomed efforts to mediate between a transcendent value of renunciation and its opposite, a fragmented society of selfish local leaders. Finally, Stein sees it as the symptom of a transcendent cultural or ritual unity which is at odds with a segmented, local peasant society (Inden 1990: 211-2).

The effect of such an essentialist approach was to render invisible the constructive role of agency in state-formation – especially ritual agency. One particular symptom (to continue the pathological trope) of this dichotomizing view in accounts of Hindu kingship by Stein, Geertz, and Dirks, is the characteristic opposition between ritual and politics (or culture and power). Inden's insightful summary of Stein's analysis of the South Indian state (ibid: 206-211) is readily applicable to the other two authors, namely that unity and authority were thought to be differently constructed at different "levels" of the state, namely: "theatrically" by "ritual sovereignty" (i.e. royal patronage) at the center and

"pragmatically" by "chiefly authority" (i.e. caste and kinship) at the periphery. This opposition is problematic, argues Inden:

It is as though there were gods worshipped and rites performed *only* at the royal capital and that these were all symbolically unifying, while political calculation and economic accumulation took place *only* at the local level, and that perceptions of self or communal interest brought about real coalitions there (ibid: 209) [my emphasis].

This is clearly not the case in Pahari polity, where gods and rituals construct all levels of political organization. As we have already seen, it is precisely practices of divinity and kingship, not essences of caste and kinship, that constitute and unify local rural polities in the western Himalayas. In what follows, I show that the same ritual processes also shape inter- and trans-local political formations. The evidence of contemporary Pahari religion shows that the ritual idiom of government by deity, with its choreography of oracles and palanquins, constructs different forms of "divine kingship" at *all* levels of traditional political organization.<sup>15</sup> In west Himalayan Hindu polity, I propose, we have divine kingship all the way down from the top or, perhaps to put it more pointedly, all the way up from bottom.

Expanding the geographical scale but keeping the metaphor of embodiment as my focus, in this final section I describe three variants of divine kingship and theistic sovereignty, each associated with the ritual incorporation of *khūnds* at sacrificial assemblies in superordinate political formations, to wit: the local circle of allies, the interlocal Tikaral confederacy, and the Bashahr kingdom. In each case, the figure of the goddess Kali/Durga orders the incorporation of *khūnds* and their gods by ritual tropes of spatial and gender reversal to constitute a scale of divine kingships with varying forms of theistic sovereignty.

### **Egalitarian Kingship and Shared or Shifting Sovereignty**

Interaction among *khūnds* and their gods is governed by an egalitarian idiom of shared or shifting sovereignty. In Rohru and Tukpa, relations between local peasant communities are ordered by two kinds of ritual

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<sup>15</sup> Clearly both ritual and politics operate at every level of spatial organization. But historical evidence of ritual patronage beyond the royal center is hard to come by, given that surviving textual sources were commissioned by kings and generally represent a view from above. One important exception cited by Inden (1990:220, n.7) is the evidence of the agency of "rural citizenries" inscribed in the "charters of the Karnataka during the Rashtrakuta and Chola imperial formations (eighth to thirteenth centuries...)", which give details of the assemblies of rural and urban caste associations.

t(r)opology: 1) reciprocal visiting every three to six years among *khūnds*, whose gods are related by particularizing metaphors of "brotherhood" or "friendship" and 2) by totalizing sacrificial assemblies held once every 25 and 60 years by each and every *khūnd* in the area, to which all beings in a local world are invited – gods, demons, and ancestors, as well as brothers, friends and affines. The royal function of sacrificial patronage performed by gods at such events exemplifies the collaborative, competitive, and sometimes combative, culture of autonomy among *khūnds* in Rohru.<sup>16</sup> Equality is never a social or political given; always already a precarious achievement, it has to be ritually made and remade. This agonistic process is evident in the performance of Rohru's most prestigious sacrifice, *śānt mela* (lit. peace festival), during which equality is potentially put at risk by, but simultaneously rescued from, the tendency of patronage to fashion hierarchical relations.

The performance of *Śānt* threatens to distort the interlocal field of equality among peers by causing an uneven distribution of cultural capital. The extension of hospitality to allied *khūnds* and Brahman clients creates a centralized network of prestation and indebtedness, within which sacrificial patrons are positioned as *primus inter pares*. To counteract this disequilibrating potential, the performance of *Śānt* is so organized to insure that the royal function of sacrificial patron circulates equally among peers, thus preventing any localized accumulation of symbolic power. Every *khūnd* is a king. This is achieved by complementary strategies of sharing based on displacement and timing.

During the three-day duration of the festival, the prestigious function of "sacrificial patron" (*ajmān*) is made to circulate among all participants (both host and guests) by sharing the task of providing the numerous sacrificial victims. In addition, at a larger calendrical time-scale, the site of performance is made to migrate from the place of one *khūnd* to another, thereby insuring that no single community becomes a permanent center of patronage. Thus, *Śānt* maintains equality among peers by constructing a shared or shifting form of sovereignty whose signature is the ritual body of the goddess.

The customary construction at *Śānt* of a *maṇḍala* to the goddess Kali/Durga in the temple-courtyard produces a characteristically Hindu version of the body politic metaphor, in which peace (*śānt*) among agents in a local world is performed by the ritual interaction of gods, caste communities, affines, ancestors, and demons. Upon arrival, the vehicles of

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<sup>16</sup> In neighboring districts such as Tukpa in Kinnaur, the *khūnds* of Rohru are notorious for their violent and boastful culture of interlocal feuding (*boirāla*), whose celebration in innumerable narrative songs is clearly not an "orientalist construction".

invited gods are seated around the *maṇḍala* in an "assembly" (*khumbli*) in positions that are spatially ordered by caste – the pitchers of the Brahman priestly gods to the east; the palanquins of Khash-Rajput royal deities to the south. This gathering of gods around a single female center gives visual and dramatic form to the classic *Devīmahātmya* narrative of the creation of the goddess Durga's body from the aggregated powers of the thirty-three gods of Indralok (heaven). In a similar trope of gender and number inversion, the twin forms of the Hindu goddess are spatially counterposed to form cosmological horizons, that is to say: the multiple/malevolent Kalis that dwell in the peripheral mountain-top wilderness (*parbat*) are unified and transformed in the singular/benevolent Durga evoked at the settlement center. In this composite female figure of theistic sovereignty formed by the gathering of gods and the transfiguration of the goddess, interlocal political order is metaphorically enacted at *Śānt* as the pacification of disordering entities from outside (*bahār*) – local Kalis, demons (*rākaṣ*), ghosts (*bhūt-pret*) and forest-powers (*janḡalī śaktis*).



Fig. 7: The ritual t(r)ope of encounter (*milin*) (Photo: P. Sutherland).

Under this world-ordering sign of "pacification" (*śānt karnā*), alliances between local gods are ritually renewed by dancing the protocol of encounter called *milin* (lit. meeting). In a melee of drummers, temple-

officers, trumpeters, and "warriors" wielding axes, swords and umbrellas, palanquins and their bearers seek out allies, jostle for position, move alongside each other, bow sideways, and touch heads together in a "brotherly" gesture of greeting. As they do so, their oracles enact an ambivalent diplomatic ritual involving another t(r)ope of sword-reversal.

The potential violence of sovereignty is deferred, but not entirely disavowed, as the two oracles embrace each other in an ambiguous gesture of negated threat. Figure 7 shows the two oracles embracing between their respective gods, each man holding his deity's sword of authority clasped in his right hand behind his counterpart's back.

### Elective Kingship and Embodied Sovereignty

If the figure of the goddess Kali/Durga at Śānt embodies the shared or shifting sovereignty of equality among *khūnds* and their "kings", the Pabīn sacrifice marks the emergence of hierarchy in an elective form of kingship.

Both Burton Stein (1983) and Nicholas Dirks (1987) have proposed that royal patronage was constitutive of hierarchy in medieval south Indian "sacred kingship", which, they argue, replaced the Vedic institution of the "sacred king". The sacrificial embodiment of divine power by the Vedic king in the *rājasūya*, *abhiṣeka* and *aśvamedha* rituals<sup>17</sup> was, they suggest, supplanted by a *bhakti* (devotional) discourse of enactment and non-violent worship (*pūjā*). In the latter, the king deployed the sovereignty of his tutelary god in ritual acts of patronage and prestation by constructing exemplary temples and granting land to Brahmans to worship the royal deity beyond the capital. In the process, though Stein does not express it as such, the king took ritual possession of space as domain by promoting theological change. This perhaps oversimplified view of historical change in south Indian polity is problematized by comparison with the data from Bashahr, where neither blood sacrifice was displaced by *pūjā*, nor embodiment by enactment. The primary difference on which I focus is the t(r)opology of state-formation. Pahari ritual memory presents an alternative history of divine kingship as viewed from below, in which the creation of translocal forms of sovereignty was not limited to the top-down creation of networks of clientage by kings, but also involved the ritual construction of translocal political formations from below. This

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<sup>17</sup> The *rājasūya* was the royal ritual of inauguration involving sacrifice and anointing. *Abhiṣeka* refers to any ritual that involves the consecration of an image, temple or person. The *aśvamedha* was the year-long Vedic horse-sacrifice, by means of which a king proclaimed his paramountcy by conquering the quarters.

process is evident in the gathering of *khūnds* and their divine rulers at sacrificial assemblies at all levels of political organization in the state.

My second sacrificial assembly, *pabīn* sacrifice, displays the emergence of royal hierarchy in the sovereign figure of the so-called *gana* of Tikaral. According to Sir Herbert Emerson (colonial administrator of the Bashahr kingdom, resident of Rohru and Tukpa, and amateur ethnographer of Pahari religion in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the *gana* was a male child installed as a "proto-king" whose reign lasted just a few years until he reached the "age of reason", when another *gana* had to be chosen. The *gana* also acted as an oracle, determining policy by divination, and as such served as the superordinate sovereign of the Kanait confederacy of the five *khūnds* of Tikaral – each locally governed by its own Nag or serpent-god. From what Emerson tells us, the *gana*'s most important function was to preside as sacrificial patron over the now-defunct sacrifice to Kali at Pabīn.

According to my fieldwork, Pabīn was last enacted more than one hundred years ago at its usual site, the forest-cave of the demon Cisralu. The latter is a residual form of the demon-king Kirmat Danu,<sup>18</sup> whose foundational "rule by demon" (*rākaṣ kā rāj*) was displaced by Mahāsū's epochal establishment of government by deity throughout the region. The figure of the *gana* apparently embodied the aggregated power of the five local gods of Tikaral in a non-egalitarian form of translocal polity, in which sovereignty was ritually constructed at the Pabīn festival as a scale of powers involving not only the *gana*, but also the demon Cisralu and the goddess Kali. In another ritual trope of reversal, the theistic sovereignty of the *gana*, as superordinate ruler of settled space, was periodically reordered in the forest at Pabīn by a heteroprax sacrifice offered to the superior powers of the wilderness, namely the anthropophagous couple of the cave-dwelling demon-king and the mountain-top goddess.<sup>19</sup>

According to Emerson, the *gana* was selected from a group of candidates by the agency of the five gods of Tikaral, and his body was imbued with their collective power in a ritual that blurs Stein's distinction

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<sup>18</sup> The deity, Mahasu, is said to have gained regional paramountcy by defeating the incumbent demon-king Kirmat Danu. The latter's power, according to the origin myth still told at Mahasu's cult center, Hanol, was destroyed when the demon was hacked to pieces. But in an alternative version of the story, which is also still current on the periphery of Mahasu country in Rohru, three of the pieces, the tongue, the tail and the heart escaped the site of dismemberment and became powerful demons in their own right. The heart was reincarnated as the demon, Cisralu (see Ibbetson, MacLagan and Rose 1919: 304-7 and Sutherland 1998: 330).

<sup>19</sup> Following the Frazerian theme of sacrificial kingship, Emerson (n.d.: ch.12) argued that the retiring *gana* may have been the victim offered in Kali's cauldron at the demon's cave.



between the embodied sovereignty of the sacred king and the enacted sovereignty of sacred kingship.

The *gana* presents a third alternative – an oracular form of elected kingship. While the "Vedic" idiom of ritual embodiment is retained, the ontological distinction between the ruler and his god in Stein's notion of sacred kingship is collapsed in the habitus of theistic subjection that characterizes government by deity. In the Tikaral confederacy, sovereignty was doubly constituted by theistic election and multiple theistic embodiment. The boy appointed as *gana* was jointly elected by the five confederate gods as their king (*rājā*),<sup>20</sup> and their collective powers (*śakti*) were transferred to his human body and person by their respective oracles. "Each of the five diviners", in trance, "lays the standard of his deity – usually a sword or dagger – on the head, hands and other parts of the boy's body" (Emerson n.d.: 12,4). Emerson quotes the following local view: "The *gana* is chosen by the gods and is endowed by them with divine powers. He is therefore both a god and a *rājā*" (ibid).

This incorporation of multiple powers by the *gana* recalls Inden's (1978:46) analysis of the royal rite of anointing (*abhiṣeka*) described in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*. In that Vedic rite, the king was anointed with the essences of the four castes (*varṇas*), whose representatives were arranged around the throne at the cardinal points. Thus, the king became the cosmic Puruṣa, by whose sacrificial dismemberment the constituent parts of the world (including the four castes) were originally created. In recombining the latter's dismembered limbs [i.e. the four *varṇas*], the *abhiṣeka* ritual constructed the king as the quintessence [i.e. fifth element] of the body politic in a centripetal movement of empowerment that reversed time and centered the world in his sovereign person.

The incorporation of the constituencies of a polity in its sovereign's body is explicit in the consecration of the *gana*. The *śakti* of the five gods of Tikaral is transmitted to all parts of the infant's body – not just to the head as in the *abhiṣeka*. In this case, however, it is the divine powers of local polities not castes (i.e. *khūnds* not *varṇas*) that were incorporated in the *gana*/king in a ritual trope that reverses Puruṣa's dismemberment in a masculine version of Durga's birth by aggregation.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Emerson (n.d.: ch.12), the candidates were arranged in a line, then the palanquins of the five gods moved along the line and selected their choice by bowing towards one of the boys. When the same boy had been chosen three times by all the gods, the decision was considered binding.

### Dynastic Kingship and Assembled Sovereignty

We can now apply the lessons learned from government by deity and the *gana* to reconceptualize divine kingship in its usual Hindu sense as the theological construction of a human king.

As elsewhere in India, the kings of Bashahr were conceptualized as divinely appointed "ministers" (*vazīr*) of the state/dynastic deity, in this case the goddess Bhimakali. This status as ministers of a theistic sovereign was inherited from the legendary first king, Aniruddh, who, according to the royal foundation myth (a local version of a well-known Puranic narrative),<sup>21</sup> was anointed by Bhimakali after gaining control of the so-called six Khunts by defeating their ruler, the incumbent demon-king, Banasur. As Aniruddh was Krishna's nephew, the divinity of the Bashahr kings was constructed by the narrative trope of descent from a god. Thus far, we are on familiar Indic terrain.

What makes the Bashahr case unusual and instructive is the participation of local gods in constructing the divinity of the king at Dasara – the annual royal assembly and sacrifice. As in neighbouring Kullu, the Dasara ritual at the ceremonial capital of the former Bashahr kingdom involves a double congregation of both human and divine subjects. The hundred local gods that are said to assemble in Kullu every year are the focus of an international tourist attraction for Himachal. By comparison, the Bashahr Dasara is a local affair attended by only a handful of deities. In both cases, however, the routes traced by gods and their retainers processing from rural temples to the former royal capital reveal the large-scale spatial construction of kingship in each state. To understand this, it is necessary to follow indigenous conceptions of divine power (*śakti*) as collective agency, already discussed. In charting the geography of *śakti* defined by the processional movements of gods that come to Dasara, it is evident that the theistic sovereignty of the Bashahr king was spatially constructed by the same ritual t(ro)pe of gathering, we have already seen at Śānt and in the figure of the *gana*. Thus, the power of the king is measured by the number of local gods that assemble at Sarahan, and the sovereignty embodied in the state-goddess Bhimkali is the performative effect of the aggregation of their multiple male powers at her temple. Once again, as we have already seen, power comes from

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<sup>21</sup> The dominant royal foundation myth associates the establishment of a second royal capital in Sarahan with the rise of a chiefly dynasty based in their original seat, Kamru. It does so by linking the origin myth of the Kamru deity, Bhadrinarayan, to the all-India Puranic myth of Banasura and Vicitralekha through the bridging device of the god Aniruddh, who figures in both the Banasura and Bhadrinarayan narratives.

outside and sovereignty is ritually constructed at a superordinate center by reversal – in this case of its gender, number and location.

Formerly "in the era of kings", 123 "ordinary" and "great" deities assembled at the state ceremonial capital, Sarahan, for Dasara – deities from all parts of the kingdom that embodied the powers of its various constituent groups and their domains (mainly *ghoris* and *parganās*). Each god was accompanied by the local leaders and armed warriors of a *khūnd*. On arrival at the capital, the gods congregated at the Bhimakali temple, the *khūnds* massed to form the royal army, and the local leaders convened in the royal darbar, each bringing with them the king's share of the grain-heap – i.e. tax in kind. While this convergence of symbolic, military and economic capital might be seen as evidence of subjection to the king, I suggest that it also demonstrates that the power and authority of the king was dependent on, and actively produced by, the acquiescence and agency of his subjects.

Nowadays, in contrast to the near-by Kullu festival which is subsidized by the state (see Daniela Berti in this volume), Sarahan Dasara is attended by a mere ten local gods. But despite these much-reduced numbers, the choreography of the gods I witnessed there, in 1988 and 1994, gives a good idea of the former political significance of ritual. In particular, it showed the complex construction of divine kingship in several ways: in the parallel agency of gods and human leaders; in the mutual agency of ruler and ruled; in the pervasive symbolism of kingship at all levels of political organization; and in the ritual embodiment of the goddess Bhimakali.

As rural parties converge on Sarahan, traveling on foot across mountainous terrain, the parallel agency of gods and humans is plain to see. The gods in their palanquins clearly embody the local sovereignty of the peasant communities that transport them. While the latter no longer bear arms or bring taxes, the construction of divine kingship at Dasara is evident in the joint ritual action of local gods and leaders. On arrival at Sarahan, each god goes directly to the Bhimakali temple to acknowledge his allegiance to the state/dynastic goddess, then, after the son of the last reigning king of Bashahr has arrived in his motorcade and worshipped the goddess, the rural leaders renew their allegiance to the king in the palace. A four-hour fire-sacrifice is performed to the accompaniment of drumming to evoke the power of the goddess, then an assembly of local gods in palanquins is convened to escort the chariot of the state-god, Raghunath, (Bhimakali's champion or *bīr*) in a grand procession celebrating Rama's triumphant return to Ayodhya.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The two-inch high gold image of Raghunath is said to be a trophy of war, captured from the neighbouring Kullu kings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Viewed from afar, in spatio-temporal terms, the power at the center is annually renewed by the ritual convergence of local groups and gods from the periphery. While the power of royal patronage was clearly once important in producing this assembly of clients, it is also evident that the king's wealth and authority were dependent on the mutual consent of local groups to renew their loyalty, pay their taxes, and contribute fighting men to the army. If these were withdrawn, as they were in the revolt of 1859,<sup>23</sup> the king would have neither wealth nor might.

Much of the t(r)opology of *rāj* performed at the Sarahan Dasara belongs to the familiar legacy of brahmanical discourse found throughout India – the legend of Banasur, the Navaratra festival, the royal darbar, and the reference to Rama. What distinguishes this Pahari version of the rite is the indigenous idiom of government by deity. All of the latter's characteristic ritual t(r)opes reappear in the Sarahan performance. The dramatis personae of *deotās*, palanquins and oracles, the choreographic repertoire of consultation, encounter, procession and assembly, and the symbolic geometries of built form and movement constitute a set of conventional procedures for ordering power among rulers and ruled in theistic terms of kingship and sovereignty – not only in local polities and the Tikaral confederacy, but also in the former kingdom of Bashahr. In particular, the establishment of the royal Bhimakali temple reproduces the characteristic set of temple officers and techniques we have already described for *khūnds*, according to which an oracle (*goksh* in Kinnauri) formerly enabled the king of Bashahr to determine policy by consulting the state/dynastic goddess.

Dispersed throughout a west Himalayan regional polity at every scale of political organization, these t(r)opes may be understood as the ritual equivalent of a political constitution, whose guiding principles are embodied in practice rather than being textualized as law. If this is the case, we shall have to rethink those structuralist paradigms reviewed above, which conceptualize the Hindu state in oppositional terms of theatrical ritual and real power, and think instead in performative terms

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<sup>23</sup> The *Himachal Pradesh District Gazetteer: Kinnaur* (1971: 62-3) gives the following account of the revolt. "In 1859 there was an insurrection in the state headed by Fateh Singh, an illegitimate brother of the *rājā*. It is generally alluded to as the *dum*. *Dum* is a name given to any popular combination raised for the redress of special grievances, or for enforcing claims to certain rights. It was thus a public demonstration of discontent against the ruler. The method followed for action appeared to be for the malcontents to leave their fields uncultivated till their grievances were redressed. They seldom resorted to violence, being content with the assurance that the apprehension of loss of revenue owing to the general abandonment of cultivation would induce the state officials to come to terms with them as soon as possible".

of a spatial field of "graduated sovereignties".<sup>24</sup> In such a field, both gods and humans are made rulers by the same repertoire of ritual t(r)opes, chief among which kingship signifies the world-forming and world-maintaining power of agency.

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<sup>24</sup> I am adapting a concept used by Aihwa Ong in *Flexible Citizenship* (1999: 215) to describe a very different historical context: the uneven constitution of authority, citizenship and territory in the neo-liberal biopolitics of Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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