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§ 1. Introductory remarks

The English term “ordeal,” deriving from Proto-Germanic **uz-dailjam* (lit. ‘that which is dealt out [by the gods]’, namely, ‘God’s judgment’), originated in the early Middle Ages (Old English *ordēl*) to designate an ancient Germanic mode of trial consisting of some arduous and/or injurious tests, which a person charged with guilt might be occasionally forced to undergo and whose result was believed to determine that person’s guilt or innocence by immediate judgment of the deity. Ordeals performed by divination, physical test, or combat were regarded by many traditional societies of the past as valid substitutes for judicial activity when human justice was, for some reason, unable to settle a case. At the root of all types of judicial ordeals is the belief that the result of the trial undergone by the person(s) accused will reflect the final verdict of some divine or supernatural being(s) believed to preside over law and truth. In this particular meaning of the term an ordeal, despite its pertaining by definition to the numinous sphere, is conceived as a sacred judicial practice that pursues worldly aims alien to the mystic experience.

Yet there also exists a second meaning of the term — a meaning that pertains more directly to the sphere of mystic experience. In this case the ordeal is conceived as a bloody, painful or, hazardous *religious* practice. Within theistic cults (e.g. some currents of Hinduism), such experiences aim at purifying the soul of the penitent who practices self-torture to enter an ecstatic communion with his or her elect deity. Within shamanistic cults, on the other hand, the goal of the ordeal usually consists in the overcoming of the profane condition by a sacred specialist who may be variously a shaman, a medium/diviner, or a healer/medicine-man. Whereas in the former case the ordeal is celebrated in fulfilment of a vow to acquire the favours of a personal divinity, in the latter it is undertaken as a rite of passage performed to authenticate

a change in sensibility in both the body and soul of a tribal sacred specialist. In either case the extreme test represents a moment of initiation to a new and more direct relationship with the divine, this relationship being reflected in a person's ability to bear his/her own ritual agony while in a state of ecstasy.

In both modes of ecstatic experience achieved through endurance of pain, it is of the utmost importance that the performer passes through the ordeal unharmed. As in the case of judicial trials, the aim of votive and shamanistic ordeals is not reached unless the votary's or the shaman's immunity from the consequences of the self-mortification of his or her body is exhibited in public. Be they taken by walking on hot coals, handling red-hot materials, being swung or rotated from a pole by hooks imbedded in one's flesh, piercing one's own flesh with skewers, lying on a board studded with iron nails, or swinging on a seat of thorns, the ultimate goal of all religious tests appear to be one and the same: to show the bystanders the penitent or the shaman is insensitive to bodily torments, wounds, loss of blood, burning heat, etc.

The objective of all kinds of religious self-torture is to achieve analgesia, that is to say, the absence of pain as a transcendent spiritual experience. In Mircea Eliade's opinion, religious self-torture would have originated as an elaboration of the archaic concept of "initiatory death."¹ According to this scholar, through mortifications voluntarily inflicted upon the body, tribal shamans and the adepts of theistic cults would express their resolve to transform their own sensibility from the "profane" to the "mystical." The practitioner's surrender to the power of a deity or spirit by means of acts of ritual self-torture, of *passiones* (the opposite of "actions" in relation to human self)² making him or her pitiful in the eyes of that deity or spirit, are believed to result in his or her transcending the human condition and entering a different spiritual realm in which a direct contact with divine powers is deemed possible. The stretching of the boundaries of one's endurance, control, and ultimately conquest of pain by the performance of body self-mortification is perceived as an overcoming of the penitent's or the shaman's spiritual condition anterior to the celebration of the ordeal and, therefore, as the most evident sign, along with the trance, of a ritual self-transformation achieved through patience — kind of an "initiation in progress," here-and-now. As in a shaman's initiatory ordeal, the body self-mortification typifying

¹ M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (trans. P. Mairet, London: Harvill Press, 1960), 85-87, 207-09. Scarification, circumcision, penile subincision, the knocking out of one or more incisors, etc. are some among the rites of "initiatory death" that are mentioned in this connection in Eliade's works.

² Cf. G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 151. This author notes that English has no word to indicate an opposite of "actions" in relation to human self. "Passion" in the sense of suffering is obsolete in current English usage.

Hindu devotional ordeals, if reiterated over several years, is believed by Hindu believers to result in the acquisition of permanent extraordinary skills.

In South Asia one notices the co-presence of the three traditional types of ordeals: judicial, devotional, shamanistic. Skipping the discussion of judicial ordeals,³ this paper is focused on the assessment of both the formal and substantial analogies between the two other modes of “divine judgment” that have been historically practiced by some populations of central, eastern and southern India. I may anticipate that the most serious problem raised by the application of Eliade’s interpretative scheme to Indian religious ordeals consists in the fact that shamanistic religions of tribal India retain but scarce and confused survivals of initiatory trials typologically comparable to those which, conversely, form an essential aspect of the rites of passage common in other shamanistic traditions worldwide. It follows that, at least so far as South Asia is concerned, the thesis according to which the complex of tribal-cum-Hindu religious ordeals would have evolved from that of prehistoric initiatory tests is unverifiable. Further complicating the general picture stands the fact that virtually every type of religious ordeal known to Indian tribal populations has a formal equivalent in the ambit of this or that Hindu popular cult, for which reason, and in the absence of some more definite historical evidence, it cannot even be proved that ordeals performed in honour of Śiva, of the Great Goddess, or of any other Hindu deity evolved out of some older shamanistic rituals of self-torture. Nevertheless, since a common background of ritual symbols and techniques underlies both Hindu and tribal religious ordeals at large, I will consider the two classes of rituals as two diverse but convergent expressions of one archaic religio-cultural complex of central, eastern and southern India. Hence, in the process of discussing Hindu devotional or votive ordeals, I will simultaneously discuss their parallels in shamanistic cultures of Middle India. In the conclusive section of this paper (§ 7), I will also discuss other parallels among Hindu mythic archetypes.

§ 2. The Vedic pole-climbing rite, *yūpārohaṇa*

Ascent of and/or suspension on and/or revolution around a pole are typical initiatory themes recurring in many shamanistic religions of both the Old and New World. Famous in this connection is the Sun Dance, an annual “death-and-rebirth” ceremony that used to be observed in the past by different North American Indian tribes. The men who had vowed to perform this

³ Referred to in Sanskrit *Dharmaśāstra* literature. For example, *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 8. 114-16 mentions two types of judicial ordeals taken with the aim of resolving a dispute when a person stands accused and the judge is unable to discern the truth: the one by carrying fire, the other by staying submerged in water.

rite of self-mortification were hung to a pole by a strap with suspension skewers driven through their breast or shoulders and were subsequently made to revolve around the pole by other people participating in the ceremony.

Rites of this sort are still today observed in South Asia, particularly in Bengal and the Deccan. They can variously consist in climbing to the top of a sacred pole or ladder, in dangling in the air while being suspended from a long beam by iron hooks embedded in one's back or, in a variant form of the latter ritual, in hanging from a long bamboo crosspiece fixed horizontally across the top of a tall standing pole and then undertaking a "centrifugal flight" test by the rapid rotation of the revolving crosspiece by people below using a rope. The protagonists of such a display of penitential rigor and physical prowess are generally people from the lowest castes or outcastes who have made a vow to this effect to Śiva or some Hindu goddess, or else tribal or semi-tribal people who, in any event, undergo the ordeal to propitiate some male or female deity assimilated to either Śiva or the Great Goddess. These rites usually take place during, or close to, the celebrations of the Hindu New Year, that is, in the period of the vernal equinox (Sanskrit *viṣuvat*), which heralds the arrival of the scorching Indian summer.

Before describing and analyzing this class of religious ordeals more thoroughly, I would like to draw attention to a Vedic rite of ascension which, though it cannot be defined as an 'ordeal,' and even less so a 'devotional' one, offers numerous parallels to the Hindu and tribal rites of ascension that will be discussed in the next section of this article (§ 3).

There is a Vedic rite called *yūpārohaṇa* ('ascent of the sacrificial post'),⁴ part of the *śrauta* ritual *vājapeya* ('drink of strength'), where the sacrificer and his wife have to climb up the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) with the aid of a wooden ladder propped up against it. First, the sacrificer asks his wife to ascend to 'heaven' (Sanskrit *sva*, *suva*)⁵ together with him. The wife responds

⁴ On the rituals performed at the *vājapeya* sacrifice see J. Eggeling, trans., *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa According to the Text of the Mādhyandina School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882-1900), 3: 1-41; A.B. Keith, trans., *The Veda of the Black Yajus School Entitled Taittirīya Saṁhita* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1: CVIII-CXI, 107-08; P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930-62), 2: 1206-12; R. Petazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (trans. H.J. Rose, Leiden: Brill, 1954), 100-03; J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 84-87; K. Steiner, 'Proposal for a Multi-Perspective Approach to Śrauta Ritual,' in J. Gengnagel, U. Hüsken and S. Raman, eds., *Words and Deeds: Hindu and Buddhist Rituals in South Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 257-76. According to Steiner, the most spectacular characteristics features of the *vājapeya* against other forms of Soma-sacrifice are the following: "(1) besides the regular sacral drink of *soma* the alcoholic drink *surā* is being prepared and used; (2) a chariot race of 17 chariots with the sacrificer as participant; (3) the climbing of a short wooden post, which has a wheel of a chariot fixed to it; (4) the climbing of a long post, the so-called sacrificial pole (*yūpa*) by the ritual patron and his wife" (p. 263). For lack of space, only the climbing of the *yūpa* will be discussed in the present essay, though it is obvious that these four ritual components of the *vājapeya* sacrifice are theoretically consistent with one another and belong to a ritual sequence.

⁵ The base meaning of *sva*/*suva* in Vedic Sanskrit is 'sunlight.' According to the context, the term can also mean 'the sun' or 'the space (full) of sunlight.' Heaven and sunlight are often not distinguished in Vedic texts, where both are called *sva*/*suva*. In an old passage of the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (1. 3. 7. 5) commenting on the ascension rite under

affirmatively, and they begin to mount the ladder. On reaching the top of the post on behalf of himself and his wife, the sacrificer touches with his hand the *caṣāla*, the wreath-shaped head-piece of the *yūpa* which in this special case is a ring cake made of wheat flour. This unique type of *caṣāla* is not used in any other Vedic sacrifice. After reaching the upper end of the *yūpa*, the ritual subject is supposed to ascend to heaven and, thus, to approach the gods. Accordingly, he climbs up over the top of the *yūpa* by the length of a head. The *mantras* for the mounting of the post are given (though with some minor details, and not always in the same order) in the three main *Saṁhitās* of the Black Yajurveda and in the *Saṁhitā* of the White Yajurveda.⁶ Only in texts of the White Yajurveda (or Vāyasaneyin) school, starting with the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (5. 2. 1. 11-14), are these *mantras* distributed to different ritual actions. Thus: (1) *prajāpateḥ prajā abhūma* (“We have become Prajāpati’s children”) is recited on climbing the sacrificial post; (2) *sva devā aganma* (“We have come to heaven, O gods”),⁷ on grabbing the *caṣāla*; (3) *amṛtā abhūma* (“We have become immortal”), on raising the head above the sacrificial post.

Many scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (it is impossible to even name them all here) have interpreted the climbing of the sacrificial post at the *vājapeya* sacrifice as a symbolic ascension to the sun, principally on account of the wheel shape of the *caṣāla* being touched by the patron of the sacrifice when he reaches the top of the post. This view is thus summarized by Raffaele Petazzoni: “The wheel-shaped cake is [a] piece of solar symbolism in the *vājapeya*, for the wheel is an obvious symbol of the sun.”⁸ Yet it is to be noted that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (5. 2. 1. 13) comments on the *caṣāla* made from wheat as a symbol of food (*anna*) only, not as a symbol of the sun. This apparently means that, once he gets to the top of the *yūpa*, the sacrificer is supplied with symbolic food for sustaining his and his wife’s lives in the yonder world. Yet other scholars,⁹ following the arguments presented by Ananda Coomaraswamy in an

discussion, *suvar* is paraphrased as *suvarṅga-loka* (‘heavenly world’ or ‘bright world’). According to H. Oldenberg and the later authors who have followed his interpretation, however, the climbing of the sacrificial post would here symbolize ascension to the sun as a celestial body, not to ‘heaven’ — cf. H. Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda* (trans. S.B. Shrotri, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 44, 57 n. 109, 250. For interpretations of the *yūpārohaṇa* as a “solar” rite see discussion below.

⁶ Black Yajurveda: *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* 1. 7. 9; *Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā* 1. 11. 3; *Kaṭha Saṁhitā* 14. 1. White Yajurveda: *Vājasaneyi Saṁhitā* 9. 20-21. Cf. Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 1: 107 n. 6.

⁷ Or *suvar devām aganma* (‘We have come to heaven, to the gods’) in the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* (1. 7. 9. 2e), etc. This is the form in which this *mantra* occurs in Vedic texts other than those belonging to the Vāyasaneyin school.

⁸ Petazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions*, 102.

⁹ See, e.g., A. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1985), 274: “The central axis of the world is the pathway to Liberation. The central pole leads upwards to the Gateway of Escape, the Sun Door that opens out of the cosmos. For Hindus and Buddhists alike the spiritual way is an ascension of the axis of the world. This ‘difficult ascent’ (*dūhoroṇa*) is symbolically enacted in the Brahmanic ritual of *vājapeya*, in which the sacrificer climbs a sacrificial post... [which at the summit] carries a wheel rim of wheaten flour, symbol of the Sun Gate.”

influential article,¹⁰ have pushed the “solar” interpretation of the *yūpārohaṇa* rite to the point that the latter is taken as one which foreshadows the Upaniṣadic conception of the entry into the Brahmaloḥka (‘world of Brahman’) through the “sun-door.” In this later Vedic conception the sun is regarded as the portal to the farther world, set beyond the heavenly world inhabited by the gods. The solar gate is open to those who have the liberating knowledge but closed to those who do not.¹¹ The hoped-for destination after death is no longer the ‘heavenly world’ (*svarga-loka*) on which the sun moves as on a solid vault (the firmament): indeed, in the new doctrine expounded in the *Upaniṣads* the deceased man can escape from the rebirth cycle by “piercing the sun-door,”¹² i.e. the sun as portal to the immortal Brahman beyond, by which act one attains an extra-cosmic state. This is the ‘way of the gods’ (*devayāna*), which is without return to earth and is contrasted with the ‘way of the fathers’ (*pitṛyāna*), which is associated with the moon and ultimately leads back to an earthly existence through rebirth.¹³

The Saṁhitā and Brāhmaṇa texts dealing with the *yūpārohaṇa*, however, do not betray any reference to the symbolism of the sun in connection with this rite;¹⁴ on the contrary, the conquest of the wheat-made *caṣāla* by the ritual subject who mounts the *yūpa* is clearly stated to symbolize the conquest of food.¹⁵ In the view of the present writer, the ritual mechanism of appropriation at the sacrifice suffices to motivate the mounting of the cultic pole set up in the symbolic centre of all existence, by which the sacrificer is supposed to acquire the energy (*vāja*) of this symbol of the world axis. In pre-Upaniṣadic eschatology the sacrificer, after death, goes to the *svarga-loka*, the bright world of the gods, perhaps identified in early Vedic times with the Milky Way,¹⁶ and lives

¹⁰ A.K. Coomaraswamy, ‘*Svayamātṛṅṅā: Janua Coeli*,’ *Zalmoxis* 2 (1939 [1941]): 3-51.

¹¹ Cf. P. Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20-21, 199, 279, 441, 525, 542, 583.

¹² *saṛaṃ dvāram bhītvā (Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 6. 30). In Upaniṣadic cosmology and eschatology “[t]he firmament, the vault of heaven, is viewed as a solid cover. After they are cremated, humans destined to be reborn go up to the moon in the form of smoke or vapor; from there they return to earth as rain, enter plants, and, when they are eaten by a man, become semen. They finally take on a new life in the womb of a woman. The universe is thus a prison with walls above (firmament) and below (earth). Those who possess the liberating knowledge, however, are able to break this cycle, to escape from this prison. The sun is viewed as a lid that covers the only opening in the vault of heaven, the only door to freedom; the sun permits the liberated individuals to pass through that opening and escape to the immortal condition outside the universe” (Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, 21).

¹³ See especially *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5. 3-10) and *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (6. 2).

¹⁴ The Saṁhitās of the Black Yajurveda indicate that, while the sacrificer and his wife are climbing the post, twelve libations accompanied by the recitation of a formula consisting presumably of mythic names of the twelve months of the year (in certain versions thirteen, i.e., twelve plus the intercalary month), are made — cf. Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 107-08 n. 6, 108 n. 2). This may imply the sacrificer is here hailed as “lord of the Year,” yet does this formula suffice to show he is “transformed into the Sun” (Petazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions*, 101)?

¹⁵ Further stress on the winning of food is laid by the rite consisting in pelting the sacrificer with small bags of salt-earth before he descends from the top of the *yūpa*: “They throw up to him bags of salt; for salt means cattle, and cattle is food; and he who offers the *Vājapeya* wins food, for *vāja-peya* is the same as *anna-peya*” (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. 5. 2. 1. 13, trans. Eggeling, 3: 33).

¹⁶ M. Witzel (‘*Sur le chemin du ciel*,’ *Bulletin des études indiennes* 2 [1984]: 213-79) has shown that the (post-Ṛgvedic) expression *svarga-loka* refers specifically to the Milky Way. He identifies the “gate of the world of heaven” (*svargasya*

there in happiness (with his wife) provided with food and other comforts. One may safely surmise the climbing of the *yūpa* at the *vājapeya* to be a simulation of the ascension to the higher regions after death. The *yūpa* is in this case the symbolical ladder for winning the world of the gods;¹⁷ in other words, it is a means to apotheosis, which conforms with the main purpose of the *vājapeya* as a ritual of status elevation.

A detail of the *yūpārohaṇa* ceremony first mentioned in a later Sūtra text has attracted the attention of many a scholar: the prescription that the sacrificer, on reaching the top of the post, should stretch out his arms before praying, “We have come to heaven (etc.).”¹⁸ This ritual act was still mandatory as late as 1955, when Frits Staal observed it during the performance of a *vājapeya* sacrifice in Pune, Maharashtra. He reports that, when the ritual patron reaches the top of the post, “he spreads his arms like the wings of a bird.”¹⁹ Assuming this ritual gesture belongs to the earliest form of the Vedic pole-climbing rite (which is not warranted at all, given that it does not find any mention in the *Saṁhitā* and *Brāhmaṇa* texts), Mircea Eliade and many scholars after him have claimed that the climbing of the *yūpa* by means of a ladder in the performance of this Vedic ceremony represents the shamanic ascent of the heavens through the conquering of the world-tree, expressed symbolically as a bird’s upward flight.²⁰ Following Eliade’s argument, Jan Gonda sees in this Vedic ritual a technique for ascending “psychologically” to heaven that could have represented the legacy of an extremely widespread and ancient shamanic ideology.²¹ A number of *Brāhmaṇa* passages relate to the “wings” by means of which the Vedic sacrificer, “having become a bird,” goes to the world of heaven.²² This ascent is expressed in nearly identical terms in Siberian and Indonesian shamanic symbolism. Eliade remarks that, whenever ascent to heaven is not experienced by the shaman as ecstatic flight during the trance (when his soul is supposed to leave the body in an occult manner), it can be mimed by the shaman either in a realistic or symbolic way within the context of structured rituals. Climbing a pole or a wooden ladder or pretending to have changed into a bird are the chief methods resorted to by both Siberian and Indonesian shamans to manifest their alleged ability to go up to the heavenly world.²³

lokasya dvāram) referred to in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6. 6. 2. 4), which places it to the north-east, with the point in the night sky where the Milky Way diverges into two branches.

¹⁷ Cp. *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* 6. 6. 4. 2: “The sacrificer makes [the *yūpa*] a ladder and a bridge to attain the world of heaven” (trans. Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 2: 550).

¹⁸ *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 11. 11. 80. 6: *āntaṁ gatvā bāhū udgṛhṇāti* (“Having finished [the climb], he raises his arms”).

¹⁹ F. Staal, ‘The Centre of Space: Construction and Discovery,’ in K. Vatsyayan, ed., *Concepts of Space: Ancient and Modern* (New Delhi: IGNC and Abhinav Publications, 1991), 89.

²⁰ See M. Eliade, ‘Le problème du chamanisme,’ *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 131 (1946): 30ff.

²¹ J. Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens. Veda und älterer Hinduismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), 109.

²² See, e.g., *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* 5. 1. 10; 5. 3. 5; 14. 1. 12-13; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3. 25, etc.

²³ Eliade, ‘Le problème du chamanisme,’ 21ff., 31ff.

The *yūpārohaṇa* rite, in which a number of “popular,” i.e. non-Brahmanic elements can be discerned,²⁴ could have shared a common origin with the well-known complex of the shaman’s ladder and climb-pole found in several archaic cultures of Asia (including among these some tribal cultures of India). Throughout Asia, and in North America too, rites of ascension involving the use of either the shamanic ladder or the climb-pole belong in the mythological complex of the three cosmic zones and the cosmic tree (the *axis mundi*). Such a community of ritual implements (the pole, the ladder) and religious symbols (the cosmic axis, the ascent to the heavenly world) could either be due to continuous interchange between the individual ethnic groups of South Asia or have been independently inherited by the immigrating Vedic Aryans from their Central Asian cultural ancestors, and by some of the non-Aryan peoples of South Asia from their own cultural ancestors. In any event, shamanistic phenomena which of themselves had a common origin in Palaeolithic/Mesolithic Asia could have existed and continued to exist as separate complexes in South Asia. “This could certainly be the case with the sacrificial post and the ladder of the Brahmanic ritual on the one hand, and the shaman[’s] ladder on the other, which is found among non-Aryan tribes.”²⁵ The (para-)shamanistic phenomena being investigated in the present paper may well have spread to South Asia through different routes and at different time depths to subsequently coexist in that part of the world as different though interacting religio-cultural realities.

After this excursus on a Vedic parallel to the shamanic ascending of the world tree, let us return to the main subject of this paper — Hindu devotional ordeals. The next section will discuss a class of self-torture rites performed by ascending, hanging from, or revolving around a pole in which we find many echoes of the Vedic pole-climbing rite outlined above.

§ 3. Ordeals performed by ascending, hanging from, or revolving around a pole

§ 3.1. The *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal

One of the most famous Hindu rituals of ascent is the *caṛak pūjā* or hook-swinging ceremony, which is enacted in rural areas of Bengal (both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh) and in the adjoining districts of Orissa in coincidence with the *viśuvat*. The *caṛak pūjā* marks the climax of the

²⁴ Cf. Keith, *The Veda of the Black Yajus School*, 1: CX; G.U. Thite, *Sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇa Texts* (Poona: Poona University Press, 1975), 78.

²⁵ R. Rahmann, ‘Shamanistic and Related Phenomena in Northern and Middle India,’ *Anthropos* 54 (1959): 738.

festival known as Śiva's *gājan*,²⁶ which lasts several days and represents the last public worship of Śiva by the village folk at the end of the agricultural year. Ecstatic dances are performed all through the holy celebrations with the accompaniment of itinerant musicians and drummers. Dances and songs alternate with varieties of self-torture: perforation of different parts of the body, especially the tongue and the sides, with long metal rods or needles (*bāṅphōṛā*); walking and jumping over red-hot-coals (*āgun sannyās*); falling from a high scaffolding onto a row of sloped blades (*pātā sannyās* or *kātāri sannyās*) or on thorny bushes (*kātā sannyās*); and lying on a wooden plank studded with nails (*pāṭ* or *pātā*). The hook-swinging ceremony is the last and final exercise in the series. Śiva's *gājan* is a Śaiva refashioning of the older and original Dharma's *gājan* (the *gājan* of Dharma Ṭhākur, a fertility village deity of rural Bengal described as a solar god in the Middle Bengali religious poems known as *Dharma-maṅgala-kāvya*s, and finally identified with Śiva due to the influence of the Brahmanical religion).

On the eve of the celebration of the *caṛak pūjā*, a tall pole is firmly planted in the ground. This pole is spoken of as the *caṛak gāch*. The Bengali word *gāch* means a tree while *caṛak* is, most likely, a derivative of the verb *caṛā* 'to go up, climb, ascend, mount.'²⁷ *Caṛak pūjā* thus translates as 'ceremonial climbing (of the *caṛak* pole).' Before being erected the *caṛak gāch* is worshipped by the *bhaktas* ('devotees') assembled to practice self-torture rites at Śiva's *gājan* festival.²⁸ A transverse crossbar, usually composed of a number of bamboos bound together, is then placed on top of the vertical pole so that it can be freely rotated on a pivot. Two ropes are attached to the ends of the horizontal crosspiece, one to fasten the penitent to be swung and the other to rotate him. One after another the fasting low-caste votaries who have chosen to undertake the *caṛak pūjā*, called

²⁶ See B.K. Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture: A Contribution to Socio-Religious Studies in Hindu Folk Institutions* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1917), 73-87, 93-108. This author, as well as several others who have followed him, proposes to derive Bengali *gājan* from Sanskrit *garjana* 'roaring, thundering': "[T]he word [*gājan*] seems to have been derived from the Sanskrit word *garjana*, meaning a loud clamour, since the ceremony is performed in the midst of a loud clamour caused by the shouting and singing of the *sannyāsīs* [= ascetics] and the loud music struck up by long drums" (p. 73).

²⁷ Cf. S. Sen, *An Etymological Dictionary of Bengali: c. 1000-1800 A.D.* (Calcutta: Eastern Publishers, 1971), 1: 260. Other authors have derived the term *caṛak* from the Sanskrit *cakra* 'wheel' to relate it to the rotation made by the devotee, yet the regular Bengali reflex of Sanskrit *cakra* is *cāk* or *cākā*, a word that differs from *caṛak* quite markedly. Still others have thought Bengali *caṛak* to be "a corruption of the Persian word [*charḳh*] 'everything revolving in an orbit, a wheel of any kind, etc.', facilitated by the nearness of the Sanskrit *cakra*, etc." — H. Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (new ed. by W. Crooke, London: John Murray, 1903), 220. Internal derivation from Bengali *caṛā* 'to go up, etc.' provides the simplest etymological solution.

²⁸ "The *cadak jagan*, or invoking of the *cadak* tree is performed on this day. The *cadak* tree is submerged in a specified pond. The *Bhaktiyas* [= *bhaktas*] go to the pond ceremonially and dip into the water in the name of Siva to catch hold of the *cadak* tree. It is believed that the *cadak* tree is not easily available and it moves and slips as the *Bhaktiyas* try to catch hold of the tree. The *Bhaktiyas* dip into the water for many times and pretend to be unsuccessful. After such unsuccessful attempts the *Bhaktiyas* catch hold of the *cadak* tree and carry the tree to the place specified for *cadak* ceremony. The *cadak* tree is worshipped on the bank of the pond and the tree is invoked by incantations" — P. Mahapatra, *The Folk Cults of Bengal* (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1972): 133.

caṛakīs, have two large bent hooks passed through the muscles over their blade bones. This operation is called *piṭhphōṛā*, ‘perforation of one’s back.’ After the penitent has climbed on the mounting platform facing the *caṛak* pole by means of a ladder, the hooks, tied together with a rope, are affixed to the end of one of the ropes hanging from the horizontal crosspiece, and the man is then lifted high into the air and whirled around, in such a way as to fly out centrifugally, by his companion below. To achieve this operation, the latter runs all the way around the upright pole and pulls the rope hanging from the other end of the revolving beam so as to impart to it a motion of rotation. While whirling in the air, the men suspended from hooks shower flower petals and throw down fruits (both indicating fertility and fecundity) on the crowd assembled below; they invoke the names of different terrific forms of Śiva and the Goddess and sometimes sing songs. In our days, due to a ban imposed on the original form of *caṛak pūjā* during the British colonial period, the hooks in many cases do not entirely support the *caṛakī*’s weight when he is dangling from the *caṛak gāch*. Thus, in many areas of Bengal, a supporting bandage of cloth tied round the body under the arms was added to the self-torture device to prevent the hooks from tearing through the flesh of the penitent. In some of the places where the *caṛak pūjā* is observed today, this waistband can fully replace the hooks as a means to suspend the devotee from the *caṛak* tree.²⁹

People supposedly believe that the penitents’ motion of rotation symbolizes the sun’s revolution and, consequently, the cycle of life on earth depending on it. The *viṣuvat* or vernal equinox, which heralds the coming of the most feared torrid summer season and the resumption of work in the fields, represents the end and the new beginning of this vital cycle. For all these reasons, some scholars have opined that by means of the *caṛak pūjā*, Bengali people intend above all to propitiate the solar aspect of Śiva and the telluric aspect of the Goddess, whose marriage ceremony is represented at some locations on the *caṛak pūjā* day. This is a kind of sacred marriage, or hierogamy, celebrated at the onset of the agricultural New Year, coinciding with the vernal equinox.³⁰

It must be mentioned, however, that the theory according to which the *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal would ritually imitate the apparent sun’s revolution around the earth contrasts with the fact that most hook-swinging rites of western and southern India, belonging in the same class as the *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal, do not involve at all the whirling of votaries in a circle (that is, the idea of

²⁹ Cf. R.C. Sen, ‘A Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies, and a Description of the Implements Used,’ *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bengal* 11 (1833): 611, 613.

³⁰ The thesis that a solar symbolism underlies the *caṛak pūjā* ritual is proposed by J.H. Powell, ‘Hook-Swinging in India,’ *Folk-lore* 25 (1914): 147-48, 183-88 and J.C. Irwin, ‘The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound,’ *History of Religions* 21 (1982): 341 n. 4.

a “wheel,” less so that of a “solar” wheel representing the cosmic act of creation), but only their swinging to and fro with a slight oscillatory movement pattern instead. Rotation at hook-swinging ceremonies was common only in parts of Bengal and in the Bengali zone of cultural influence in northern Orissa and eastern Jharkhand.³¹ Moreover, there are scholars who question the validity of the term ‘hook-swinging,’ introduced by British colonial ethnographers in the nineteenth century to describe this class of rituals; indeed, “swinging presupposes a regular rocking movement to and fro on an axis, a pendulum-like rhythm, whereas the ‘swinging’ in the so-called hook-swinging involves the actor simply hanging from a horizontal construction with either hooks in the flesh of his back or a rope fastened to his waist, or both.”³² Such a cautionary observation is, however, not always true as an oscillatory movement pattern is often seen at work in hook-swinging rituals and particularly in those in which the hook machine is mounted on a movable car (see below); not to speak of the *caṛak pūjā* ritual itself, in which the swinging and whirling round of the penitents is mandatory.



Fig. 1. The *caṛak pūjā* rite. West Bengal.

³¹ G.A. Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and Its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800-1894* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 17-18. Cp. F.M. Ferrari, ‘Surrendering to the Earth: Male Devotional Practices in the Bengali Dharma Cult,’ *Fieldwork in Religion* 1 (2005): 124-44: “The fact that *caṛak pūjā* was initially described as a ritual involving a rotatory movement has proved misleading... In reality the performance of the devotee is hardly circular... Rather it is more correct to speak about a suspension or oscillating self-offering... In the *gājan*, devotees refer to ‘hook-swinging’ as *dolan sebā* [‘swing service’], a ‘service’ where emphasis is given to the suspending or oscillating aspect... Accordingly, I believe it is more correct to refer to similar practices as ‘suspending’ or ‘hanging’ practices.”

³² A. Nugteren, *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty: Rituals around Sacred Trees in India* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 114.

The earliest European testimony relating to the observance of hook-swinging rites in Bengal is probably Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's account, dating from the seventeenth century; it, however, only mentions the hanging of penitents from tree branches by means of hooks passed through their backs, not the typical *caṛak*-tree device.³³ In the course of the nineteenth century Hindu hook-swinging practices were gradually forbidden by British colonial authorities in Bengal with the full support of the western-educated Indian elites. In the first decades of that century, the *caṛak pūjā* ritual had impressively developed in Bengal, above all in Calcutta, where the structures erected to perform it had become of gigantic proportions, so much so that they could support the weight of twelve simultaneously rotating penitents.³⁴

§ 3.2. Hook-swinging rituals based on the idea of hanging and rotation in Orissa and Jharkhand

In the districts of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar in northern Orissa, the *caṛak pūjā* ceremony is turned into a religious festival known as Uṛā Paraba or Uṛā Yātrā (*uṛā* means 'flying in the air' in Oriya language; the corresponding Bengali term is *caṛake-oṛā* or 'flying on the *caṛak* tree').³⁵ In many cases the Oriya Hindu devotees (*bhaktas*) who undergo this ordeal are not even tied with a band to the revolving horizontal crossbar; instead, they firmly hold on to it with one hand.³⁶ Munda tribal communities living in the same area celebrate the Uṛā festival in the same fashion as the Oriyas.³⁷ Some tribal communities of Santals (Munda speakers), settled in this part of Orissa as well as in Jharkhand, celebrate, during the period of the *viṣuvat*, a hook-swinging festival, called Pata, which closely resembles those observed by the low-caste Hindus living in the same region. This Santal festival is meant to propitiate the *pata boṅgas*, divine spirits who are but tribal adaptations of Mahādeo (i.e. Śiva) and the Great Goddess. British colonial records as well as local folktales stress the fact that the Santals, who settled in the Santal Parganas on the eastern Chhotanagpur Plateau, used to perform the rite, exactly like the local Hindus, by being suspended from a rotating device (*pata ḍaṅ*, where *ḍaṅ* means 'pole') with no support other than two iron hooks fastened into the integuments of their backs. The Santal *bhaktas* who subject themselves to the swinging are possessed by the spirit of the *pata boṅgas* and act their parts during the festival as if they were the

³³ J.-B. Tavernier, *Travels in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne* (trans. and ed. V. Ball, London: Macmillan & Co., 1889), 2: 254-55.

³⁴ Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 19-21.

³⁵ B. Chaudhuri, 'Fire-Walking the Tribal Way: A Rejoinder,' *Anthropos* 62 (1967): 553.

³⁶ D.N. Patnaik, *Festivals of Orissa* (Bhubaneswar: Orissa Sahitya Akademi, 1982), 22.

³⁷ B. Biswal, *Cult of Śiva* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1988), 122.

deities themselves. Thus the Santals observe this festival as a tribal version of the Śaiva *caṛak pūjā*.³⁸

The Munda and Oraon tribes of Ranchi district on the Chhotanagpur Plateau also practice the *caṛak pūjā* during the month-long Śaiva festival they call Māṇḍā Paraba (which includes a fire-walking finale: see section § 6.4). It is celebrated in the same way, and during the same period, as in Bengal. Although the tribal *bhaktas* who undertake this ordeal are now suspended by a length of cloth to the revolving bar of the *caṛak* tree, it is reported by local elders that they once used to be swung around with big hooks piercing the loins. The devotees use feminine attire during the ceremony — a tendency to transvestitism, no doubt connected with Śākta cult practices, is also present in the *gājan* festival of Bengal.³⁹

§ 3.3. Hook-swinging and tribal rites of ascent in Middle India

Moving to the west of the Chhotanagpur Plateau, we find hook-swinging rituals to be part of the religious traditions of other tribal groups settled along the Vindhya and Satpura Ranges. To begin with, a hook-swinging festival is observed by some Bhil communities of Jhabua district (western Madhya Pradesh) on the very day of the Holī festival in the month of Phālguna (February-March) — though the Bhils themselves deny any cultic relationship between hook-swinging and the latter festival. In this case, too, although the fastening of the votary to the revolving crossbar on top of the swinging structure is done with ropes passed round his body, two hooks are passed below his hip-string as a memory of the older practice. Furthermore, like the Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi district, the Jhabua Bhils being swung around on the turning device are dressed in female attire. They wear a piece of red cloth across the chest and a woman's ornaments. This circumstance is, once again, indicative of a Śākta, i.e. a Hindu influence on the development of this ritual in spite of the fact this festival is not celebrated among the Hindus in the area. The Bhils dedicate this devotional trial, which they call *gaḷ deorā* (*gaḷ* means a hook and *deorā*, a place of worship), to different gods and goddesses, although it is apparent the ritual is enacted chiefly

³⁸ W.W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1868), 1: 463; V. Ball, *Jungle Life in India; or, the Journeys and Journals of an Indian Geologist* (London: De La Rue & Co., 1880), 232-33; C.L. Mukherjee, *The Santals* (2nd ed., Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1962), 268-70; W.G. Archer, *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India. A Portrait of the Santals* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), 133-35; J. Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 101, 144-45.

³⁹ K.P. Chattopadhyay and N.K. Basu, 'The Māṇḍā Festival of Chotanagpur,' *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 30 (1934): 160-61; V. Rosner, 'Fire-walking the Tribal Way,' *Anthropos* 61 (1966): 188-90.

in honour of the smallpox goddess *Sītlāmātā*. Thus, this Bhil ritual as a whole seems to be of Hindu origin.⁴⁰

Also the Gonds (Dravidian speakers) and the Korkus (Munda speakers) of the Mahadeo Hills in Madhya Pradesh observe a hook-swinging ceremony in the days immediately following the *Holī* festival; they, however, carry out the observance in a different and somewhat peculiar way. Both the wooden post on which the devotees are swung round and the hook-swinging ritual itself are called *Megnāth*, a corruption of the Sanskrit *Meghanāda* (an epithet of *Indrajit*, son of the demon king *Rāvaṇa*). The Gonds are supposed by the Hindus to be the descendants of *Rāvaṇa*; as to the Korkus, they worship *Rāvaṇa*, his brother, *Kumbhakarna*, and his son, *Meghanāda*, on the *Daśaharā* day, sing songs in praise of *Rāvaṇa* in the time of *Holī*, and regard that demon king as their ancestor. Whether these two tribal groups of central India imitate the *rākṣasa* *Meghanāda* as the first hook-swinger, or whether they perform the hook-swinging ritual to gain his favours remains unclear. The hook-swinging post and the deity therein are also known as *Kandera* (said to be an inherited Korku word). To erect the post, a straight teak or *sāj* tree is selected and cut in the jungle in accordance with divine instructions, which the village priest receives in a dream. The tree is planted in a deep hole dug to the east of the village and consecrated with the blood of sacrificial animals. It is the *bhumkā*, the tribal village priest of both the Korkus and Gonds, who is suspended from the crossbar set on the top of the *Megnāth* pole and then whirled in mid-air — presently by means of a rope, but in the past, as elsewhere in India, by means of hooks stuck through the muscles of his shoulders. The rite can also be performed by other faithful followers in fulfilment of a vow.⁴¹

There also exist other pole-climbing rituals enacted in spring by the Bhils, Gonds and Korkus that are not discussed in the present paper as they do not involve any self-injury acts. In some such rituals the male pole-climbers are beaten with sticks by women assembled below the pole. Although the ultimate source of inspiration for the above described Bhil, Gond, and Korku hook-swinging rites may well have been some Hindu form of hook-swinging, it must be stressed here that the *caṛak pūjā* tradition of the Bengal-Chhotanagpur-Orissa region did apparently never spread into the Vindhya and Satpura region, homeland to those three tribal groups. Hence, the origin of such tribal ordeals, admitted they did not develop from within the religious traditions of

⁴⁰ W. Koppers and L. Jungblut, *Bowmen of Mid-India: A Monography of the Bhils of Jhabua (M. P.) and Adjoining Territories* (Wien: Elisabeth Stiglmayr, 1976), 2: 89-92; R. Wiesinger and J. Haekel, 'Contributions to the Swinging Festival in Western Central India,' *Acta Ethnologica and Linguistica* 13 (1968): 1-26.

⁴¹ R.V. Russell and R.B. Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1916), 3: 116-17; W. Koppers, *Die Bhil in Zentralindien* (Horn-Wien: Berger, 1948), 160 n. 397; S. Fuchs, *The Korkus of the Vindhya Hills* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1988), 363-65; S.G. Deogaonkar and S.S. Deogaonkar, *The Korku Tribals* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1990), 42, 110.

the three tribes, has to be sought in some other Hindu hook-swinging rituals, perhaps in the direction of Maharashtra, where hook-swinging in honour of the Hindu god Khaṇḍobā once used to be classified by the local Brahmans as a manifestation of demonic devotion or *rākṣasī bhakti* (see below).⁴²

Be that as it may, an internal development could be hypothesized for these tribal ordeals if they could be shown to be related to the ritual ascent of the shamanic ladder, a practice common, for instance, among the Dravidian-speaking Gonds and the Indo-Aryan-speaking Baigas living in the state of Chhattisgarh. A sacred ladder made of wooden sword-blades is often preserved in the courtyard of the house of the *paṇḍā*, a kind of Gond sacred man whose main religious occupation is to become possessed by the goddess presiding over epidemics, Marai Mātā, who is also his tutelary deity. On the occasion of certain festivals dedicated to this female deity, notably of the agricultural festival called Jovāra, the chief *paṇḍā* climbs the bladed ladder and, atop it, scourges himself publicly. This ceremony is accompanied by acts of self-injury, carried out by other *paṇḍās*, such as skewering their cheeks, dancing on a nail-studded plank, or walking on burning embers.⁴³ Among the Baigas of Chattisgarh the possession of a sacred ladder is a prerogative of the *baruā*, a kind of shaman-diviner. During his divinatory trance (*dhām*) the Baiga *baruā* climbs the ladder without touching it with his hands and self-inflicts pain using a rope studded with iron spikes or an iron chain provided with sharp prongs.⁴⁴

The presence of an ascension symbolism alongside the ritual body self-mortification within the *caṛak pūjā* and other similar hook-swinging ceremonies has, thus, some parallels in the shamanistic religions of Middle India, in which the ascent of the *caṛak* tree and the subsequent “flight” of the Hindu votary hanging from the revolving machinery are replaced by the climbing of a ladder (a symbolic “celestial” flight) in a ritual context always of self-torture. The theme of the “separation upward” and that of momentarily overcoming the earthly condition through an ecstatic flight appear to be two key elements shared by both types of religious experience. In some shamanic traditions of Eurasia, including those of Middle India, the ascent of the ladder can be replaced by the climbing of a cultic pole. Hence the *caṛak* tree, in a manner analogous to both the shaman’s ladder and the sacrificial post ascended by the ritual patron at the Vedic *vājapeya*

⁴² However, hook-swinging as performed in the Deccan does not usually involve the rotation of the penitent.

⁴³ S. Fuchs, *The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1960), 457ff., 526 ff.

⁴⁴ V. Elwin, *The Baiga* (London: John Murray, 1939), 381-82.

sacrifice, could be possibly interpreted as a symbol of the cosmic axis connecting the earth and the sky.⁴⁵

A further linkage of hook-swinging to the shamanic complex may be inferred from the use of sharp iron hooks to suspend the devotees participating in this severe religious experience. Suspension by means of iron hooks may be due to “a desire to insulate or isolate the hook-swinging devotee from impure or demoniacal influences.”⁴⁶ In the most archaic form of hook-swinging ceremonies, the body of the hanging penitent is touched only by iron. In India this metal is regarded as strongly anti-demoniacal, and several tribes of Middle India hold to the belief that iron tubes, clamps, cones, nails etc., manufactured by village smiths abiding by anti-pollution ritual rules, have the power to drive away evil spirits.⁴⁷ In many shamanistic traditions across Eurasia, the connection between shamans and blacksmiths remains extremely close. In India, the smiths who produce and sell to Hindu devotees the hooks used to perform hook-swinging rites — as well as the iron skewers, rods, small lances or miniature tridents employed to perform flesh-piercing rites — play a crucial role in the overall rituals. Accordingly, the close connection between hook-swinging and flesh-piercing practices (also the sacred ascent of the bladed ladder, the sacred jumping or standing on a row of blades, etc.) and blacksmiths may be interpreted as a religio-cultural legacy of shamanism to Hinduism.

§ 3.4. Hook-swinging in South India: *siḍi/ceṭil* festivals

Dravidian-speaking Hindu communities of southern India (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka) observe rituals of hook-swinging almost exclusively in honour of female deities. These *śaktis*, whose names may vary a lot moving from one zone to another, are regarded at one time as the givers and healers of the gravest diseases, as the donors of food and progeny and their destroyers. In the hook-swinging rites performed in their honour, which are normally part of annual temple festivals, the rotation of penitents hanging with hooks embedded in their backs from a T-shaped contrivance is generally absent, being replaced by a simpler swinging motion from a non-revolving apparatus.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ On the use of the bladed ladder and the climbing pole in Indian tribal shamanism see Rahmann, ‘Shamanistic and Related Phenomena,’ 736-40.

⁴⁶ Powell, ‘Hook-Swinging in India,’ 193 n. 86.

⁴⁷ Rahmann, ‘Shamanistic and Related Phenomena,’ 744.

⁴⁸ There are, however, some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts testifying to the performance of hook-swinging rites on the Malabar and South Canara coasts as well as in Madras with rotating machineries that were nearly identical to the *caṛak gāch* of Bengal. Cf. E. Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1906), 490-93.

In southern India the pole driven vertically in the ground, typical of the *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal and the neighbouring hill regions, is in most cases replaced by a long beam installed in a diagonal pattern on a processional car or wagon. The earliest mention of this type of ritual in European sources is the one provided circa 1430 by the Venetian merchant and explorer Niccolò de' Conti, who witnessed its performance in the royal city of Vijayanagara.⁴⁹ The execution of hook-swinging rituals on temple-owned wooden wagons is a typically South Indian Śākta cult practice. All over South India, Śākta temples have retained some far more substantial socio-religious functions than they have done in Bengal; this explains why in South India hook-swinging ceremonies were once regularly patronized by temple *pūjārīs* (priests), not by *zamīndārs* (landlords) as was the case with the *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal.⁵⁰

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century many of the hook-swinging ceremonies of South India were made more acceptable to the eyes of the British rulers and the western-educated Indian elites by imposing the replacement of the self-injuring votary with an animal (e.g. a sheep) or an anthropomorphic image (e.g. a fully clothed doll).⁵¹ In certain areas of South India, ordeals by swinging continued to be enacted in honour of Hindu goddesses by just making the penitent enter a big basket suspended by a rope on the top of a sacred pole located on a temple's premises.⁵² These mitigated forms of the ritual can be defined as "pseudo-hook-swinging."

It is likely some replacement process of this type took place at all the Śākta pilgrimage centres of the Deccan where hook-swinging was once in vogue. In the city of Mysore, for instance, hook-swinging once formed, in all likelihood, the pivotal element of the religious festival, Māri Jātra, generally observed during February to propitiate the group of seven ill-giving goddesses known as the Seven Māris (collectively worshipped as forms of the goddess of epidemics); however, from the early-twentieth century the same ceremony was carried out by suspending two votaries by bandages tied round their chest (thus, not by hooks passing through their backs) on the end of long wooden beams installed on as many processional wagons, which were subsequently hauled through the streets of Mysore. In Kannada and Telegu this hook machine is called *siḍi* (lit. 'hook').⁵³

⁴⁹ Cf. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 220.

⁵⁰ Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 13 ff., 72-73.

⁵¹ Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes*, 500-01; H. Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India* (2nd ed., Calcutta: Association Press, 1921), 58-61.

⁵² Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 132-34.

⁵³ Whitehead, *Village Gods*, 82-83. The Abbé Dubois terms this ritual ordeal "chidi mari", namely, Telugu/Kannada *siḍi-māri*, 'hook(-swinging penance in honour of the smallpox-goddess) Māri' — cf. J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (3rd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 597-98.



Fig. 2. *Ceṭil urcavam* (hook-swinging ceremony). Mica painting, southern (Anglo-)Indian style of Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. Circa 1840.

<http://www.indianminiaturepaintings.co.uk/Trichinopoly%20genre%20scenes%20on%20mica,%201840.html> (accessed December 27, 2012)

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In Tamil Nadu a variant form of this class of votive ordeals is carried out at the *Ceṭil Urcavam*, a Śākta temple festival. The Tamil term, *ceṭil*, cognate with Kannada and Telugu *siḍi*, means a hook, while *urcavam* (for Sanskrit *utsava*) means a temple festival. A *ceṭil* is, more properly speaking, a contrivance consisting of an upright post and a horizontal bamboo pole fastened across its top; a rope with a sharp metal hook hangs from one of the ends of this bamboo sweep, which is used to suspend a devotee under the vow.⁵⁴ In Tamil this penance is termed as *ceṭilāṭṭam*, literally meaning ‘hook-swinging.’⁵⁵ Although the *Ceṭil Urcavam* is mainly associated with the worship of *Māriyamman*, the Tamil equivalent of the goddess *Māri* of Karnataka, in certain areas of the Tamil country the festival is celebrated to commemorate the self-immolation

⁵⁴ *Tamil Lexicon*, s.v.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, s.v. However, *-āṭṭam* also implies the notions of dance and possession.

of Kāttavarāyaṇ, a deified regional hero regarded as the son of Śiva and Pārvatī.⁵⁶ According to Tamil mythological tradition, Kāttavarāyaṇ's self-immolation consisted in his suspension on the top of the *kaḷu* or *kaḷumaram* (literally 'a stake for impaling criminals') by a hook driven into his flesh along with a number of nails. The pain endured by this mythical hero, his death by impalement (as is apparent in mythological narratives associated with him)⁵⁷ as well as his resurrection, is conceived of as an act of self-sacrifice aimed at making him into a god, a result he ultimately achieves with descending from the post as a regenerated being worthy of a cult of his own. Echoes of the Vedic pole-climbing rite (*yūpārohaṇa*) leading to the performer's apotheosis, discussed in section § 2 of this paper, resound in this Hindu ritual.⁵⁸

According to oral testimonies collected in Tamil Nadu, in times past the annual ritual repetition of Kāttavarāyaṇ's self-immolation consisted in tying a man with heavy chains and hooks to a small platform fixed on the top of a tall post annexed to a temple. This person was subsequently starved to death on the post. Currently the man who impersonates Kāttavarāyaṇ in some temples of Tamil Nadu, at the ceremony known as *kaḷuvērral* ('mounting of the stake'), re-enacts the pain suffered by that mythical hero by ascending the *kaḷu* and then entering a small wooden square frame set on its top, where he accepts a hook from a member of the caste of blacksmiths after the latter has, in turn, climbed the pole for this purpose. The explanation for this rite, as provided by the local tradition, is that in past times a golden hook used to be driven into the neck of the man, fettered atop the *kaḷu*, impersonating the hero. The hook, it may be inferred, is a homologue of Kāttavarāyaṇ's "impalement stake" referred to in the myths about him. Significantly, this Tamil festival is celebrated in Pankuṇi (March-April), the same time of year when the *caṛak pūjā* is observed in eastern India.

⁵⁶ On Kāttavarāyaṇ and the temple legends and cult practices connected with him, see E. Masilamani-Meyer, 'The Changing Face of Kāttavarāyaṇ,' in A. Hildebeitel, ed., *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 87-89, 95-99.

⁵⁷ Śaiva-Śākta rituals of symbolic impalement are found as far as Nepal. In the Triśūljātrā festival of Deopatan, celebrated just before the onset of the monsoon in Āṣāḍha (June-July), children are symbolically impaled on a trident and carried in procession (actually each of them is fastened to a long post shaped in the form of a one-prong lance, sticking out of a processional litter). According to a legend, an evil demon used to create havoc in the area by stealing and impaling the inhabitants' children. The demon was ultimately killed. To commemorate this victory, a festival was established at which local children, representing the demon's children, are "impaled" the same way as the demon had done with Deopatan children — cf. A. Michaels, *Śiva in Trouble: Festivals and Rituals at the Paśupatiṇātha Temple of Deopatan* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 107-25. However, this annual temple procession is not the same as a votive ordeal performed by ascending or hanging from a post; it is rather a kind of ritual commemoration of a victory over a demon, at which the aspects of revenge and protection against demons predominate.

⁵⁸ In the story of Kāttavarāyaṇ's apotheosis, the stake becomes "a symbol of sacrifice, rebirth and transcendence, a means to access the deities (through tapas)" — Masilamani-Meyer, 'The Changing Face of Kāttavarāyaṇ,' 89. Similar goals, as we have seen, motivated the ritual ascent of the sacrificial post (*yūpārohaṇa*) in Vedic times.

Whereas the *kaḷuvērral* ceremony appears to be modelled on the archetypal ritual of human sacrifice,⁵⁹ the *ceṭil* festivals — celebrated at many of the shrines of Tamil Nadu dedicated to the goddess of epidemics, *Māriyamman*, on the day on which the sick are carried before her cult image to receive her grace — follow the pattern of hook-swinging ceremonies enacted to propitiate a Hindu goddess in fulfilment of a vow. As the festival is performed today, the man who personifies *Kāttavarāyaṇ* is not suspended with the use of hooks from a horizontal beam mounted on the vertical pole but instead climbs onto a small platform that is hoisted to the top of the pole and subsequently swung from it. A ritual feature that differentiates the *Ceṭil Uṟcavam* from the other forms of ordeal by suspension/swinging taken into examination thus far is its association with children who are handed over to the practitioner, one after another, at each new swinging of the platform to be returned to their parents soon after. This act is believed to secure good health and long life for the children;⁶⁰ its originating from the hook-swinging ritual complex is indicated by the fact the blessing of children lifted in flight by persons swung by means of hooks pierced through their flesh is the main purpose of a similar rite, the so-called *piḷḷayetutu tūkkam* (lit. ‘hanging with a lifted up child’), which continues today at some Śākta temples in the nearby state of Kerala.⁶¹



Fig. 3. *Piḷḷayetutu tūkkam* (‘hanging with a lifted up child’) rite. Kerala.



Fig. 4. *Tūkkam* (‘hanging’) rite. Kerala.

⁵⁹ According to an interpretation, in southern India hook-swinging — no doubt a phenomenon of considerable regional variation in meaning and practice — would be linked to notions of (self-)sacrifice rather than asceticism (which would have been, conversely, the common denominator of the hook-swinging ritual as historically performed in eastern India). Cf. U. Schröder, ‘Hook-Swinging in South India: Negotiating the Subaltern Space within a Colonial Society,’ in U. Hüskén and F. Neubert, eds., *Negotiating Rites* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 218.

⁶⁰ Masilamani-Meyer, ‘The Changing Face of *Kāttavarāyaṇ*,’ 98. Since an identical practice is followed by some hook-swingers at the *carak pūjā* of Bengal, it would seem that the lifting of a child in the air while swinging from hooks in fulfilment of a vow during a festival is an ancient rite incorporated in hook-swinging traditions of both northeastern and southern India.

⁶¹ L.K. Anatha Krishna Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes* (Madras: Higginbotham & Co., 1909-12), 1: 324.

§ 3.5. Hook-swinging in South India: *tūkkam* rituals

The ceremony termed as *tūkkam*⁶² — a Malayalam word that means both ‘hanging’ and ‘weighing’ — is observed in the premises of temples dedicated to Bhagavati and/or her fierce form Bhadrakālī, Kerala’s two most popular forms of the Great Goddess. Once again, it must be noticed that this votive ordeal is celebrated during the vernal equinox: the Malayalam month of Mīnam (March-April).

The devotees who succumb to this form of penance are suspended by hooks driven through their back muscles — currently more and more often replaced by a waistband — on the *tūkkaccāḍu*, a sort of gigantic balance mounted on a four-wheeled wooden contrivance and consisting of a long wooden beam projecting upward and forward, which can be raised or lowered as a lever on a pivot by people standing behind. On the top end of the beam a square wooden frame covered by a decorated tent is fixed, from which one to three penitents are suspended, with or without hooks, to swing freely to and fro. These men are raised into the air through the movable contraption, which is paraded three times around the temple amidst the cheers of the crowd.

A *tūkkam* is often offered by an infertile couple, under a vow, who pays the performers of the rite, for the couple hopes to beget children by the grace of the Great Goddess. In some cases, as mentioned above, a child is handed over to the swinger who holds the child in his arms as he swings. Until the mid-nineteenth century, this variant form of the rite was carried out by both male and female devotees of the Goddess on behalf of parents who had made the vow. The practitioner’s ability to bestow health on sick children or fertility on an infertile couple seems to imply his or her temporary deification; in other words, he or she is seemingly believed to share in the divine power of the Goddess. It is also on record that, in times past, on some occasions the performers brandished weapons (sword and shield or bow and arrow), shouted, and gesticulated as if they were then enacting a kind of sacred drama — e.g., a battle between the Goddess and some *asura*. The same feature was once present in certain Śākta hook-swinging rituals of Tamil Nadu. This kind of deification of the penitent hanging from the torture pole is somehow reminiscent of the apotheosis of the Vedic initiate climbing the sacrificial post the at the *vājapeya* sacrifice, which was discussed in section § 2 of this paper.

⁶² On the *tūkkam* ritual see Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes*, 493-97, 499; A.M. Hocart, ‘Tukkam,’ *Man* 27 (1927): 161-62; G. Tarabout, *Sacrifier et donner à voir en pays Malabar. Les fêtes de temple au Kérala (Inde du Sud): étude anthropologique* (Paris: EFEO, 1986), 262ff., 290ff.; Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 37.

Finally, in a variant form of the *tūkkam* rite prevalent in the Travancore region of Kerala, the swingers are made up with artificial beaks and wings to resemble Viṣṇu's mount, the bird Garuḍa, and the rite is in this case called *garuḍan tūkkam* ('eagle hanging').⁶³ This special hook-swinging ceremony is framed in an all-night theatrical performance that presents the story of the war between the demon Dārīka and the goddess Bhagavati. Its symbolic meaning is the offering of the blood of Garuḍa directly to Bhagavati/Bhadrakālī, or else to her blood-thirsty female assistant Vētālam. As in all other *tūkkam* ceremonies of Kerala, the hooks embedded in the backs of the eagle-masked penitents are said to symbolize the goddess' teeth biting their flesh. Thus, the blood shed by the insertion of the hook through the flesh is intended as an offering to the Goddess.⁶⁴ This is in line with the all-India pattern of hook-swinging and flesh-piercing rites, which have always embodied both blood-sacrifice and self-torture.

The penitent's ritual identification with a bird (notably an eagle) in the *garuḍan tūkkam* rite is mirrored by the *paravai-kāvaṭi* rite of Tamil Nadu, in which people suspended horizontally on iron hooks stuck through the muscles of their back and legs from a crane imitate the flight of a bird.⁶⁵ Echoes of both the Vedic and shamanistic "magic flight," a phase of existence in which an initiated person is said to turn into a bird, resound here.

⁶³ Yaroslav Vassilkov ('Parable of a Man Hanging in a Tree and Its Archaic Background,' *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* 32 [1994-95]: 43) claims that the mythological background to this rite was provided by the ancient myth recorded in the *Mahābhārata* (1. 29. 1-10), where the bird Garuḍa steals the *amṛta* (the elixir of immortality), guarded by the revolving iron wheel with a honed edge and sharp blades, from its receptacle at the top of the world. The divine bird first flew in circles, together with the revolving wheel, and then suddenly penetrated between the spokes of the dreadful device to seize the *amṛta*. Prof. Vassilkov compares the rotatory motion of the participants in the *caṛak pūjā* ritual to the circular flight of Garuḍa in this episode of the great epic; and one might add that the blades of the giant wheel, forged by the gods to protect the *amṛta*, are reminiscent of the iron hooks embedded in the flesh of the penitents participating in the *caṛak pūjā*. However, this interpretation is weakened on the one side by the fact that the Kerala devotees who swing on hooks at the *garuḍan tūkkam* ceremony while wearing beaks and wings, do not rotate at all, and on the other by the fact that performers of the *caṛak pūjā* ritual in central and eastern India are never masked or dressed as birds.

⁶⁴ S. Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21, 148. A section of the Bhadrakālī vs. Dārīka myth of the Travancore region deals with the arrival of the bird Garuḍa on the battlefield; he had been sent there by Viṣṇu to assist the goddess in her battle against the demon, which he did. However, it is said that, since the goddess still craved for blood even after she had slain the demon, she drank some of the blood of Garuḍa, too. Garuḍa was willing to offer his own blood in sacrifice because he wished to quench the goddess' thirst for blood, which was a menace to mankind. In another version of this story, it is Bhagavati or Bhadrakālī's wild and ferocious female assistant, the tiger-like Vētālam, who drinks Garuḍa's blood. The *garuḍan tūkkam* ceremony symbolizes this mythical episode.

⁶⁵ The *paravai-kāvaṭi* (or *paravakkāvaṭi*), called *parava-kāvaṭi* in Kerala, is a hook-swinging rite performed in return for or in anticipation of the Goddess' grace. In Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka it is also performed to ask Murukan's assistance or to show him one's gratitude. Tamil *paravai-kāvaṭi* literally translates as 'winged/feathered/bird pole (that carries burdens).' The term *paravai* ('bird, wing, feather') refers to the devotee's winged movement, a kind of "ecstatic flight" — cf. D. Bass, *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Up-country Tamil Identity Politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 137ff.



Fig. 5. *Paravai* ('bird')-*kāvati* rite. Tamil Nadu.

<http://ipiercedmyearsforthis.tumblr.com/post/28534696683/the-paravai-kavadi-8-hooks-no-blood-little>
(accessed December 28, 2012)

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§ 3.6. Hook-swinging in Maharashtra

In the Deccan, the best known example of a hook-swinging practice not associated with the cult of female divinities is probably the one provided by the cult of Khaṇḍobā, a popular Hindu male god worshipped in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh (where he is known as Mallanna), and Karnataka (known there as Mailāra). Until a few decades ago Khaṇḍobā, considered an inferior manifestation of Śiva, was propitiated by his most ardent devotees with possession, fire-walking, hook-swinging, and self-mutilation rituals. Such extreme manifestations of *bhakti* (devotion), called *bagāḍ*, were displayed in public to fulfil some special vows, *navas*, taken for the benefit of single individuals or of the whole community. They were classified as manifestations of demonic devotion (*rākṣasī bhakti*) and were accordingly held in great contempt by the local Brahmins.⁶⁶ The hook-swinging ceremony celebrated in Maharashtra in honour of Khaṇḍobā is termed *gaḷ tocaṇē* ('piercing the hook'). Nowadays a pumpkin, and no longer a human being, is suspended on a hook and swung from the cultic pole on this ritual occasion.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ J.M. Stanley, 'The Capitulation of Maṇi: A Conversion Myth in the Cult of Khaṇḍobā,' in Hildebeitel, ed., *Criminal Gods*, 293 n. 6, 296 n. 35; G.D. Sontheimer, 'Between Ghost and God: A Folk Deity of the Deccan,' in Hildebeitel, ed., *Criminal Gods*, 299-300, 303, 310, 330. Cf. Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 168-70.

⁶⁷ Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 18.

§ 3.7. Some Native American parallels

Besides the Sun Dance, already referred to above, parallels to South Asian spring-pole festivals are found in some native North American and Mesoamerican cultures that possess an ancient rite of spring whose archetypal constitutive elements are thought to consist of “the sacrifice of a living tree and the proffered sacrifice of a living man to help insure the continuity of life at the crucial season of spring planting.”⁶⁸

According to anthropologist Frank Waters,⁶⁹ the *Sáqtiva* (‘Ladder Dance’)⁷⁰ of the Hopi Indians of the Southwestern U.S. and the “Flying Pole Dance” of the *voladores* of Mexico may have a common origin by virtue of their parallel rites and of the ethnic and linguistic relationship of the Hopis and the Aztecs. Indeed, the *voladores* (‘[pole-]fliers’)⁷¹ ceremony of the Totonac, Huastec and Otomí ethnic groups of Mexico is generally regarded as a legacy of the religion of the Aztecs (who, like the Hopis, spoke languages belonging in the Uto-Aztecan family). In the Mesoamerican form of this ceremony, performers often dress as hawks or eagles (*Danza de Los Gavilanes*, or Dance of the Hawks); among the Hopis, too, the four performers of the *Sáqtiva* rite wore eagle or hawk feathers in their hair. There appear to be some striking similarities between the Indian and American pole-rituals, and dressing as birds — cf. the above discussed *garuḍan tūkkam* rite of Kerala, with “fliers” made up as kites, and the rite of *paṛavai-kāvaṭi* or ‘winged pole (that carries burdens)’ of Tamil Nadu, with penitents suspended on a pole or a frame who swing to and fro in imitation of the flight of a bird — may be counted among these. Other similarities between South Asian and Native American pole-rituals are: (1) the concept about a proffered sacrifice of the “fliers” (who, in any event, generally come through the test unharmed); (2) their motion of rotation, or swinging round on ropes;⁷² (3) their observance of complete sexual continence; and (4) the time of the year — the onset of spring — at which such ceremonies are observed in both India and North/Central America.⁷³ Such a parallelism of rites and concepts relating to self-

⁶⁸ F. Waters, *The Book of the Hopi* (2nd ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 197.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-97.

⁷⁰ In the *Sáqtiva* or Ladder Dance of the Hopis, two virginal young male initiates jumped in the mid-air from a crossbar set on top of a high pole along which slightly protruding lengths of several limbs of the tree from which the pole was made were left (hence, the pole was called *sak*, that is, ‘ladder’ because a man could climb to its top by using it as a virtual ladder). Soon after jumping forward, they grabbed and then swung from a crossbar set on top of another pole opposite to the former, and identical to it. Meanwhile, two other boys swung in wide arcs from thongs fixed to two more poles lying nearby. The four poles were planted on the edge of a steep precipice, and the ritual was consequently conceived of by the Hopis as a kind of “jump of death”.

⁷¹ In the *voladores* ceremony of Mexico, four men climb a tall post set up like a maypole and are then tied upside down on ropes that unwind as they swing round the pole and thereby descend spiraling from its top.

⁷² Though one must always concede that the “flying pole” ritual complex of South Asia may have developed from within Hinduism at a comparatively more recent date.

⁷³ It seems that the *Danza de Los Voladores*, like the *carak pūjā* of Bengal, was originally associated with the vernal equinox.

sacrifice hardly means these two religious traditions derive directly from a common prehistoric prototype; on the contrary, they could as well be taken together as an example of convergent evolution by way of which remotely related cultural phenomena (in this case, having most likely a shamanistic origin) end up developing similar adaptive designs as a consequence of selective pressure on the spread of human ideas and behaviour.

Table 1. Rituals/festivals discussed in section § 3

Name of ritual/festival	Name of tribe/caste	Location	Date of ritual/festival	Deity [Demon, if any]	Salient features
<i>caṛak pūjā</i> , i.e. 'ceremonial climbing (of the <i>caṛak</i> pole)' (part of Śiva's <i>gājan</i> festival in Bengal, and of the <i>Māṇḍā</i> festival in Jharkhand)	Bengal: Hindu low castes Jharkhand: Munda tribes, Oraon (tribe), Hindu low castes	West Bengal, Bangladesh & Ranchi Plateau (Jharkhand)	<i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox) or, in the case of the tribal <i>Māṇḍā</i> festival of Jharkhand, during the month of <i>Vaiśākha</i> (April-May)	1. Śiva 2. Śakti	devotee climbs a pole with a crossbar and swings from or rotates around it by means of a rope with iron hooks stuck in his flesh; earliest accounts are silent about rotation
Uṛā ('Flying') festival of N.E. Orissa; cp. Bengali <i>caṛake-ora</i> ('flying on the <i>caṛak</i> tree'); the same hook-swinging ritual is observed at the <i>Daṇḍa</i> and <i>Pāṭuā</i> festivals in other parts of Orissa	Hindu low castes Munda tribes of N.E. Orissa	Orissa	<i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	1. Śiva 2. Śakti	devotee swung around on a pole with a crossbar like at the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
Pata festival	Santal (tribe)	N.E. Orissa, West Bengal & Jharkhand	<i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox) or the whole month of <i>Vaiśākha</i> (April-May)	<i>pata boṅgas</i> (tribal adaptations of Śiva & Śakti)	devotee swung around on a pole with a crossbar like at the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
Megnāth (or Kandra) festival	Gond tribes Korku (tribe)	S. Madhya Pradesh	some days after the <i>Holi</i> festival in <i>Phālguna</i> (February-March)	Kandra/Kendra (only among the Korkus) or Megnāth [= Meghanāda, son of the demon Rāvaṇa]	tribal village priest and other penitents swung around on a pole with a crossbar like at the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
<i>gaḷ deorā</i> , i.e. 'place of worship by hook (-swinging)'	Bhil (tribe)	W. Madhya Pradesh	during the <i>Holi</i> festival in <i>Phālguna</i> (February-March)	1. <i>Sītlāmātā</i> (smallpox goddess) 2. <i>Gaḷ Bāpsi</i> ('Little Father-Hook').	penitent swung around on a pole with a crossbar like at the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
Jovāra festival	Gond tribes	Chhattisgarh	either in spring — ten days after <i>Holi</i> , or in autumn — ten days before <i>Daśaharā</i>	Marai Mātā (goddess of epidemics and tutelary deity of the <i>paṇḍā</i>)	tribal shaman-diviner (<i>paṇḍā</i>) climbs a bladed ladder amid different acts of self-injury
<i>dhām</i> (divination ritual)	Baiga (tribe)	Chhattisgarh	on request	various divinities/spirits	tribal shaman-diviner (<i>baruā</i>) climbs a ladder while practicing self-torture

no name recorded (see section § 6.5)	Dusādh (probably a Hinduized tribe; now a Scheduled Caste)	S.E. Uttar Pradesh & Bihar	during a fire-walk ceremony held twice every year — in Pauṣa (December-January) and Caitra (March-April)	Rāhu (deified ancestor?) [= Rāhu, the Hindu eclipse-demon]	<i>bhagat</i> (diviner, medium and healer) possessed by Rāhu climbs a bladed ladder
<i>gaḷ ṭocaṇē</i> , i.e. 'piercing the hook'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Maharashtra	in fulfilment of a special vow (<i>nava</i>)	Khaṇḍobā (considered a manifestation of Śiva)	devotee climbs a pole with a crossbar and swings from it by means of a rope with iron hooks stuck in his flesh; no motion of rotation involved
<i>siḍi-māri</i> , i.e. 'hook (rite in honour of the smallpox goddess) Māri'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Karnataka & Andhra Pradesh	during the annual temple festival of the goddess of epidemics (usually celebrated after the start of the hot season)	Māri & many other regional/local goddesses of epidemics	devotee swings from a long beam, installed in a diagonal pattern on a processional wagon, by means of a rope with iron hooks stuck in his flesh; another form of the ritual (without the use of the mobile car) is very similar to the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
Ceṭil Urcavam, i.e. 'hook festival'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu	during the annual temple festival of the goddess of epidemics (usually celebrated after the start of the hot season)	Māriyamman (goddess of epidemics)	devotee swings from a horizontal beam fixed on the top of a vertical pole by means of a rope with iron hooks stuck in his flesh; another form of the ritual, recorded in colonial sources, was very similar to the <i>caṛak pūjā</i> of Bengal
<i>kaḷuvērral</i> , i.e. 'mounting of the stake'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu	Pankuṇi (March-April)	Kāttavarāyaṇ (regional deified hero considered the son of Śiva and Pārvatī)	devotee impersonating Kāttavarāyaṇ mounts the <i>kaḷu</i> ('stake for impaling criminals') and is offered a hook while he is on top of it
<i>tūkkam</i> , i.e. 'hanging/weighing'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Kerala	Mīnam (March-April)	goddesses Bhagavati & Bhadrakālī	devotee swings from a long beam, installed in a diagonal pattern on a processional wagon, by means of a rope with iron hooks stuck in his flesh; in some cases children are handed over to the swingers who hold them in their arms as they swing
<i>garuḍan tūkkam</i> , i.e. 'eagle hanging'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Kerala	Mīnam (March-April)	goddesses Bhagavati & Bhadrakālī [Vētālam, a blood-thirsty female assistant of Bhagavati/Bhadrakālī]	variant form of <i>tūkkam</i> rite whose performers dress as eagles to impersonate the bird Garuḍa
<i>paṛavai-kāvaṭi</i> , i.e. 'winged pole (that carries burdens)'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu	in fulfilment of a vow to the Goddess or, when the worshipped deity is Murukan, during the Taippūcam festival in the month of Tai (January-February)	1. Māriyamman & other local goddesses of epidemics 2. Murukan	devotee swings from a long beam, installed in a horizontal pattern on a wheeled contrivance, by means of ropes with iron hooks stuck in the flesh of his back and legs, and thus mimics the flight of birds

§ 4. Other ordeals performed with the use of prickly, pointed or sharp objects

§ 4.1. The *gājan* festivals of Bengal

Among the numerous self-torture rites performed in Bengal and Orissa in the period of the *viṣuvat*, a very important role is played by those in which the penitent's physical pain is self-inflicted through a constant pressure on, or even a violent impact with objects such as a nail-studded plank, a board with swords or knives attached, or a mass of thorny bushes. Since the phenomenology of all these devotional ordeals — which, in essence, consists in resting one's weight on sharp spikes or blades for a variable time — differs to some extent from that of flesh-piercing rites (which are religious trials carried out through “self-impalement,” i.e. by poking skewers, hatpins, needles, tiny lances, or miniature tridents through one's cheeks, lips, tongue, sides, or arms), they require a separate treatment here.

There exists in West Bengal a class of low-caste Śaiva ardent practitioners, known as *bhaktas* ('devotees') or as *sannyāsīs* ('ascetics'),⁷⁴ who during Śiva's *gājan* festival band together in vowed brotherhoods led by a *pāṭ-bhakta* (lit. 'throne [i.e. chief] devotee'). They practice all of the forms of self-torture listed in the preceding paragraph with the addition of another peculiar type carried out by the *pāṭ-bhakta* alone and consisting in lying on a wooden plank studded with nails in its middle portion. The plank, *pāṭ* or *pāṭā* in Bengali, is the size of an adult man and is endowed with an iron neck rest and iron supports for the ankles. It can be raised and carried by two poles tied to it lengthwise. *Pāṭās* are considered sacred by the Śaivas of Bengal inasmuch as each is believed to be the representative of Śiva's terrific form, Bhairava. One or more of them may be carried by *bhaktas*, in turns, on their heads in the course of a nocturnal procession (*rāṭgājan*), lit by lamps, to a Śiva temple. On this occasion, the *pāṭā* bearers dance wildly and spasmodically in a trance during which they are believed to be possessed by Bhairava through the medium of the *pāṭā*, which directly rests on their heads. They are accompanied in the procession by other groups of *bhaktas* rolling on the ground all the way to the temple or having their tongues perforated by long iron rods. On the fifteenth and last day of the *gājan* festival, the *pāṭ-bhakta* is laid on the largest *pāṭā*, his back on the iron spikes, and is taken in procession to the temple. In Dharma's *gājan* festival, the *pāṭā* is replaced by a similar, roughly anthropomorphic, nail-studded board, called *Bāṇeśbar* ('Lord of Arrows'). This sacred object, too, is used to kind of “impale” the leading

⁷⁴ Obviously this term is used in the ritual context of the *gājan* in a different sense from that of Sanskrit *saṃnyāsīn*, a word that designates an ascetic, in most cases a Brahman, who has taken *saṃnyāsa* (initiation into renunciation). The *bhaktas* or *sannyāsīs* of Bengal adopt the temporary status of an ascetic (*saṃnyāsīn*) to perform a series of ascetic exercises only during the celebration of the *gājan* festival, and return to their ordinary lives after its conclusion.

bhakta, and seems to be a deification of the *pāṭā* (in Śiva's *gājan*, as just seen, alternatively identified with Bhairava). The *bhaktas* of Dharma's *gājan* explicitly regard the Bāṇeśbar as the lord of *bāṇphōrā* (the generic designation of all flesh-piercing rites).⁷⁵

At Śiva's *gājan* the *bhaktas* are consecrated in a special initiation ceremony during which each, in spite of being from the lowest castes, is given a sacred thread akin to that worn by the Brahmans. The thread, worn around the neck, not across the left shoulder in the Brahmanic fashion, symbolizes each *bhakta*'s rebirth in the world of the gods, for *bhaktas* claim to be like deities and symbolically assume the *gotra* of Śiva for the duration of the festival.⁷⁶ The archaic relationship between ordeal and sacred initiation, which has been briefly discussed in the introductory section of this paper, is apparently at work in this religious observance.



Fig. 6. *Pāṭās* (planks studded with nails). West Bengal.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ilreporter/4813988121/> (accessed December 27, 2012)

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⁷⁵ A. Östör, *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure, and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 118-61; A. Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī, 2: On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 190-207.

⁷⁶ Östör, *The Play of the Gods*, 155, 159.



Fig. 7. The row of blades fixed on a plank used to perform the *kãtãri sannyãs* rite. West Bengal.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ilreporter/4813986891/> (accessed December 27, 2012)

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§ 4.2. The Daᅇᅇa and Pãtuã festivals of Orissa

A group of religious festivals similar in their execution to the *gãjan* of West Bengal, and like these celebrating the New Year, are observed in Orissa during the month of Caitra (March-April). Known as the Daᅇᅇa Yãtrã, Pãtuã Yãtrã, and Jhamu Yãtrã, these festivals, like the *gãjan*, are characterized by a wide range of self-inflicted body mortifications by devotees who have vowed to fast and self-torture. Besides the already mentioned rite of the “flying on the wheel” (*urã*), these votive ordeals of Orissa, just like those of nearby Bengal, include forms of self-injury involving the use of pointed or sharp objects or contact with fire; moreover, they are common to Śiva and Śakti cults. The penitents of Orissa are often united in brotherhoods, access to which may be in some cases hereditary. They generally belong to Hindu agricultural castes of low social rank or to semi-tribal communities, both of whom in the distant past formed the bulk of the folk armies of various Orissan kingdoms. The Daᅇᅇa and Pãtuã Yãtrãs of Orissa are generally patronized by exponents of wealthy families — in times past, in some areas, by the *rãjãs* themselves.⁷⁷ The same is said to have been the case with the penitents of Bengal who introduced

⁷⁷ F. Brighenti, *Śakti Cult in Orissa* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001), 344 ff.

and cultivated flesh-piercing rites at the *gājan* festival; indeed, “[t]he class of men from whom these *sannyāsīs* were recruited furnished the Hindu zamindars (landlords) of yore with their infantry.”⁷⁸ Historically, in both Bengal and Orissa high-caste festival patrons, often Kṣatriyas, used to pay bands of low-caste performers of all of the above described penances (including the hook-swinging ritual), using them as proxies for their own religious benefit and social prestige.

The main object of veneration during the Daṇḍa Yātrā of Orissa (also known as Daṇḍa Nāṭa) is a holy cane or staff (*daṇḍa*) representing Śiva, to whom the songs, dances, gymnastics, acrobatics, austerities and penances performed by the *bhaktas* are offered during the festival. The Goddess, too, is worshipped and propitiated at the festival, especially in her ferocious aspect as Kālī and her propitious one as Śiva’s spouse (Gaurī). Each of the different acts of self-mortification practiced by the *bhaktas* is called a *daṇḍa* (in this case in the sense of ‘punishment,’ not of ‘staff’); accordingly, the *bhaktas* of the Daṇḍa Yātrā are alternatively referred to as *daṇḍuās*. For two or three weeks they move in closely knit groups from village to village across a particular district. They conduct an ascetic itinerant life and take part in different religious ceremonies. Their rites of penance or ‘punishment’ encompass within their rich symbolism some precise references to each of the five gross elements of Indian cosmological traditions, the *pañcabhūtas*. The element earth is represented by the hot dust on which the *bhakta* rolls under the scorching heat of the mid-day sun (*dhūli daṇḍa* or ‘dust punishment’); the element water by the river or pond he plunges into to perform underwater feats (*pāṇī daṇḍa* or ‘water punishment’); the element fire by his stepping onto glowing coals, handling burning resin, or swinging, head downwards, from a crossbeam with a blazing fire lit below (these fire ordeals are collectively termed *agni daṇḍa* or ‘fire punishment’); the element air by his whirling high in the air around the *uṛā* pole. Ether, the fifth element of traditional Indian cosmology, is represented by the *bhakta*’s continuous utterance of *mantras*.⁷⁹ Physical tests consisting in laying one’s weight on pointed or sharp objects such as swords, nails or thorns, only play a secondary role in the economy of this festival.⁸⁰ The aim of all such self-torture practices is reportedly to draw Śiva’s attention on human sufferings, which are subsumed in the painful physical tests undergone by the *bhaktas*. The latter, by virtue of their epitomizing the pains suffered by the whole community or by the individuals who finance their

⁷⁸ Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 108.

⁷⁹ I. Citaristi, ‘The Five Elements in the Daṇḍa Rituals of Orissa,’ *Indian Folklore Research Journal* 1 (2001): 47-52; B. Schnepel, ‘The “Dance of Punishment”: Transgression and Punishment in an East Indian Ritual,’ in U. Rao and J. Hutnyk, eds., *Celebrating Transgression: Method and Politics in Anthropological Studies of Culture* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 115-27.

⁸⁰ K.B. Das, *A Study of Orissan Folk-lore* (Santiniketan: Visvabharati Publishing Department, 1953), 67; H.C. Das, ‘Tradition of Folk Music and Dance in Orissa,’ in H.C. Das, ed., *Cultural Heritage of Orissa* (Cuttack: Institute of Oriental and Orissan Studies, 1993), 335.

dangerous feats, thus act as intermediaries between Śiva and his followers.⁸¹ In this case, too, as in that of the *bhaktas* active during the *gājan* festival of Bengal, each votary is regarded as an initiate enjoying the temporary status of an ascetic because of the privileged relationship he entertains with Śiva, so much so that a sacred thread akin to that worn by the Brahmans is conferred upon him.⁸²

The Pāṭuā Yātrā draws its name from the *pāṭuās*, a class of Orissan low-caste penitents who carry out their acts of self-torture in honour of the Great Goddess.⁸³ The Oriya word *pāṭuā* derives from *pāṭa* 'an expanse',⁸⁴ that is, the bed of thorns, fire, etc. these people walk across during their penances. Throughout the festival, a major role is played by physical trials involving trampling on thorns and iron nails and driving sharp metal objects into one's flesh. Each class of *pāṭuās* specializes in a particular form of self-torture; thus, the *kaṇṭā pāṭuā* walks over or pounces on a bed of thorns or nails (*kaṇṭā*);⁸⁵ the *niāñ pāṭuā* walks over glowing embers (*niāñ* = fire); the *khaṇḍā pāṭuā* is carried around on a temple-like wooden palanquin with sharp blades affixed on it in a row (*khaṇḍā* = sword);⁸⁶ the *phoṛa pāṭuā* drives iron rods or big nails or hooks into his back or his tongue (*phoṛa* = bore, aperture);⁸⁷ the *jhulā pāṭuā* is hung upside down from the branch of a tree or a crossbeam, to which his feet are tied tightly, and is then swung over a fire (*jhulā* = swinging);⁸⁸ the *uṛā pāṭuā* is hooked through his back muscles and then swung high around a pole; the *pāñī pāṭuā* performs some hazardous feats in the water (*pāñī*); and the *ghaṭa pāṭuā* dances on stilts with a water pitcher on his head (*ghaṭa* = water-jar, pitcher). The ordeals taken during the Pāṭuā Yātrā

⁸¹ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 61, 64.

⁸² L.K. Sagpathy, 'The Tribal Dances of Orissa,' *The Hindu*, 31 October 1993.

⁸³ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 81-86; Patnaik, *Festivals of Orissa*, 21-22.

⁸⁴ G.C. Praharaj, *Pūrṇachandra Ordīā Bhāshākosha (A Lexicon of the Oriya Language)* (Cuttack: Utkal Sahitya Press, 1931-1940), s.v. *पट*. Sanskrit *pāṭa* 'breadth, expanse.' The Oriya term *pāṭuā* does not appear to be the same as the Bengali term *paṭuā* (from *paṭ* 'cloth or canvas'), which designates a class of hereditary scroll-painters and itinerant poet-singers.

⁸⁵ The Orissan equivalent of the *kāṭā sannyās*, a class of ritual ordeals typical of the *gājan* festival of Bengal which include *kāṭā jhāp* ('jumping on thorns'), performed by jumping down from scaffolding onto prickly shrubs spread on the ground, and *kāṭā khelā* ('playing with thorns'), in which participants lie down on a bed made of the same prickly shrubs over which they roll and wallow. Cf. Sen, 'Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,' 610; Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 86; S. Manna, *Mother Goddess Caṇḍī: Its Socio-Ritual Impact on the Folk-life* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993), 143.

⁸⁶ At the *gājan* festival of Bengal, a class of devotees undergo a similar ordeal called *pātā* ('blade') *sannyās* or, in certain areas, *bāṭi jhāp* ('jumping on knives'). These *sannyāsīs* first get on a raised bamboo platform, and then throw themselves with extended arms upon a row of large and thick household knives (*bāṭi*) fixed on a board held by other *sannyāsīs* below. Cf. Sen, 'Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,' 610-11; Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 85-86.

⁸⁷ This type of ordeal corresponds to the *bāñphōṛā* ('perforation with arrows') class of rites performed by devotees at the *gājan* festival of Bengal by piercing their tongue, forehead skin, and the sides of their body with long sharp-pointed iron rods. On the different nomenclatures used to indicate the various types of *bāñs* ('arrows') employed in these rites of self-torture see Sen, 'Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,' 612-13 and Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 103-05.

⁸⁸ The same type of ordeal, under the name of *jhulā sannyās*, is commonly performed at the *gājan* festival of Bengal. Cf. Sen, 'Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,' 611. See also section § 6.4 in this paper.

are dedicated to goddess Maṅgaḷā, the Auspicious-One (a propitious aspect of the Hindu Great Goddess), who is the same as Durgā/Kālī. She is worshipped during the festival in the form of a pitcher filled with water, in which the power of the Goddess is believed to be embodied.

§ 4.3. The shaman's thorn-seat swing in the Orissa-Bastar region

Given the peculiarity of the acts of self-torture performed by low-caste and semi-tribal votaries of Orissa and Bengal on the occasion of their respective *viṣuvat* celebrations, it appears legitimate to wonder whether such rites have some parallels in the tribal cultures of central-eastern India. To this effect, a hypothesis can be put forward that the religious trials carried out by Hindu votaries through painful contact or impact with nails, blades, thorns and the like, may have their common archetype in a more primitive form of body self-mortification — that is, the ritual swinging on a divinatory seat suspended on a tree branch and covered with a bundle of thorns, which characterizes some shamanistic religions of southwestern Orissa and of the Bastar-Chhattisgarh region. Indeed, this rudimentary instrument of self-torture, made with natural materials and without the use of any metal, appears to have been devised well before such functionally similar implements as the board of nails or the palanquin provided with a row of blades whose cutting edge points upward, which are employed by Hindu devotees to practice their self-mortification ceremonies. It seems therefore important, at this point of inquiry, to mention the different ritual occasions on which the shamans of some central-eastern Indian tribes swing on thorns.

The Gadabas of southwestern Orissa, a tribal group divided among Munda- and Dravidian-speaking sections, practice the ritual swinging on a seat covered with sharp thorns during the Bāli Yātrā, a fertility festival observed by the tribal people of the area in the month of Bhādrapada (August-September). A possessed shaman-diviner of the village goddess, the *beju* (a eunuch or hermaphrodite dressed as a woman) or, in all places where such a sacred specialist is not available, a *bejuni* (the *beju*'s female homologue), sits on a rudimentary swing whose seat is covered with thorny plants and, while oscillating to and fro, falls into a trance; then starts to utter prophecies. He/she also invites other members of the community to sit on the swing, promising them immunity from suffering, thanks to the protection of the goddess. At certain places the *beju* subsequently walks on hot coals.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 2: 250ff.; G. Ramadas, 'The Gadabas,' *Man in India* 11 (1931): 170-71; Patnaik, *Festivals of Orissa*, 81.

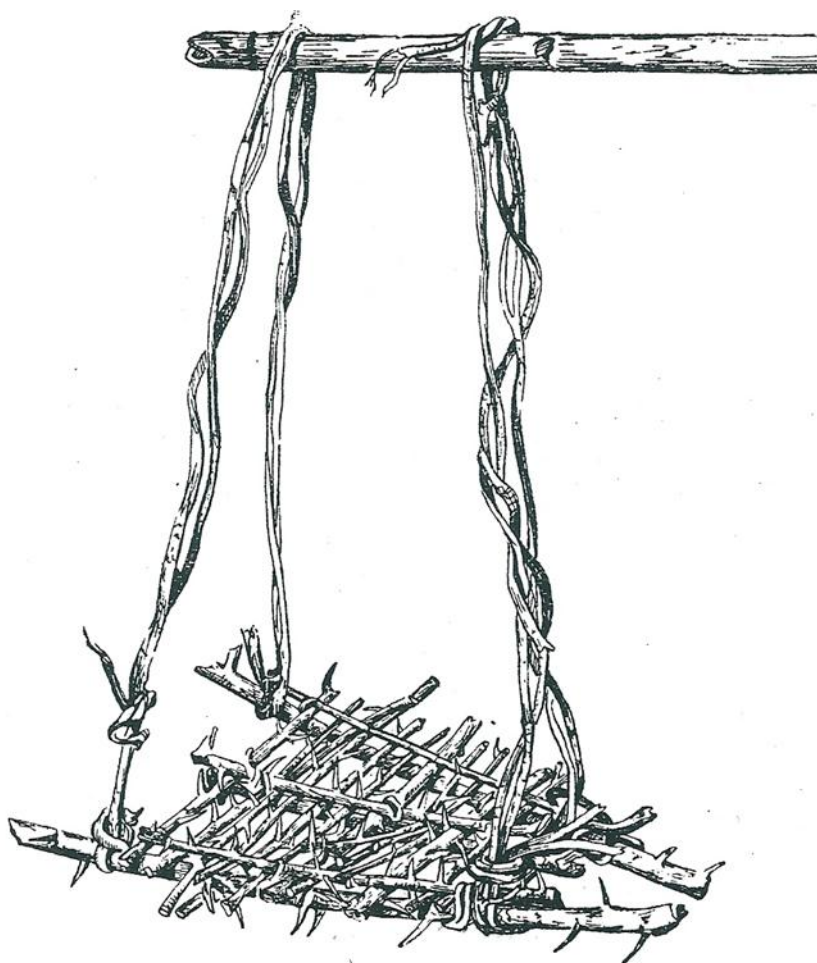


Fig. 8. Bondo “magician’s swing,” its seat made of thorny branches. Orissa. From. V. Elwin, *Bondo Highlander* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1950), 112, fig. 31.

A thorn-seat swing is used by the Bondos, a culturally archaic Munda-speaking tribe of southwestern Orissa, at the *dagoi-gige* sacrifice, which should be offered three times during a Bondo couple’s married life to placate the malevolent spirit, “Dagoi,” believed to exert enormous influence on conjugal life and the family economy. During the sacrificial rite, a Bondo shaman and medicine-man, the *disari*, swings on a spike-studded seat, in a state of trance and possession, and finally invites the sacrificing couple to participate in the same ordeal.⁹⁰

Also the Munda-speaking Hill Saoras of southwestern Orissa practice the ritual oscillation on a swing of thorns, in this case a rite at which a shaman possessed by “Lurnisum” (a female divinity-spirit presiding over epidemics) officiates to make a village immune from smallpox.

⁹⁰ V. Elwin, *Bondo Highlander* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1950), 106ff.

Among both the Hill Saoras and the Gadabas, swinging on thorns is accompanied by self-injury acts performed with the use of sharp blades.⁹¹

Among the Muria Gonds, a Dravidian-speaking tribal group of Bastar district, there exists a shaman-diviner, *siraha*, believed to be able to establish contact with ill-giving spirits through ecstatic dances, trembling, and trance as well as some harmful acts such as self-scourging and/or swinging on a seat studded with sharp iron points.⁹² As mentioned earlier, the same shamanic paraphernalia are peculiar to the Baiga sacred specialist, *baruā*.

In all such instances of a tribal religious ordeal, the shaman or diviner who practices self-torture intends to authenticate his possession and certify the validity of the propitiatory sacrifice or divinatory rite he performs. By publicly submitting himself to self-torture and, above all, coming through it unharmed, the tribal sacred man shows the bystanders that the divine spirit, believed to descend upon him during the possession ceremony or the trance, can make him insensitive to pain, especially if satisfied with the offerings it has received. Like other tribal self-injury practices discussed here, the physical test of the thorn-seat swing represents a moment of public exhibition of the superhuman power the shaman achieves, thanks to his initiation. It is interesting to notice how the shaman on occasions invites some uninitiated to undertake self-torture, as if he wished to drag individuals among the profane members of the community into the discovery of the initiatory value of physical suffering. This socio-religious trend could be defined as a form of “democratization” of shamanism. It can be hypothesized that an analogous tendency toward cultural imitation may have contributed to the proliferation of Hindu self-torture rites. In fact, the introduction of self-injury rituals into the worship of Śiva, the Great Goddess, and Murukāṇ might have occurred, at least in part, as a cultural loan. Hindu low-caste groups might have, in the course of time, borrowed some ritual techniques aimed at establishing forms of ecstatic communion with supernatural entities from the shamanistic cults of certain South Asian tribes; in the same breath, they might have identified the mythical founders of such mystical techniques with heroes and demons appearing in different episodes of the epics and the Purāṇas, as we shall see later.

One should be cautious in dealing with this issue as there is no historical evidence such a Hinduization process ever took place in the above terms. In any event, it seems incorrect to ascribe the origin of the shamanistic swinging on thorns to an influence exerted on tribal cults of central and eastern India by either the Hindu hook-swinging complex or some Hindu votive

⁹¹ V. Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1955), 203.

⁹² V. Elwin, *The Muria and Their Ghotul* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1947), 199ff.

ordeals carried out through contact of acute spikes with parts of the penitent's body. In principle, even the well-known ancient form of penance practiced by Indian ascetics by lying on a bed of thorns or a couch studded with rows of iron spikes (usually with a spiky head-rest as pillow) might be indebted to some older shamanic rituals of self-torture performed with thorny plants.⁹³

Table 2. Rituals/festivals discussed in section § 4

Name of ritual/ festival	Name of tribe/caste	Location	Date of ritual/festival	Deity [Demon, if any]	Salient features
<i>gājan</i> festivals (two different traditions: Śiva's <i>gājan</i> and Dharma's <i>gājan</i>)	Hindu low castes	West Bengal	Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	1. Śiva, or else (in Dharma's <i>gājan</i>) Dharma Ṭhākur, a fertility village deity 2. Śakti, or else (in Dharma's <i>gājan</i>) the earth goddess [<i>bāṅphōrā</i> or flesh-piercing rites are mythologically traced back to Bāṅa, the "Arrow Demon" — see section § 7.3]	lying on a wooden plank studded with nails; perforation of the tongue and the sides with long iron rods; jumping from a raised platform onto a row of sloped blades or on thorny shrubs; rolling on a bed of thorns
Pātuā Yātrā, i.e. 'festival of the <i>pātuās</i> (devotees who walk across a <i>pāṭa</i> or expanse [of thorns, fire etc.])'	Hindu low castes	Orissa	Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	goddess Maṅgaḷā (a manifestation of Durgā/Kālī)	perforation of the back or the tongue with iron rods, big nails or hooks; walking on a bed of thorns; standing on a processional palanquin with sharp blades affixed on it in a row
Bāli Yātrā, i.e. 'festival of sand'	Gadaba (tribe)	S.W. Orissa	Bhādrapada (August-September)	village-goddess	tribal shaman-diviner (<i>beju</i>) swings in a trance state on a seat covered with sharp thorns and utters oracular responses; he also performs self-injury acts with the use of sharp blades
<i>dagoi-gige</i> ritual	Bondo (tribe)	S.W. Orissa	three times during a Bondo couple's married life	Dagoi (malevolent divinity/spirit believed to exert enormous influence on conjugal life)	tribal shaman/healer (<i>disari</i>) swings in a trance state on a seat covered with sharp thorns

⁹³ Lying on a bed of thorns (in Pāli, *kaṅṭakapassaya*) was one of the typical forms of penance ascribed to the Ājīvika ascetics in ancient Buddhist sources. The so-called "bed of thorns" (in Sanskrit, *kaṅṭaka-śayyā*), an iron couch studded with nails traditionally used by certain Hindu *sādhus* to afflict and subdue the body, appears to be related, even linguistically, to that ancient Ājīvika penance. Cf. W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk-lore of Northern India* (2nd ed., Westminster: A. Constable & Co., 1896), 1: 92; A.L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: A Vanished Indian Religion* (London: Luzac & Co., 1951), 110. See also section § 7.5 in this paper.

no name recorded	Hill Saora (tribe)	S.W. Orissa	during outbreaks of smallpox	Lurnisum (female divinity/spirit presiding over epidemics)	tribal shaman/healer (<i>kuṛan</i>) swings in a trance state on a seat covered with sharp thorns to make a village immune from smallpox; he also performs self-injury acts with the use of sharp blades
divination and healing rituals (no name recorded)	Muria Gond (tribe)	Bastar district (Chhattisgarh)	on request	various divinities/spirits	tribal shaman-diviner and healer (<i>siraha</i>) swings in a trance state on a seat covered with sharp thorns and scourges himself on it

§ 5. Other South Indian votive ordeals: *kāvaṭi* rituals and cheek-piercing

The ancient Dravidian term *kāvaṭi*, occurring in identical form in Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu, designates an entire class of Hindu rituals of offering and penance. Such rituals are specially prominent in Tamil Nadu, where they represent an essential component of the cult of Murukaṅ — the Tamil equivalent of the North Indian Hindu god of war Skanda, son of Śiva and Pārvatī. Etymologically the term *kāvaṭi*⁹⁴ designates any shoulder pole and, more specifically, a bamboo pole, used for carrying burdens on the shoulders, with ropes fastened to both ends with containers on each; moreover, it indicates any burden carried on the shoulders with a yoke. In its ritualistic meaning, the term designates a ceremonial carrying yoke of bamboo with an arch over it, which is interwoven with peacock feathers, decorated with either lime fruits and streamers or flowers made of cloth or papier-mâché, and loaded with offerings mostly for Murukaṅ's temple. The peacock being regarded as Murukaṅ's *vāhana* (sacred mount), the *kāvaṭi* is, therefore, conceived of as the god's "peacock vehicle." Limes are believed to ward off evil spirits all over the Deccan. *Kāvaṭis* are usually loaded with two baskets hanging at either end of the pole, which contain offerings to the god. These may variously consist of milk, coconuts, sugar, honey, flowers, fruits, fish, and even living snakes. The offerings are shouldered, often from a long distance, to some eminent Murukaṅ temple

by male *kāvaṭi* carriers,⁹⁵ walking barefoot, who undertake this penitential pilgrimage in compliance with a vow they have formerly made to the god. In this connection, a shoulder yoke

⁹⁴ From Proto-Dravidian **kā-waṭi* 'shoulder pole.' Cf. B. Krishnamurti, *The Dravidian Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9, 525.

⁹⁵ The *kāvaṭi* penance is everywhere gender-specific.

used as a cultic implement to carry baskets containing rice-cake offerings to some deity is mentioned in a late Vedic ritual text.⁹⁶

Before fulfilling his vow, the votary has to succumb to a long period of purification. The *kāvaṭi* penance is generally framed in the context of an annual procession accompanied by the incessant beating of drums and cheers from the crowd, both of which contribute immensely to inducing the trance in the carrier of the *kāvaṭi*, causing him to abandon himself to ecstatic dancing (the *kāvaṭiyāṭṭam* or 'burden dance'). By ancient tradition, Murukaṅ is believed to have the power to possess his faithful followers, forcing them to worship him through ecstatic dances and songs. While performing their step-dance, the *kāvaṭi* bearers observe silence; the tinkling of the many brass bells their *kāvaṭis* are adorned with is the only sound they produce. The penitents come back to normal consciousness only after they reach the temple of destination, at which they offer the items transported on the *kāvaṭi* to the worshipped image of Murukaṅ at the time of its annual consecration ceremony (*abhiṣeka*).⁹⁷ As in Śaiva-Śākta ritual tests, the *kāvaṭi* bearer then asks Murukaṅ to repay his sufferings through an act of grace, which generally consists of curing his own illnesses or those of close relatives or in the blessing of his own children.

The most extreme form of *kāvaṭi* penance is the so-called *alaku-kāvaṭi* or *kāvaṭi* with skewers,⁹⁸ a practice that is currently restricted to the Tamils residing in southwestern Peninsular Malaysia (including Singapore) and northeastern Sumatra. The *alaku-kāvaṭi* is performed on the occasion of the Hindu festival of Taippūcam, which is celebrated during the full moon in the month of Tai (January-February). This festival originated in South India and was introduced in Peninsular Malaysia in the late nineteenth century by low-caste Tamil migrant groups who had come to the region of the Straits of Malacca as labourers. The Tamil term *alaku* means 'blade of a weapon' (e.g. a sword) as well as 'head of an arrow.' In this variant form of *kāvaṭi*-bearing, which involves a larger amount of self-torture than the basic one, the *kāvaṭi* carrier endures the pain caused by innumerable hooks or, alternatively, spear-like spikes piercing the skin of the trunk of his body. The structure of this type of *kāvaṭi* is generally made of four arched metal frames on which are fixed dozens of symmetrically arranged inward-projecting long metal spikes whose pointed ends stick into the flesh of the votary. The whole machinery has the appearance of an arch-shaped cage of spikes assembled in such a manner as to suggest the shape of a spread

⁹⁶ *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* 1. 12. 1-3. This rare *sūtra* passage relates that, if a *caitya* (holy place of some sort) happens to be far off, one may send one's sacrificial offering (*bali*) in the baskets of a shoulder yoke (*vivadha*) by a middleman. Cf. A. Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 109-10.

⁹⁷ K.V. Zvelebil, *Tamil Traditions on Subrahmanya-Murugan* (Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, 1991), 32-35.

⁹⁸ The Tamil term *alaku-kāvaṭi* is best translated as 'a burden of sharp weapons' (*Tamil Lexicon*, s.v.).

peacock's tail. Alternatively, countless little hooks anchored to the votary's skin can be fastened to metal wires or chains tied to the arched frames.

In either case, during the long processional walk of the penitent, the waving *alaku-kāvaṭi* structure is stabilized by virtue of its being attached to his body with either spikes or hooks, and it is the pressure exerted by the spikes on the torso, or else the tension of the wires the iron hooks are fastened to, that keeps the device balanced on the penitent's shoulders (by which the *kāvaṭi*'s weight, cushioned by shoulder pads, is supported). An *alaku-kāvaṭi* being an object of considerable weight, often surmounted by a model temple, it is not difficult to figure out the intense pain caused by the pull of the hooks or the pressure of the spikes inserted under the skin of the *kāvaṭi* carrier during his trek to a Murukaṅ temple. The penitent's bodily pain is sometimes increased by wooden sandals, with long nails sticking out, pointing upwards, pricking his feet. The Tamil *kāvaṭi*-bearers of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore and Sumatra are, however, invariably seen immersed in a trancelike state denominated *aruḷ* ('deity's grace/mercy') — a psychic condition that should, at least in theory, prevent them from suffering. They begin to shiver and shake as they achieve trance, enact a feverish circular-step dance during their march to the temple, and generally collapse after they have made their offering to Murukaṅ in the temple sanctum. Their *kāvaṭis* are then immediately removed.⁹⁹

Although such extreme forms of a *kāvaṭi* procession were banned from southern India long ago, there is little doubt about the fact Tamil Nadu is their place of origin. Metallic *kāvaṭis* like those present in Singapore are forbidden in India,¹⁰⁰ yet the simpler model of processional *kāvaṭi* originally devised by the Hindus of Tamil Nadu — a shoulder-borne arch made with wood or bamboo — could easily have been provided in by-gone days with instruments of self-torture such as the inward-projecting skewers or the chains with hooks that are nowadays part and parcel of the hi-tech *alaku-kāvaṭis* used by Tamil Hindus in Southeast Asian countries. In addition, during the celebration of the Taippūcam festival at the main centres of Murukaṅ-worship in Tamil Nadu, the *kāvaṭi* bearers practice self-torture after fashions that closely resemble those adopted at the same festival by Murukaṅ devotees belonging to the Tamil diaspora in the Straits of Malacca. Indeed, during the celebrations of Taippūcam across Tamil Nadu it is common to see *kāvaṭi* bearers (at times even female ones) who stick dozens of limes, attached to fish-hooks, into their

⁹⁹ M. Tanaka, *Goddesses, Patrons and Devotees: Ritual and Power among the Tamil Fishermen of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 92-97; A.C. Willford, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 60-76.

¹⁰⁰ H.-D. Evers and J. Pavadarayan, 'Religious Fervour and Economic Success: The Chettiars of Singapore,' in K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani, eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 858.

back and chest in multiple rows and have their cheeks, tongue, forehead or torso perforated by temple priests with metal *vēls* ('spears' or 'lances') of different lengths — the *vēl*, a lance with a leaf-shaped blade, is the most important and ancient aniconic symbol of Murukaṅ's power.¹⁰¹ This ritual, known as *vēl-kāvaṭi* ('burden of spears'),¹⁰² is usually as bloodless as possible and requires participants to enter a trancelike state prior to ritual performance. During their ecstasy, Tamil *vēl-kāvaṭi* practitioners dance the *kāvaṭiyāṭṭam*, a wild and frenzied dance of possession.

The *vēls* pushed through the cheeks and the tongue by Tamil devotees of Murukaṅ in compliance with a vow are the functional and symbolic equivalents of the *bāṅs* ('arrows, shafts') used in the same manner by Bengali devotees of Śiva at the *gājan* festival.¹⁰³ It can further be noted here that, in course of time, the tongue-piercing ceremony has spread as far as Nepal.¹⁰⁴ The ceremonial skewering of one's tongue and cheeks is also meant to indicate the votary has temporarily relinquished the power of speech and is vowed to silence (*maṇam*). The object used is either a needle in the shape of a lance that is pierced through the tongue, or a several feet long skewer that is passed through the two jaws between the teeth. In this connection it is worth noticing that in southern India flesh-piercing practices are chiefly adopted in the propitiation of either local or pan-Indian Hindu goddesses by penitents, both male and female, belonging to low or untouchable castes. In this Śākta version of the cheek-cum-tongue-piercing ritual, both cheeks are perforated with a silver needle that is locked in front of the mouth by a mechanism resembling that of safety-pins.¹⁰⁵ Some male devotees pierce long iron rods (called *alakus*), up to fifteen feet long, through their cheeks. A number of female devotees, too, perforate their cheeks with a metal rod, yet most of them just perforate their tongues with a thin needle. This ritual generally takes place at the time of the festival of a particular goddess during a procession to her temple. The votaries, believed to be possessed by the goddess, walk in a trancelike state towards the temple amidst the beat of drums and the shouting of encouragement of the surrounding

¹⁰¹ Cf. K.V. Zvelebil, 'A Guide to Murukaṅ,' *Journal of Tamil Studies* 9 (1976): "Originally, the spear was the weapon of the hunter and the tool of Murukaṅ's priest, the *vēlaṅ*, and the symbol of war and the warriors. The lance is the instrument of the god's heroic deeds and the symbol of his military prowess, of his destructive power... Moreover, Murukaṅ and his lance also represent the cosmic, divine pair of the god and his *śakti*, his energy" (p. 12).

¹⁰² F.W. Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 180.

¹⁰³ In Bengal, many of the *sannyāsīs* (penitents) participating in the *gājan* of Śiva use to pierce their tongue (though not their cheeks) with long thin metal rods (*bāṅs*). The rod thrust into the tongue, as well as the rite itself, is called *jihbābāṅ* (Bengali *jihbā* = tongue). The *sannyāsīs* undergoing this ordeal hold either end of the *bāṅ* with their hands and dance in a procession. Cf. Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 104-05.

¹⁰⁴ G. Sharma, 'Faith Motivates Tongue Piercing in Nepal Village' (accessed September 28, 2012 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/17/us-nepal-festival-tongue-idUSBRE83G04820120417>).

¹⁰⁵ In Tamil this ritual is known as *alakuppūṭtu* 'locking the mouth by a wire running through the cheeks, in fulfilment of a vow;' cf. *alaku-pōṭu* 'to have one's tongue pierced with an iron or silver wire, or to have small skewers, inserted in many parts of one's body, as a penance' (*Tamil Lexicon*, s.v.). The Abbé Dubois witnessed a variant form of this rite in which one's lips were "pierced by two long nails, which crossed each other so that the point of one reached to the right eye and the point of the other to the left" (Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, 599).

people. The *alaku*s, just like the *vēls* in the case of *kāvaṭi* pilgrimages to Murukaṅ temples, are removed on the penitent's arrival to the shrine of the goddess and given her as an offering.¹⁰⁶ The opinion of the present author is that the *vēl-kāvaṭi* ordeal practiced by the followers of Murukaṅ in Tamil Nadu was originally borrowed from the Śākta cheek-cum-tongue-piercing ritual complex of southern India.



Fig. 9. Cheek-piercing rite performed for a Hindu goddess during a temple procession.



Fig. 10. Cheek-piercing rite performed for Murukaṅ by a *kāvaṭi* bearer.

In another form of *kāvaṭi* practiced by Tamil communities in Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa, ropes pulled from hooks imbedded in the back of a penitent are fastened to a miniature temple chariot or a little ceremonial cart the man has vowed to drag through the streets, obviously with exacting toil and excruciating suffering, to a Murukaṅ temple. The cart is sometimes replaced by a companion who, positioned behind the faithful, pulls on the ropes in such a manner that the hooks stretch the penitent's skin. Also for this form of *kāvaṭi*, there is an ancient Tamil prototype, the so-called *tēr-kāvaṭi* (from *tēr* 'car, chariot'); however, in Tamil Nadu Hindu votaries subject themselves to this ordeal out of devotion to the goddess of epidemics Māriyamman only, not for Murukaṅ. *Tēr-kāvaṭi* processions usually take place in the Tamil month of Cittirai (April-May).¹⁰⁷

The cart of goddess Māriyamman, pulled by the devotee with hooks inserted in his back, is an equivalent of the temple car, pulled by a crowd of devotees, on board of which another penitent swings from hooks during certain Māriyamman festivals of South India. The *tēr-kāvaṭi* of the Śāktas may even have served as a prototype for the *alaku-kāvaṭi* (pertaining to the worship of Murukaṅ) in that both rituals characterize having voluntary pain inflicted on a walking penitent

¹⁰⁶ Whitehead, *Village Gods*, 28-29, 76-78.

¹⁰⁷ M. Biarreau, 'Brahmans and Meat-Eating Gods,' in Hildebeitel, ed., *Criminal Gods*, 20-21.

by the pulling force of the hooks inserted under the muscles of his back; moreover, since a *kāvaṭi* is conceived of as Murukaṅ's sacred vehicle, the carrying of a *kāvaṭi* on one's shoulders can be compared to the dragging of a temple car (another kind of divine vehicle) through the streets.



Fig. 11. *Tēr-kāvaṭi* ('car-burden') rite. Taippūcam festival, Singapore.



Fig. 12. *Alaku-kāvaṭi* ('burden of sharp weapons') rite. Taippūcam festival, Singapore.

http://avaxnews.net/educative/Singapore_Hindus_Celebrate_Thaipusam_Festival.html (accessed December 28, 2012)

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Table 3. Rituals/festivals discussed in section § 5

Name of ritual/festival	Name of tribe/caste	Location	Date of ritual/festival	Deity [Demon, if any]	Salient features
<i>kāvaṭi</i> penance (basic form)	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu & Tamil diaspora in the Indian Ocean rim	during the Taippūcam festival in the month of Tai (January-February)	Murukaṅ [in a myth associated with the Paḷaṅi Hill shrine in Tamil Nadu, the demon Iṭumpaṅ is described as the first <i>kāvaṭi</i> -bearer — see section § 7.4]	devotee shoulders from a long distance a ceremonial carrying yoke of bamboo with an arch decorated with peacock feathers over it, which is loaded with offerings for Murukaṅ's temple
<i>alaku-kāvaṭi</i> , i.e. 'burden of sharp weapons'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil diaspora in the Straits of Malacca region; the ritual originated in Tamil Nadu, from where it was subsequently banned	during the Taippūcam festival in the month of Tai (January-February)	Murukaṅ [in a myth associated with the Paḷaṅi Hill shrine in Tamil Nadu, the demon Iṭumpaṅ is described as the first <i>kāvaṭi</i> -bearer — see section § 7.4]	<i>kāvaṭi</i> carrier endures the pain caused by metal hooks or spikes fixed to the <i>kāvaṭi</i> and piercing the skin of the trunk of his body

<i>vēl-kāvaṭi</i> , i.e. 'burden of spears'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu & Tamil diaspora in the Indian Ocean rim	during the Taippūcam festival in the month of Tai (January-February)	Murukaṅ [in a myth associated with the Paḷaṅi Hill shrine in Tamil Nadu, the demon Iṭumpaṅ is described as the first <i>kāvaṭi</i> -bearer — see section § 7.4]	<i>kāvaṭi</i> carrier sticks dozens of limes, attached to fish-hooks, into his back and chest in multiple rows and has his cheeks, tongue, forehead or torso perforated with metal spears or skewers of variable length
<i>alaku-pōṭu</i> , <i>alakuppūṭtu</i> etc. (according to Tamil nomenclature)	Hindu low castes	Tamil Nadu & other areas of S. India	penance carried out in fulfilment of a vow to a Hindu goddess at the time of her annual festival, during a procession to her temple	Śakti	devotees (male and female) perforate both cheeks with a metal skewer that is locked in front of the mouth like a safety pin; some have their tongue pierced by a long needle; male devotees pass long iron rods, up to fifteen feet long, through their cheeks
<i>tēr-kāvaṭi</i> , i.e. 'car-burden'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu & Tamil diaspora in Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore & S. Africa	Cittirai (April-May) or, when the worshipped deity is Murukaṅ, during the Taippūcam festival in the month of Tai (January-February)	1. Māriyammaṅ (goddess of epidemics) 2. Murukaṅ (only among the Tamil diaspora)	devotee pulls a small processional car of the divinity by means of ropes with hooks imbedded in his back — an equivalent to the hook-swinging rite as performed on a processional wagon

§ 6. Ordeals by fire

Religious ordeals based on techniques of “mastery of fire” — an expression by which Eliade designates any public demonstration of human insensibility to high temperatures — were once widespread throughout the world. The most common among them is, no doubt, the fire-walk ceremony, a kind of march over an expanse or a trench covered with red-hot coals or white-hot stones (the latter being the practice prevalent in Polynesia) that once used to be, or is still performed, in China within the Taoist tradition, in Japan by some esoteric Shinto sects, in some archipelagos of the Pacific (most famous is the case of the Fiji Islands), in Spain, in the mountain tracts of Thrace and Macedonia, in ancient Italy and Asia Minor, and also by many tribal ethnic groups of Africa and the Americas. Of course, ecstatic fire-walking has always been prominent in India, too, as well as in countries that were anciently included in the sphere of Indian cultural influence, such as Tibet, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bali.¹⁰⁸

In Eliade's opinion, the experiences of “mastery of fire” and of “magic flight” would be the most directly referable to a shamanic spiritual dimension among all paranormal phenomena. According to the eminent scholar, the mystical end aimed at by all the people of faith who, in

¹⁰⁸ Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 93-95; P. Brewster, 'The Strange Practice of Firewalking,' *Expedition* 19 (1977): 43-47.

diverse religio-cultural environments, ritually manipulate or step onto extremely hot materials would consist in a purification and regeneration of the soul through contact with temperatures that, in normal conditions (that is, outside the ecstatic experience), could not be tolerated by the human body. The ecstatic condition seems to be the primary source of the mysterious resistance opposed to fire by the body of those who undergo this class of religious tests, a phenomenon that until now has not received any satisfactory explanation. Eliade thinks it possible to trace a continuous development, from shamanistic to theistic cults, of the ecstatic techniques being employed to perform fire ordeals. From a psychological point of view, the element unifying all trials aiming at spiritual purification and regeneration through contact with fire would be the will of those who experience them to show the whole community their separation from the common man's spiritual condition, for the "mastery of fire" would be perceived all over as a mark of free access to the superior, "igneous" condition shared in by gods and divine spirits.¹⁰⁹

§ 6.1. Early references in Indian texts

The earliest literary mentions of fire penances carried out in fulfilment of vows made to Hindu deities are to be found in Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* (seventh century C.E.). This text relates that, when emperor Harṣa's father fell ill, the populace of the capital city, Kānyakubja on the river Ganges, undertook various penances to avert his death; among these the poet Bāṇa lists holding melting gum on one's head to pacify Śiva and burning oneself with a lamp to propitiate the *mātṛkās* (a group of awe-inspiring ill-giving female deities). The penance consisting of placing burning *guggula* (bdellium, a fragrant gum used in Tantric worship) on one's head is known from later sources, too.¹¹⁰ However, these are not yet the typical forms of Śaiva-Śākta fire ordeal known from later sources — e.g., walking on a bed of hot coals or carrying on the head a pot filled with burning embers. There is, at any rate, a possibility the fire-walking ceremony is alluded to in a Jaina text dating from roughly the same period as Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, for Willem Bollée claims the *Ohanijjutti* (sixth century C.E.?), a monastic disciplinary text composed in Prakrit verses and included in the Śvetāmbara canon, mentions this ceremony as *ḍevaṇa*.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 89, 95.

¹¹⁰ D.N. Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kālamukhas: Two Lost Śaivite Sects* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 17, 27-28.

¹¹¹ *Ohanijjutti* 40 — cf. W. Bollée, *Materials for an Edition and Study of the Piṇḍa- and Oha-Nijjuttis of the Śvetāmbara Jain Tradition* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991-94), 2: 224; id., 'Folklore on the Foot in Pre-modern India,' *Indologica Taurinensia* 34 (2008): 63 and n. 157. Strangely enough, the Sanskrit commentary on the *Ohanijjutti* by Droṇa (eleventh century C.E.) states that the *ḍevaṇa* ordeal was undertaken by people wearing sandals. The Prakrit term *ḍevaṇa* may derive from the Old Indo-Aryan root *ḍī-* 'to fly' (replacement of Vedic *dī-* from *Mahābhārata* onwards). Compare, in

§ 6.2. Fire-walking rituals in South India

It is only from the epoch of the Anglo-French colonial expansion in southern India that ritual fire-walking began to be documented in the written record. The available testimonies of early European travellers about this tradition principally relate to some Śākta cults of Tamil Nadu, and particularly to the one being paid to Tiraupatiyamman, a deified form of the *Mahābhārata*'s main heroine Draupadī.¹¹² Nowadays a fire-walking ceremony, *tīmiti* (in Tamil, 'treading on fire'), is the culminating event of the festival dedicated to this goddess in the Tamil districts of North and South Arcot.¹¹³ The fire-pit (in Tamil, *akkiṅikuṅṭam*)¹¹⁴ the penitents walk across is formed by burning a large quantity of firewood on selected ground in which a wide, shallow trench has been dug out; coals are subsequently raked out of the trench into a rectangular bed.

At the symbolic level, Tiraupatiyamman's fire-pit is often equated to a flower bed. In Tamil, it is called *pū-nīṭam* or 'flower place',¹¹⁵ and another term for the fire-pit at other Śākta fire-walking ceremonies of Tamil Nadu is *pūkkūli* ('flower-pit'). Both expressions are euphemisms stressing the fact Tamil fire-walkers feel the glowing embers as cool and pleasant as if the embers were a bed or a pit full of flowers.¹¹⁶ Tamil *pū*, quite significantly, means both 'flower' and 'spark of fire.'

The period of the year when Tiraupatiyamman's fire-walk ceremony can be held in the core area of her cult extends from March to August.¹¹⁷ This also holds true for most of the ritual fire-walks accomplished in honour of other Hindu goddesses across Tamil Nadu. Consequently, the vernal equinox seems to mark the beginning of the six-month period during which ritual fire-walking is performed in Tamil Nadu the same way as it represents a privileged time for the performance of hook-swinging rituals throughout the Deccan and eastern India.

Fire-walking in honour of the goddess Tiraupatiyamman is a traditional practice having no textual foundation in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. It finds its earliest textual sanction in an

New Indo-Aryan, West Pahārī *ḍeuṅō* ~ *ḍewṅu* 'to go' (p.c. from Prof. Rosa Ronzitti, Università per Stranieri di Siena, Italy).

¹¹² A. Hildebeitel, 'Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī,' *History of Religions* 20 (1980): 152-53.

¹¹³ On the fire-walking ceremony that is annually observed in honour of goddess Tiraupatiyamman by the Tamil community of Singapore at the main Māriyamman temple of that city, see L. Babb, *Walking on Flowers: A Hindu Festival Cycle* (Singapore: Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1974), 23ff.

¹¹⁴ From Sanskrit *agni-kunḍa*. The Vedic *kunḍa* is a hole dug in the ground for receiving and preserving sacred water or fire.

¹¹⁵ Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 2: 459 n. 44.

¹¹⁶ G. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *Cool Fire: Culture-Specific Themes in Tamil Short Stories* (Göttingen: Edition Herodot, 1983), 216, 331.

¹¹⁷ A. Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī, 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 44.

episode of the Tamil version of the epic composed by Villiputtūr Ālvār in the fourteenth century C.E., in which Draupadī is stated to have entered into fire every year to prove her purity before the celebration of each of her successive polyandrous marriages with the five Pāṇḍava brothers. In the oral traditions of the Draupadī myth handed down in Tamil Nadu, other variations on this narrative nucleus point to the fact the epic heroine had undertaken the fire ordeal to reaffirm her sexual purity, which had been doubted by some for different reasons, to prove she had held steadfastly to *dharma*. Trial by fire once constituted the principal form of judicial ordeal imposed on women belonging to certain South Indian castes to purify themselves after they had committed adultery. Other traditional stories handed down by Tamil bardic performers set Draupadī's fire-walk in the aftermath of the mighty Pāṇḍava-Kaurava war; they either regard the mythic heroine's entry into fire as a confirmation of her purity, deemed necessary because of her mistreatment at the hands of the Kauravas, or as a way to remove the sin committed by her Pāṇḍava husbands by slaughtering so many of their own blood relations, the Kauravas — an act that also involves Brahmanicide. Tiraupatīyamman's *tīmiti* ceremony is the culmination of a larger ritual cycle stretching over a several weeks (over two and a half months in Singapore), during which parts of the *Mahābhārata* are re-enacted, and the fact the *tīmiti* always follows ceremonies that enact the *Mahābhārata* war's conclusion within this ritual cycle demonstrates stories about Draupadī's post-war fire-walk best match the actual temple rituals. At the *tīmiti* ceremony some image of Draupadī/Tiraupatīyamman, usually a decorated pot, *karakam*, is always carried across the hot coals by a temple priest, implying the heroine/goddess is tested anew and that she is leading her "troops" (of devotees) in a victory march across the fire-pit.¹¹⁸

It seems likely the mythic narrative about Draupadī's fire-walk was created by Tamil bards in the medieval period to provide an epic foundation for Śākta ecstatic fire-walking. The latter ritual might have been practiced in South India in much earlier times to propitiate some female deities who were specially revered by the Śūdras and the Untouchables. As a matter of fact, many other South Indian goddesses besides Tiraupatīyamman are propitiated through this type of ordeal. Goddesses presiding over epidemics are the main addressees of trials by fire throughout Dravidian India, from Tamil Nadu to the entire coastal belt of Andhra Pradesh and from Kerala to the southern plateaus of Karnataka.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 436-45.



Fig. 13. *Tīmiti* ('treading on fire'). Tamil Nadu.

A more ancient literary archetype for Tiraupatiyamman's fire-walk tradition is seemingly represented by the fire ordeal (Sanskrit *agni-parīkṣā*, i.e. 'trial by fire') undertaken by the heroine Sītā at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (6. 104) to prove to her and Rāma's subjects she had not been violated by the demon king Rāvaṇa during her captivity in the latter's capital, situated on the island of Laṅkā. As is well-known, the text affirms the gods themselves attended Sītā's fire ordeal and that Agni, the god of fire, recognized her purity and refused to consume her, thus proving her innocent. Even the fire-test passed by Sītā when her chastity was called into question is, however, a judicial ordeal, not votive like the *tīmiti* rite being discussed here. Furthermore, since the status of this *Rāmāyaṇa* episode has been questioned by a number of scholars who have rather convincingly shown it to be a later interpolation in the epic,¹¹⁹ the claim Sītā's fire ordeal provides a *very* ancient model for Śākta fire-walking ceremonies seems rather shaky.

Participation in fire-walking in Tamil Nadu once used to be reserved for the *cāmiyāṭis* or 'god(dess)-dancers,' shamanic figures (mostly male) who are credited with the inherited ability to

¹¹⁹ For a bibliography on this philological issue see L.A. van Daalen, *Vālmīki's Sanskrit* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 190-91 and J. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 391 and n. 105.

be possessed by a specific deity (in most cases a goddess),¹²⁰ but is now open to all Tamil Śākta devotees who have taken a vow in a situation of distress and wish to manifest publicly their devotion to the Great Goddess by crossing her holy fire-pit. Among certain low castes of Kerala it is the *velicapād*, the possessed oracle through whom the Goddess manifests herself, who has a special role in the fire-walk and is followed by the priests and the votaries across the fire-pit.¹²¹ At some Śākta centres of Kerala it is believed, after the successful termination of the fire-walk, the devotees will have acquired some occult powers (e.g. that of removing evil spirits or that of inflicting harm on others).¹²² Also, in both the *bhūta kōla* of the Tulu-speaking region (southern coastal Karnataka) and the *teyyam* of northern Malabar — two similar traditions of ritual god- or spirit-worship mainly consisting of theatrical possession performances — walking on fire or jumping, or even throwing oneself repeatedly on a huge heap of glowing embers, is often part of the ritual dance of the god(dess) or spirit impersonator.¹²³

Trance and possession are common phenomena in Śākta ritual fire-walking, although their occurrence is not needed to achieve the objective, which may consist in the purification from negative *karma*, in the neutralization of particularly unfavourable omens (e.g., a serious disease affecting one or more of the penitent's household members), or in the bestowal of some divine boon, generally consisting of the recovery of one or more family members from a disease in progress. Those who fall on the burning embers or sustain scalding during the fire-walk ceremony are considered to be impure because of their previous assumption of intoxicating substances or non-renunciation of sexual desires.¹²⁴ Women are not excluded from participating in an ordeal that, as is narrated in the Indian epics, was first carried out by Sītā and Draupadī, two heroines. European accounts dating from the eighteenth century certify that already in those times hundreds of Tamil mothers holding their (presumably sick) children in their arms used to join the fire-walkers on the occasion of Tiraupatiyamman's annual festival. At the *gājan* festival of

¹²⁰ "The *cāmiyāṭi* becomes possessed and serves as a temporary mouthpiece for a deity during festivals. The dancers are known for ascetic feats, such as walking on hot coals, which serve as proof of their possessed state and attest to the power of the deity who protects them from pain and harm. While the god dancer is possessed, people can ask for advice and reassurance." — C. Shattuck, *Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 77.

¹²¹ Anatha Krishna Iyer, *Cochin Tribes and Castes*, 2: 76, 369.

¹²² U.R. Ehrenfels, *Kadar of Cochin* (Madras: University of Madras Press, 1952), 165.

¹²³ M.J. Walhouse, 'On the Belief in Bhutas — Devil and Ghost Worship in Western India,' *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 5 (1876): 418; K. Sanjiva Prabhu, *Special Study Report on Bhuta Cult in South Kanara District* (Delhi: Controller of Publications, 1977), 49, 94-96, 110; A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism: An Empirical Study in Chirakkal, North Malabar* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983), 67ff.; J.J. Pallath, *Theyyam: An Analytical Study of the Folk Culture, Wisdom, and Personality* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995), 78ff.

¹²⁴ Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 1: 274, 444.

Bengal, too, female devotees are fully entitled to take part in fire ordeals, whereas they are not entitled to enact hanging and piercing rites.¹²⁵

§ 6.3. Carrying a fire-pot

A less harmful and, consequently, more universally accessible form of trial by fire held in honour of Hindu goddesses is represented by the ritual known as *tīccaṭṭi* ('fire-pot'). Common throughout Tamil Nadu and Kerala, this votive ordeal is carried out by Śākta fervent followers in fulfilment of a vow, generally made to a village goddess or a plague goddess, by carrying a clay pot containing some burning substance (e.g. coal, camphor, resin or oil-soaked cotton) to the shrine of that deity. The pot is either called *akkiṇiccaṭṭi* ('fire-pot') or *akkiṇicatti* ('fire-energy').¹²⁶ The votaries, usually united in a procession, which is sometimes a dancing one (*tīccaṭṭiyāṭṭam* 'fire-pot dance'),¹²⁷ either hold the fire-pot in front of their chests or place it on their heads; the latter position is typically adopted by women, most likely because placing burning pots on their breasts would injure that area of their bodies.

The *tīccaṭṭi* rite can also be executed by carrying a number of burning braziers on a polygonal frame fastened around the penitent's shoulders and torso. Analogous to other Hindu votive ordeals discussed on preceding pages, the period of the year when the *tīccaṭṭi* rite can be performed extends from March to May; however, in this case the main connection appears to be with village-goddess festivals, which are usually celebrated during that time as the latter coincides with the unhealthy hot season before the coming of the monsoon rains, when diseases become epidemic in South Asia. A fire-pot-holding rite is also practiced in Bengal in the ambit of the *gājan* festival, whose dates, as mentioned above, fall in March-April. The rite, *dhunā poṛāna* ('burning of resin'), takes place in a Śiva temple and involves seated men and women who use both hands to hold on their heads an earthen bowl filled with burning embers, over which powdered resin is poured to keep the fire alive.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 84-85.

¹²⁶ A. Good, 'Power and Fertility: Divine Kinship in South India,' in M. Böck and A. Rao, eds., *Culture, Creation, and Procreation: Concepts of Kinship in South Asian Practice* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 345 n. 32. Tamil *akkiṇi* is a loan from Sanskrit *agni* 'fire'; *caṭṭi* is a native Tamil term meaning an earthen vessel; and *catti* is another Sanskrit loanword (from *śakti* 'power, energy'). Thus, the alternation of *akkiṇiccaṭṭi* and *akkiṇicatti* as terms designating the fire-pot carried by the practitioners of this ritual is based on a typical play on words. The fire in the pot represents the *śakti* or divine energy who is the Goddess, shielded by the pot to protect her devotees from being consumed.

¹²⁷ D.P. Mines, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 35-37, 44-46, 86-90.

¹²⁸ Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 86.

§ 6.4. Fire-walking rituals in Orissa, Bengal and Jharkhand

Orissa continues to preserve an ancient Śākta tradition of fire-walking. The ceremony forming the nucleus of the festival, Jhāmu Yātrā (from Oriya *jhāma* or *jhāmu* ‘heat or blaze of fire’), is annually observed with remarkable pomp in the month of Caitra — that is, once again, around the period of the *viṣuvat* — amidst a large gathering of pilgrims and local devotees at some of the state’s eminent Śākta temples. On this occasion a variable number of narrow parallel fire trenches, dug outside the premises of the shrine at which the ordeal is held, are filled with firewood that is later burned until it is reduced to red-hot coals. Fire-walkers, *jhāmuās*, cross over the path of glowing embers in a trance. A key part in the fire-walking ceremonies of Orissa is the role played by the *kāḷaśī*, the traditional medium between gods and men. The *kāḷaśī* can be either a man or a woman and is always a member of a low or untouchable caste. During the trance, he or she is considered to be the goddess for whom he/she serves as the living oracle, dispensing advice and performing cures. *Kāḷaśīs* select the participants in the fire ordeal and often join the fire-walkers. Orissan women are permitted to walk over the hot coals only if they are *kāḷaśīs*. Possessed *kāḷaśīs* are the first to walk on the burning coals; their precedence over the other fire-walkers symbolizes the belief the goddesses they impersonate cross the fire-pit first, as is the case with *Tiraupatiyamman* in Tamil Nadu. Numerous points of contact exist also between the shamanistic *kāḷaśīs* of Orissa who impersonate goddesses during fire-walking ceremonies and the *cāmiyāṭīs* or “goddess-dancers” of Tamil Nadu (as well as the *veḷicapāds* of Kerala), the possessed oracles of goddesses who in the past led fire-walking ceremonies.¹²⁹

Fire ordeals are performed in Orissa in honour of Śiva, too, during the above discussed *Daṇḍa Yātrā* festival, which, like the *Jhāmu Yātrā*, is celebrated during the month of Caitra. Fire-walking, the handling of melted resin, and the hanging of a penitent by his ankles on a scaffold, from where he is swung through the flames of a fire lit below him, are the fire tests associated with this festival in the regional tradition of Orissa. The last mentioned penance, which can be defined as fire-swinging, is practiced by Orissan *jhulā pāṭuās*, too, on the occasion of the *Pāṭuā Yātrā* festival (which, as we have seen, represents the Śākta counterpart to the *Daṇḍa Yātrā*).¹³⁰ The fire is sanctified by a Brahman, as if it were a sacred altar. During the celebrations of the *gājan* festival in West Bengal, a nearly identical ritual penance, spoken of variously as *jhulā sannyās*, *dolan sebā*, *hindol* or *agnidol*, is dedicated to Śiva. This form of penance is traced back to ascetic

¹²⁹ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 84; J.M. Freeman, ‘Trial by Fire,’ *Natural History* 83 (1974): 54-63; Brighenti, *Śakti Cult in Orissa*, 348, 352; L. Foulston and S. Abbott, *Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton [England]/Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 178-79.

¹³⁰ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 64, 85.

practices of swinging over a smouldering cowdung fire, which are said to have now become rare among Indian *sādhus*, though not among the low-caste Hindu votaries of Bengal and Orissa who, either consciously or unconsciously, continue to replicate this ascetic penance. When fire is absent, and the *sādhu*'s penance is just an act of swinging upside down, the latter is often termed “bat penance” — the *vagguli-vata* of Pāli Buddhist sources. This form of self-mortification was characteristic of ancient Ājīvika ascetics; it is recorded in the *Mahābhārata*, too. Such ancient forms of a swinging penance, it appears, were originally accomplished from the branch of a tree.¹³¹

Historically, the Orissa-Bengal-Bihar region no doubt represents one of the main centres of diffusion of Śaiva fire ordeals together with central and western Deccan.¹³² In Bengal a different form of such votive trials, once again carried out during the *gājan*, is known as *phul* (‘flower’) *sannyās* or else as *āgun* (‘fire’) *sannyās*. The faithful taking part in this set of rituals gather fuel and make a large bonfire in the evening; at night they walk and hop over the flames and sport with the burning coal. The Bengali name of the latter ritual, which involves handling the coals, rubbing and showering them on one’s body, tossing them about, and playing catch with them, is *phul-khelā* (‘flower play’).¹³³ As we have seen, the “coals = flowers” equation is likewise peculiar to Tamil fire-walk rites. In view of the geographical distance between Tamil Nadu and Bengal, one has to assume this religio-cultural tradition to be archaic indeed.

Some semi-Hinduized Munda and Oraon tribal communities of the Chhotanagpur Plateau practice fire-walking as well as “flower-play” rites on the occasion of the religious festival called Māṇḍā Paraba, which they observe in April-May alongside people from the blacksmith, cowherd and untouchable castes. This festival — which also includes hook-swinging and fire-swinging among its sacred performances — is but a tribal adaptation of the *gājan* of Śiva, introduced into the region around Ranchi from nearby Bengal. Among both the Mundas and Oraons a *māṇḍā* (cp. Sanskrit *maṇḍapa*) is an open-air shrine at which Mahādeo (i.e. Śiva), represented by a roundish stone installed on a plinth or platform, is worshipped as a village deity.¹³⁴ In the local Indo-Aryan dialect, the fire-walk ceremony is known as *phūl khundi*, a term literally meaning ‘trampling on

¹³¹ Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas*, 110; Nugteren, *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty*, 115 and n. 75, with literature. In the *Mahābhārata*, Manu is said to have hung down like this for ten thousand years.

¹³² In Maharashtra, Karnataka and western Andhra Pradesh fire-walking is associated with the folk Śaiva cult of Khaṇḍobā/Mailāra/Mallanna — cf. Sontheimer, ‘Between Ghost and God,’ 303; R. Chandrasekhara Reddy, *Heroes, Cults and Memorials: Andhra Pradesh, 300 A.D. - 1600 A.D.* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1994), 11. In Andhra Pradesh fire-walking also used to be done to propitiate the male deity Vīrabhadra, an incarnation of Śiva — cf. ‘Reports on the Swinging Festival, and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire,’ *Selections from the Records of the Madras Government*, No. 7 (Madras: Fort St. George Gazette Press, 1854), 23-24, 33-34.

¹³³ Sen, ‘Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,’ 611.

¹³⁴ S.C. Roy, *Orāon Religion and Customs* (Ranchi: Man in India Office, 1928), 38-39.

flowers.’ The test is performed jointly by tribal and non-tribal *bhaktas* who have vowed to walk through fire for five consecutive years in thanksgiving for a grace received from Mahādeo. All of them wear the sacred thread for three days, just like the Bengali *bhaktas* do at Śiva’s *gājan*. During the term of the festival, even tribal devotees live the life of a pure Hindu *bhakta*. The head devotee (*pāṭ-bhakta*), who is generally the *pāhān* or priest of some Munda or Oraon village, leads the fire-walk. He first scoops up glowing coals with his hands, holds them for a few minutes, and then takes them to Mahādeo’s *māṇḍā*; he subsequently crosses the bed of coals, followed by tens and tens of other *bhaktas* who jump and hop in the fire repeatedly, taking, in their palms, glowing embers or throwing around the embers with their bare feet. On the whole, this Māṇḍā festival provides an interesting case of tribal-Hindu cultural assimilation.¹³⁵

§ 6.5. Para-shamanistic fire-walking rituals in North and Middle India

To the north of the Chhotanagpur region, the Dusādhs — a caste of Untouchables, probably of tribal origin, found from eastern Uttar Pradesh to the Bihar-Bengal border region (including the northern slopes of the Chhotanagpur Plateau) — observe a peculiar type of fire-walk ceremony some aspects of which look more “shamanistic” than the corresponding Munda-Oraon ceremony as a whole. Indeed, the Dusādhs do fire-walking in combination with the climbing of a bladed ladder, which, as has been remarked earlier in this paper, is regarded by most of anthropologists as a typically shamanic ritual practice. The ceremonial use of the bladed ladder is widespread not only in eastern India, but also among the Kachin, Lolo and Lisu of Burma and Yunnan, the Zhuang and Mien/Yao of southern China, and the aborigines of northern Formosa.¹³⁶ According to the ethnographer Herbert H. Risley,¹³⁷ among the Dusādhs of Bihar “[the] ladder, made with sides of green bamboos and rungs of sword blades, is raised in the midst of a pile of burning mango wood, through which the *bhakat* [or *bhagat*]¹³⁸ walks barefooted and ascends the ladder without injury. Swine of all ages, a ram, wheaten flour, and rice-milk (*khīr*), are offered up; after which the worshippers partake of a feast and drink enormous quantities of ardent spirits.”

A nearly identical ritual, among the Dusādhs of Mirzapur district (southeastern Uttar Pradesh), was recorded by William Crooke without stating the bladed ladder is raised *right above*

¹³⁵ Chattopadhyay and Basu, ‘The Māṇḍā Festival of Chotanagpur,’ 157ff.; Rosner, ‘Fire-walking the Tribal Way,’ 182-85.

¹³⁶ Rahmann, ‘Shamanistic and Related Phenomena,’ 737.

¹³⁷ H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 1: 255.

¹³⁸ The term *bhakat* or *bhagat*, from Sanskrit *bhakta* (‘devotee’), indicates a shaman-diviner, oracle, medium or sorcerer of Hindu or Hinduized divinities in many tribal and popular traditions of northern and central India.

the fire-pit the chief officiant walks across.¹³⁹ The composite ceremony, held twice every year in the months of Pauṣa (December-January) and Caitra (March-April),¹⁴⁰ is meant to propitiate Rāhu, the eclipse demon of the Hindus, who is one of the most important deities among those worshipped by the Dusādh caste. By passing through the fire and standing on one of the sword blades atop the ladder with his naked feet, the *bhagat*, a semi-tribal sacred man, is believed to have been inspired with the spirit of Rāhu, who has become incarnated in him, and can, thus, start to administer his healing rites. According to Crooke,¹⁴¹ “[this] ritual is a good illustration of Dravidian [*sic*; read non-Aryan] shamanism.” According to a Dusādh legend Rāhu was an ancestor of the caste who was killed in battle and subsequently became a god.¹⁴² This legend provides an interesting parallel to the fire-walking ritual observed by the Bhuiyās of Mirzapur district, a Hinduized tribe, now having Scheduled Caste status, who worship a deified warrior-ancestor, Lahaṅg Bīr (*bīr* = deified hero), in a ceremony during which some men walk on hot coals and roll on thorny bushes while being supposedly possessed by the *bīr*’s spirit. Such people then pronounce blessings on the community, which are believed to issue directly from the *bīr*’s mouth.¹⁴³

All in all, both the Dusādh and Bhuiyā fire-walking rites, performed as they are in honour of deified ancestral heroes, appear to stem from a shamanistic tradition differing from the Śaiva fire-walk tradition, imported from the Bengal plains, which nowadays prevails among certain semi-Hinduized tribal groups of the neighbouring Chhotanagpur region. In any event, whatever their “pre-Hindu” forms may have been, the putative shamanistic models of Hindu ordeals by fire might have gradually lost their autonomy after mingling with popular Hinduism; thus, giving way to a new ritual synthesis acceptable by both low-caste Hindus and the tribal populations whose religiousness had been more influenced by the allied Śiva-Śakti cults.

An apt analogy for the Dusādh and Bhuiyā fire-walking rites lies in the ritual dance on a fire altar enacted on the *viṣuvat* day in some villages of the Mandakini Valley (in the Himalayan region of Garhwal) by the *nar* (‘fire[-man]’),¹⁴⁴ a kind of shamanic figure associated with the cult of Jakh, a local Hindu god originating from an ancient *yakṣa* deity, of whom the *nar* is considered a

¹³⁹ Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folk-lore*, 1: 19-20.

¹⁴⁰ L.S.S. O’Malley, *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Patna* (Patna: Superintendent, Bihar and Orissa Government Printings, 1924), 54.

¹⁴¹ W. Crooke, ‘Dusādh, Dusādh,’ in J. Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4: ‘Confirmation’ - ‘Drama’ (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons / Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 852.

¹⁴² Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folk-lore*, 1: 20-21.

¹⁴³ W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1896), 2: 82.

¹⁴⁴ Cp. Kumauni *nar* = *bhinar* ‘fire’ — D.D. Sharma, ‘Dardic Elements in Central Pahari,’ *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal* 18 (1980): 111.

human incarnation. During the *nar's* dance over fire, he is possessed by Jakh, and the believers fully identify him with the god; in this condition of absolute spiritual purity, said to arise from contact with fire, he utters oracular responses that are believed to issue directly from Jakh's mouth.¹⁴⁵ There appear to exist no immediate parallels to this fire ordeal in other parts of the Himalayas or, to be precise, in the whole of northwestern South Asia.¹⁴⁶ The closest similarities to the *nar's* fire ordeal are probably those provided by the above discussed fire-walking ceremonies of the Dusādh and Bhuiyā castes in the eastern Gangetic plains with their oracular and para-shamanistic overtones. However, the same also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Śākta fire ordeals of Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala during which a trained devotee being supposedly possessed by a deity — the *kāḷaśī* in Orissa, the *cāmiyāṭi* in Tamil Nadu, the *veḷicapād* in Kerala — serves as the temporary mouthpiece of that deity before or after leading a fire-walk. Such para-shamanistic figures, credited with special spiritual powers, thus act as guides and initiators for the beginners.

In North India, exactly like in South India, trials by fire are more characteristic of folk Hinduism than of tribal religions. It can be added here that in North India leaping through the flames or walking on hot embers is sometimes carried out by low-ranking Hindu village priests at the Holī festival; for example, in the region around Mathura.¹⁴⁷ This notwithstanding, there are a few exceptions to this all-India trend. Barring the above discussed Munda and Oraon ordeals by fire, which look too similar to those performed by the Hindus at the *gājan* festival of Śiva in Bengal to possibly represent a genuinely tribal tradition, in the opinion of the present writer there are in Middle India at least two tribal traditions of ceremonial fire-walking that may deserve further investigation to ascertain the extent to which they have been influenced by Hindu devotional ordeals. These are the Bhil and Juang fire-walk observances.

According to Wilhelm Koppers and Leonard Jungblut, among the Bhils of Jhabua (Madhya Pradesh) fire-walking is called “sul pharwi” or “sul salwi,” an Indo-Aryan expression allegedly meaning “to walk on Sul, i.e. the tutelary deity of the fire ditch.”¹⁴⁸ The ceremony takes place

¹⁴⁵ M.M. Dhasmana, ‘Perception of Bhutas in Kedarkhand,’ in B. Saraswati, ed., *Prakṛti: The Integral Vision, 1: Primal Elements: The Oral Tradition* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1995), 48.

¹⁴⁶ However, in the fourteenth century, in a locality near Amroha, situated half-way between Delhi and the Garhwal region, the Arab traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa came across a group of Sufi dervishes belonging to the Ḥaydarī sect who danced and rolled on burning coals. Cf. A.T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200-1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 60. Historically, many other instances are known of Muslim devotees and/or ascetics of India who walk over burning embers on certain religious festivities, chief among which is the Muḥarram. At many localities in India fire-walking is often done during this Muslim festival with Hindus among the fire-walkers. For a list of sources, see Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 2: 440 n. 3.

¹⁴⁷ W. Crooke, ‘The Holi: A Vernal Festival of the Hindus,’ *Folk-lore* 25 (1914): 64-65.

¹⁴⁸ Koppers and Jungblut, *Bowmen of Mid-India*, 2: 93. Bhili “pharwi”: cp. Gujarati *pharvū* ‘to walk about, traverse’; Bhili “salwi”: cp. Gujarati *salvū* ‘to roll/writhe about’. The name of the female deity “Sul (Mata)”, to whom the fire-walk is offered, may be the same as Old Gujarati *sūla* ‘pain’, modern Gujarati *sūl* ‘impaling stake’ (cp. Marathi *sūl* ‘impaling stake; sharp pain’). Could these Bhili expressions be rendered as ‘walking/rolling over (the goddess) Pain’?

during the Holī festival. A specified number of walks over fire may be the object of a vow in honour of the goddess presiding over the fire-pit. The latter is dug near the place where the Holī tree is planted. The fire ditch is consecrated with the blood of sacrificed animals (goats, chicken). In the nearby Khandesh region, a Bhil tribal priest waves a sword six times over the fire before the beginning of the actual fire-walk. The village chief is the first person to walk — of course, barefooted — over the fire ditch.¹⁴⁹

The Juangs, a Munda-speaking tribe of northern Orissa, are reported to have been once accustomed to walking on hot coals before starting to set fire to their hill clearings in the month of Māgha (January-February) to obtain new cultivable lands. On this occasion both the secular and religious leaders of the village walked across a fire trench over which the blood of a sacrificed goat had been previously sprinkled. A wooden pillar was subsequently set up under a tree in the name of the fire-deity, “Karikar,” to whom the Juang fire-walk ceremony used to be dedicated. The head of the goat was buried by this pillar, and its flesh was roasted in the sacred fire-pit. Verrier Elwin’s local informants claimed the Juangs used a primitive kind of drill to kindle the fire on the occasion of this ceremony;¹⁵⁰ an identical ritual method of making fire by friction remains in use by the Badagas of the Nilgiri Hills (southern India), a caste of semi-tribal agriculturists adhering for the most part to the Śaiva sect of the Liṅgāyats, on the occasion of their own annual fire-walk ceremony.¹⁵¹ The Badaga fire-walking rite, like that of the Juang, initiates the sowing and planting season, which in southern India extends from March to April.¹⁵²

Table 4. Rituals/festivals discussed in section § 6

Name of ritual/ festival	Name of tribe/caste	Location	Date of ritual/festival	Deity [Demon, if any]	Salient features
<i>tīmiti</i> , i.e. ‘treading on fire’ (according to Tamil nomenclature)	various Hindu castes (no Brahmins)	throughout S. India	March to August (in S. India the season for the performance of this ritual generally starts around the time of the <i>viśuvat</i> or vernal equinox, as does also the season for the celebration of village-goddess festivals)	Śakti (most commonly village-goddesses, regional plague-goddesses, etc. — see section § 7.1) (in Tamil Nadu and Singapore also Tiraupatīyamman, the deified epic heroine Draupadī)	male and female devotees walk barefoot over a bed of red-hot coals; the fire-pit is often equated to a ‘flower-pit’; fire-walkers often carry their children in their arms; a leading role is played in the ceremony by figures of possessed oracles of the Goddess or of god(dess)/spirit impersonators

¹⁴⁹ Crooke, ‘Holi,’ 65; Koppers and Jungblut, *Bowmen of Mid-India*, 2: 93-94.

¹⁵⁰ V. Elwin, ‘Notes on the Juang,’ *Man in India* 28 (1948): 127.

¹⁵¹ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 1: 98ff.

¹⁵² W.A. Noble, ‘Nilgiri Dolmens (South India),’ *Anthropos* 71 (1976): 112-13.

<i>tīccatti</i> , i.e. 'carrying a fire-pot'	various Hindu castes (no Brahmans)	Tamil Nadu & Kerala	March to May (in S. India the season for the performance of this ritual generally starts around the time of the <i>viṣuvat</i> or vernal equinox, as does also the season for the celebration of village-goddess festivals)	Śakti (most commonly village-goddesses, regional plague-goddesses, etc. — see section § 7.1)	male and female devotees carry a clay pot containing some burning substance (e.g. coal, camphor, or resin) to the shrine of a Hindu goddess in fulfilment of a vow
<i>dhunā porāna</i> , i.e. 'burning of resin'	Hindu low castes	West Bengal	during Śiva's <i>gājan</i> festival in Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	Śiva	male and female devotees sit in a Śiva temple and hold on their heads an earthen bowl filled with burning coal and resin
Jhāmu ('heat/blaze of fire') festival	Hindu low castes	Orissa	Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	Śakti (the ritual is performed at some among the most important Śākta centers of Orissa)	male devotees walk barefoot over parallel trenches filled with red-hot coals; a leading role is played in the ceremony by figures of possessed oracles (also female) of the Goddess
<i>jhulā</i> ('swinging') penance/austerity	Hindu low castes	Orissa (during the Daṇḍa and Pāṭuā festivals) West Bengal (during Śiva's <i>gājan</i> festival)	Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	1. Śiva (at the <i>gājan</i> festival of Bengal and the Daṇḍa festival of Orissa) 2. Śakti (at the Pāṭuā festival of Orissa)	devotee is hung upside down by his ankles from the branch of a tree, a crossbeam, or a scaffold, and is then swung over a fire lit below him
<i>phul</i> ('flower') <i>sannyās</i> ritual, also known as <i>āgun</i> ('fire') <i>sannyās</i>	Hindu low castes	West Bengal	during Śiva's <i>gājan</i> festival in Caitra (March-April) until the <i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	Śiva	male devotees walk and hop over the flames at night and sport with the burning coals by handling, rubbing and showering them on one's body, tossing them about, and playing catch with them; this is called <i>phul-khelā</i> (lit. 'flower play')
<i>phūl khundi</i> , i.e. 'trampling on flowers'	Munda tribes, Oraon (tribe), Hindu low castes	Ranchi district (Jharkhand)	part of the Māṇḍā festival in the month of Vaiśākha (April-May)	Śiva	tribal and non-tribal devotees walk across, jump and hop in the fire repeatedly at night, taking, in their palms, glowing embers or throwing around the embers with their bare feet
no name recorded	Dusādh (probably a Hinduized tribe; now a Scheduled Caste)	S.E. Uttar Pradesh & Bihar	twice every year — in Pauṣa (December-January) and Caitra (March-April)	Rāhu (deified ancestor?) [= Rāhu, the Hindu eclipse-demon]	<i>bhagat</i> (diviner, medium and healer) possessed by Rāhu walks barefooted over a fire ditch and then climbs a bladed ladder
no name recorded	Bhuiyā (Hinduized tribe; now a Scheduled Caste)	Mirzapur district (S.E. Uttar Pradesh)	every two years (date not recorded)	Lahaṅ Bīr (deified ancestral hero)	men possessed by Lahaṅ Bīr walk on hot coals and roll on thorny bushes
no name recorded	various Hindu castes	Garhwal region (Uttarakhand)	<i>viṣuvat</i> (vernal equinox)	Jakh (local Hindu god originating from an ancient <i>yakṣa</i> deity)	<i>nar</i> , the oracle of Jakh, is possessed by the deity and dances over fire

“sul pharwi” [an expression that possibly means ‘walking over (the goddess) Pain’]	Bhil (tribe)	W. Madhya Pradesh	during the Holī festival in Phālguna (February-March)	“Sul” (i.e. Old Gujarati <i>sūla</i> ‘pain’?), the female tutelary deity of the fire ditch	the fire ditch is dug near the place where the Holī tree is planted and is consecrated with the blood of sacrificed animals; the village chief is the first to walk on fire, followed by other penitents in fulfilment of a vow made to the goddess presiding over the fire trench
no name recorded	Juang (tribe)	N. Orissa	before starting to set fire to the hill clearings in the month of Māgha (January-February) to obtain new cultivable lands	“Karikar,” a fire-deity	both the secular and religious leaders of the village walk across a fire trench over which the blood of a sacrificed goat has been previously sprinkled; a wooden pillar, by which the goat’s head is buried, is set up under a tree in the name of the fire-deity

§ 7. Mythical prototypes of Hindu devotional ordeals

The ritual practices discussed in the present paper appear quite alien to Brahmanic religious culture. There is in fact no scriptural sanction for religious self-torture in the whole of the Vedic corpus; moreover, barring ordeals by fire, the practice of religious self-torture seems to have never been popular in the Vedic heartland in northwestern South Asia (the Brahmanical Āryāvarta). From the remotest past the Brahmans have esteemed ritual self-torture acts to be suited for the Śūdras, Untouchables and tribals only, and have abstained from performing them, or even from legitimizing them with Brahman approval. It has also been pointed out that the appeal of devotional ordeals has been historically confined to the devotees of Śiva, of the Great Goddess, and of their son, Skanda or Murukāṇ, who have acted in all times as the most popular divinities among the “impure” Śūdras and Untouchables as well as among tribal communities in course of Hinduization. The followers of the ritually “purer” Viṣṇu cult, on the contrary, have always opposed all such forms of ritual self-torture and blood sacrifice. In the Vaiṣṇava cult perspective, heavily conditioned by the *ahiṃsā* doctrine, the mortification of one’s own body is a serious error inasmuch as man’s and God’s body are one. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (17. 5-6), indeed, resolutely denies the religious value of any act of penance carried out through bodily torments, which are, on the contrary, held by its author(s) to be inspired by demons. In a similar way, the historical Buddha doubted the religious value of the acts of body self-mortification that, in his time, were popular among certain groups of ascetics. The Buddha contrasted such practices, considered by him as merely exterior ones, with true inner discipline and the control over the self.

Although the votive ordeals discussed in the present paper can be included by full right within the universe of Hindu *bhakti* (devotion to a personal divinity), their origin remains, in good substance, shrouded in mystery — the reason it has been deemed appropriate here to investigate the parallel phenomenon of shamanistic tests, which may have originated out of some archaic South Asian religio-cultural complex that also gave rise to Hindu votive ordeals. The links of the practices of self-torture aimed at propitiating Śiva, the Great Goddess, or Murukāṅ with tribal religious cultures extraneous to the Vedic Brahmanical tradition may also be inferred from the rare etiological myths hinting, if only in an indirect form, at the origin of such practices.

§ 7.1. Prototypes of fire ordeals

As regards the complex of trials by fire, this paper, in section § 6.2, discussed that the mythic archetype generally taken as a model by the Śāktas of Tamil Nadu to justify such ritual penances, viz., Draupadī's self-purification through a "fire bath" (closely resembling Sītā's trial by fire), better fits the scheme of the judicial ordeal — an extreme form of public self-certification, whose function is to exculpate oneself from a charge — than that of the devotional ordeal undergone to establish an ecstatic communion with a personal divinity. Therefore, Śākta (and, even more so, Śaiva) ordeals by fire do not seem to have any background Hindu myth that can consistently explain their origin.

At best, what can be noted from a mythological standpoint is that South Indian goddesses propitiated with ordeals by fire are often identified with the element fire. Tiraupatiyamman (Draupadī), for instance, epitomizes the three Vedic fires of birth, marriage and cremation. This goddess is conceived of as the *śakti* of sacrificial fire and of the final purification of the universe by fire at the time of cosmic dissolution.¹⁵³ The leading proponents of the fire-walking cult of Tiraupatiyamman are the members of the Vaṅṅiyāṅ caste (from *vaṅṅi*, a Tamil transposition of the Sanskrit *vahni* 'fire'), who claim, like Draupadī, they, too, were born from fire (*agnikula* or 'the race of fire').¹⁵⁴

In addition, the plague-goddess Māriyamman, is sometimes described as a fire surrounded by snakes. The myths of origin of this goddess, which have several variants in southern India, are generally modelled on the tale of Reṅukā, which was first plotted in the *Mahābhārata* (3. 116) and

¹⁵³ Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 1: 12, 198-99. Likewise, Śiva is wreathed in fire when performing his dance of cosmic destruction (*tāṅṅava*).

¹⁵⁴ J. Filliozat, *Religion, Philosophy, Yoga: A Selection of Articles by Jean Filliozat* (trans. M. Shukla, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 112-13.

later developed into an important local legend. She was the mother of the Brahman hero (and *avatāra* of Viṣṇu) Paraśurāma, who decapitated her because her chastity had been compromised by a momentary impure thought. Likewise, myths about the origin of Māriyamman generally revolve around the motif of the decapitation of a woman accused of some transgression of Brahmanic sexual norms, which is followed by her rebirth as the divine giver of diseases.¹⁵⁵ It is interesting to notice that, in one such South Indian Śākta myth, the woman who later on turns into the goddess of smallpox is condemned by her suspicious husband to be burnt alive on a pyre rather than decapitated.¹⁵⁶

Similarly, a class of coastal Andhra Pradesh local goddesses known as *pēraṅṅālus*, whose legends and rituals preserve numerous shamanistic elements, are conceived of as married women who voluntarily entered the *guṇḍam* ('fire-pit') — in some cases because their husbands had become suspicious of their virtue — and were subsequently reborn as goddesses.¹⁵⁷ This mythical theme parallels that of the birth of Māriyamman, Tiraupatiyamman, and other Hindu goddesses from sacrificial fire.¹⁵⁸

This writer emphasizes the need for further research on shamanistic fire-cults in tribal India and their relation to Śakti cult to solve the riddle of the origin of Śākta ordeals by fire. An aspect of Śākta fire ordeals of South India that appears to match fairly well those of shamanistic origins appears in the evocation of a supernatural entity — a Hindu goddess of diseases in the former case, a malevolent spirit in the latter — and the achievement of a mystical communion with that entity through one's taking on part of its excess fury or heat, symbolized as fire. The furious character of South Indian village-goddesses, who are often the same as the goddesses of diseases, manifests itself in typical fashion on the occasion of the outbreak of an epidemic, during which the village deity is regarded, at one time, as the victim (just as the human inhabitants of the village) of an attack delivered by the demons of diseases, and as the deity who permits such an attack to take place so that her cult be revived.

When a village-goddess festival is celebrated in coincidence with the outbreak of an epidemic, the village goddess manifests her ever-dreaded power by allowing the demons of fever

¹⁵⁵ The myth of Reṅukā is transposed in many South Indian myths dealing with the origin of village-goddesses or the goddesses of epidemics. Cf. A. Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 172; A. Hildebeitel, 'Rāma and Gilgamesh: The Sacrifices of the Water Buffalo and the Bull of Heaven,' *History of Religions* 19 (1980): 195-97; D. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 200-01; Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 1: 266 n. 25, 284 n. 3, 353, 370.

¹⁵⁶ P. Filippini-Ronconi, *Miti e religioni dell'India* (2nd ed., Roma: Newton Compton, 1992), 141.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. M.V. Krishnappa, 'One Who Stays for Good: Perantallu in Northern Coastal Andhra,' *Indian Folklore Research Journal* 10 (2010): 13-47.

¹⁵⁸ Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 1: 391 n. 20.

to attack her devotees and inviting those among them who are possessed by her to carry out some physically challenging rite in her honour. On all such occasions, South Indian village-goddesses seem to manifest a predilection for trials by fire in particular. The devotee's mystical experience of contact with the fire-pit sacred to the Goddess, which is reportedly painless, is believed by the villagers to cool the fury aroused in the deity by the invasion of the demons of diseases and by her disappointment due to the past neglect of the rites meant to appease her. Likewise, it is to dampen the village goddess' excess heat that, during the festivals in question, refreshing drinks such as milk, curd, or water are offered to the fire-walkers, to the people who, at the time, are suffering from fever, and to the iconic or aniconic cult image of the village goddess.¹⁵⁹

Although trials by fire are part of Hindu *bhakti* traditions throughout India, and more specifically of the Śākta tradition, they, as much as other Hindu votive ordeals discussed in this paper, could have spread among Hindu agricultural populations starting from the imitation of ecstatic techniques of fire mastery of shamanistic origin. Indeed, it appears possible that low-caste Hindu communities who could interact with, or were even the biological descendants of some neighbouring tribal groups were induced, obviously in the course of a long-term process, to practice forms of “spontaneous and aberrant shamanism” — to use a definition by Mircea Eliade — because of the attraction exercised on them by the phenomena of trance, spirit-possession, and altered consciousness, which are constantly associated with shamanism.

§ 7.2. Prototypes of hook-swinging rituals

Similar considerations may hold true for hook-swinging. Indeed, it is not clear if and to what extent Śaiva-Śākta traditions of hook-swinging absorbed some earlier shamanistic rituals (for instance, the shaman's swinging on a thorn-seat, pole-climbing, ascent of the sacred ladder, and self-hooking/skewering), nor how such archaic shamanistic practices could have become associated with and legitimized by Hindu mythology and rituals. Also the ancient Vedic rite, part of the above discussed *vājapeya* sacrifice, wherein the ritual patron and his wife have to ascend the sacrificial post by a ladder placed against it, may have played some role in the diffusion of pole-climbing rites over India.

In the 1930s an American ethnologist, William Christie MacLeod, tried to show through comparative study that “the elaborated hook-swinging rites in India and in North America are

¹⁵⁹ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 204-05; Masilamani-Meyer, ‘The Changing Face of Kāttavarāyaṇ,’ 80.

survivals in these two regions of a hook-swinging rite of a single origination, the locale of origin being probably India of the Dravidians,” and that “[t]he fire-walk and pole-climb [of both India and North America] are rites which [...] belong to the same culture [...] as hook-swinging.”¹⁶⁰ While MacLeod’s diffusionist ideas may appear implausible and obsolete today, the hypothesis cannot be ruled out that prehistoric Asian shamanism elaborated a complex of religious ordeals that included rites such as the divinatory swinging on a seat of thorns and the initiatory suspension/swinging on a cultic pole symbolizing the candidate shaman’s “soul-flight” along the *axis mundi*. As mentioned earlier in this paper, numerous structural parallels can be traced between South Asian and Native American pole-climbing and suspension rites. It remains to investigate whether such structural parallels hark back to a prehistoric layer of “Laurasian” shamanism (to use a term coined by Michael Witzel to designate a complex of inherited Eurasian and Native American mythologies)¹⁶¹ shared in common by the cultural ancestors of some South Asian populations — the Dravidians? — and those of some American Indian populations. The climbing of the sacred pole by the medicine-man is regarded by some anthropologists as a most archaic and constitutive feature of Native American religions, and has a close counterpart in corresponding ritual behaviour in North Asian shamanism (e.g. among the Tungus of Siberia).¹⁶² The vertical worldview of shamanism, with the shaman’s privileged (belief of) travelling along the *axis mundi* to underworld and upper world, is believed by some scholars to have emerged in Central Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic and to have subsequently expanded across Eurasia and North America.¹⁶³ Such a hypothesis for the genesis and diffusion of shamanism may account for the similarities observed between South Asian pole-climbing and suspension rites on the one side, and Native American ones on the other.

In South Asia, with the invention of iron-smelting after ca. 1000 B.C.E., this shamanic ritual tradition could have been further developed with the introduction of the hooking of the flesh of the back and swinging from these iron hooks in the air from the cultic pole. If it was practiced by ancient Dravidian shamans in Middle and South India, such a shamanic ritual could have easily been taken over by low-caste devotees of Śiva and of Hindu goddesses (often of tribal origin) to be ultimately turned into a type of devotional ordeal in honour of those divinities. It is also to be

¹⁶⁰ W.C. MacLeod, ‘The Nature, Origin, and Linkages of the Rite of Hookswinging: With Special Reference to North America,’ *Anthropos* 29 (1934): 32.

¹⁶¹ See discussion in M. Witzel, ‘Shamanism in Northern and Southern Eurasia: Their Distinctive Methods of Change of Consciousness,’ *Social Science Information* 50 (2011): 39-61.

¹⁶² Å. Hultkrantz, *The Religion of the American Indians* (trans. M. Setterwall, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), XII, 110.

¹⁶³ W. van Binsbergen, ‘Mythological Archaeology: Situating Sub-Saharan African Cosmogonic Myths within a Long-range Intercontinental Comparative Perspective,’ in T. Osada and N. Hase, eds., *Proceedings of the Pre-Symposium of RIHN and 7th ESCA Harvard-Kyoto Roundtable* (Kyoto: Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, 2006), 319-49.

noted that the hook-machine (the cultic pole plus the metal hooks hanging from its crossbar) is often conceived of as a deity in India, and this mythic conception, too, may go back to prehistoric Asian shamanism. Indeed, a remarkable cultic feature of both Hindu and tribal hook-swinging rituals is that the wooden pole or beam from which penitents are suspended is often worshipped or even deified.¹⁶⁴ For instance, in the *caṛak pūjā* of Bengal the *caṛak* tree is, as we have seen, worshipped with *mantras* on the bank of the pond from which it is taken out after having been submerged into it. The hook-machines mounted on temple-owned cars, used in Śākta hook-swinging ceremonies in south India, are the “property” of the temple’s presiding goddesses; in certain areas, e.g. in Kerala, the hooks piercing the flesh of penitents suspended from the pole are described as the “teeth” of the Goddess, with this implying an anthropomorphization of the hook-machine itself. Some Bhil groups worship the deified hook-swinging pole as Gaḷ Bāpsi (‘Little Father-Hook’).¹⁶⁵ The Korkus and Gonds of the Mahadeo Hills in Madhya Pradesh call their hook-swinging pole, Megnāth, i.e. by the name of Rāvaṇa’s son Meghanāda. The Korkus also call this deified wooden post, Kandra or Kendera (probably from Korku *kende* ‘black’). These and other traditions point to the frequent occurrence of the deification of the pole and its iron hooks at both Hindu and tribal hook-swinging festivals.

Be that as it may, and conceding the shamanistic interpretation of the hook-swinging complex of India is still a hypothesis, not a proven fact, let us, in this context, also point out Indologist Albertina Nugteren’s suggestion according to which, in addition to the sphere of shamanistic ideology, “[t]here could be other spheres of influence [on Hindu hook-swinging]: age-old, non-Brahmanic practices; mythological narratives re-enacted in festivals, ceremonies, and rituals, court-ceremonies of swinging and weighing the king; ancient practices connected with sun-symbolism; and the elements of a tournament, rivalry, young men’s daring, gymnastic feats.”¹⁶⁶ At any rate, let us once again remark there is no Hindu etiological myth accounting for the origin of hook-swinging rites and that this leaves the path open for future research work on the latter’s putative shamanic prototypes.

¹⁶⁴ A deified cultic pole is worshipped at New Year festivals, like in the case of the *caṛak* tree in Bengal, also in other religious contexts in South Asia. In Nepal, for instance, the anthropomorphized Yasim God, a tall pole with a horizontal crossbar near the top, said to represent the god’s arms, is raised at the Biskah or Bisket Jātrā of Bhaktapur. The *yasim* pole, a representative of Bhairava, is subsequently taken down to signal the ending of the old and the start of the new solar year. The dates for the celebration of this festival fall in the period of the vernal equinox, which is, as we have seen, also the propitious time for Hindu hook-swinging ceremonies throughout India. When the Yasim God has been raised, young men climb the ropes attached to it and present an offering of coins at the knots where the ropes are attached to the pole. However, this climbing rite alone is not sufficient to posit a connection with Hindu ordeals performed by ascent of and/or suspension from a pole. Cf. R.I. Levy, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991): 463ff.

¹⁶⁵ Koppers and Jungblut, *Bowmen of Mid-India*, 2: 89-91.

¹⁶⁶ Nugteren, *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty*, 114.

§ 7.3. A mythical prototype of flesh-piercing and skin-pricking rituals

There are, on the contrary, some more specific mythological references with regard to Śaiva-Śākta devotional ordeals consisting of piercing different parts of one's body with skewers or of resting one's weight on pointed or sharp objects such as nails and blades. In the Śaiva tradition of Bengal,¹⁶⁷ and seemingly in that of Orissa, too,¹⁶⁸ the mythical prototype more often evoked to justify such acts of self-torture is the grisly dance enacted before Śiva by the *daitya* or *asura* (demon) Bāṇa — whose name, significantly enough, means 'Arrow'¹⁶⁹ — to earn the god's mercy. The story of the demon-king Bāṇa's battle with Kṛṣṇa is told in several Purāṇas.¹⁷⁰ The versions included in the *Harivaṃśa* and *Śiva Purāṇa* are the most relevant with regard to the etiology of Śaiva flesh-piercing rites. Both texts relate that Bāṇa, a monstrous demoniacal being provided with one thousand arms, and an ardent follower of Śiva, was defeated by Kṛṣṇa in a fierce battle at the close of which Kṛṣṇa, at the bidding of Śiva, with his discus chopped off demon's arms, leaving only four (or two). He spared Bāṇa's life, owing to the intercession of Śiva, who convinced him to withdraw without cutting off the demon's head. Repentant, overwhelmed with love and devotion, Bāṇa then approached Śiva (the *Śiva Purāṇa* specifies he went to the temple of the god). In a mood of despair, his countless wounds still streaming with blood, the demon danced before Śiva. In the *Śiva Purāṇa*'s version of the story he is said to have assumed various postures, made several grimaces, wrinkled his forehead and shaken his head in many ways to show in succession a range of different poses and expressions. Much of his blood was shed on the ground while he danced, followed in rows by thousands of his servants. Thus Bāṇa forgot his self and fixed his mind on Śiva. The latter, being delighted with his devotee's ecstatic performance, granted him a series of boons. Among these, only two are common to both the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Śiva Purāṇa*'s narratives: (1) the healing of the wounds Bāṇa had received in the course of his fight against Kṛṣṇa (which provides an important link with the *gājan* festival and its acts of self-injury, traditionally considered non-harmful because of the protection accorded by Śiva on the *bhaktas*

¹⁶⁷ Sen, 'Short Account of the Charak Puja Ceremonies,' 610; Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 244-47; Oddie, *Popular Religion*, 49.

¹⁶⁸ Das, *Study of Orissan Folk-lore*, 64-65.

¹⁶⁹ The *bāṇphōṛā* ('perforation with arrows') class of rites performed at Śiva's *gājan* festival in Bengal are apparently called thus after the name of the *asura* Bāṇa, who is regarded as their mythical originator in the regional folk tradition — cf. Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 107. This folk etymology may, after all, be correct, for it is out of discussion that the iron skewers used for ritual flesh-piercing at that festival are not actual "arrows". Also the flesh-piercing rites performed at Dharma's *gājan* are called *bāṇphōṛā*, yet in this case there is no folk-mythological connection with the Purāṇic story of Bāṇa, the "Arrow Demon"; the latter seems, however, to be present in the rituals of Dharma's *gājan* under the form of Bāṇeśbar ('Lord of Arrows'), the deified nail-studded wooden plank that presides over the *bāṇphōṛā* rites, and on which the chief *bhakta* of this variety of *gājan* festival is laid down and carried in procession — cf. Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 2: 202-03.

¹⁷⁰ For a list, see *The Vishnu Purana: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition* (trans. H.H. Wilson, London: J. Murray, 1840), 596 n. 5.

performing them); (2) Bāṇa's appointment as the chieftain of Śiva's attendants (either the *gaṇas* or the *pramathas*).¹⁷¹

It is above all one of the boons conferred on Bāṇa by Śiva in the *Harivaṃśa* version of the story that is interpreted by the folk tradition of Bengal as the foundational act of Śaiva flesh-piercing rites. That is when the demon asks the god “that when [your] devotees dance [before you] as I [Bāṇa] have, anointed with blood, extremely afflicted, pained with wounds, it will result in birth as [your] son.”¹⁷² Therefore, imitation of Bāṇa's “dance of the wounded and bleeding one” is conducive to the status of Śiva's son (not just an attendant).¹⁷³ This Purāṇic narrative seems almost a description of an ecstatic ritual in which a possessed devotee dances madly in a state of trance (as is the norm in many Hindu votive ordeals) to please Śiva, and self-inflicts injuries without showing any pain in the certainty that his god, being satisfied with the acts of body self-mortification carried out in his honour, will prevent him from suffering, will heal his self-procured wounds, and will bless him for eternity. Although Bāṇa's countless wounds are caused by Kṛṣṇa's discus, it is clear from the myth it is Śiva himself who, by virtue of his unity with Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa (stressed in both the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Śiva Purāṇa*'s accounts), decrees the martyrdom of his demon devotee. Śiva's purpose is to dissuade Bāṇa from persevering in his errors so he can join his retinue of attendant spirits. This goal is achieved through a sort of wild initiatory trance during which Bāṇa's agony turns into ecstasy.

Therefore, one may easily understand why this episode, and particularly the description of Bāṇa's ghastly dance before Śiva's temple found in the *Śiva Purāṇa*, represents a source of religious legitimization for Bengali low-caste devotees who have vowed to subject themselves to bloody self-torture acts to be performed before a Śiva temple to obtain grace from Śiva as well as public acknowledgement of the privileged relationship — almost one of an initiatory type — they entertain with this god (or, in certain cases, with his divine bride).

Thus, in Bengal and in parts of north Orissa and Jharkhand, the *daitya* Bāṇa is conveniently regarded as the initiator of Śaiva flesh-piercing ordeals. The story of Bāṇa is no doubt a Hindu myth, not a shamanic narrative. Yet flesh-piercing rites are as prominent, if not more so, in southern India as they are in eastern India. And let us note that in southern India they are in no way connected mythologically with the Purāṇic narrative of Bāṇa's dance. As discussed in section

¹⁷¹ On Bāṇa's fight with Kṛṣṇa and his subsequent mad dancing before Śiva, cf. *Harivaṃśa* 112 in the critical edition (P.L. Vaidya, ed., *The Harivaṃśa Being the Khila or Supplement to the Mahābhārata* [Poona: BORI, 1969-71]) and *Śiva Purāṇa*, *Rudrasaṃhitā* 55-56 (J.L. Shastri, ed., *The Śiva Purāṇa* [trans. A board of scholars, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970], 2: 1047-53).

¹⁷² Hildebeitel, *Cult of Draupadī*, 2: 189.

¹⁷³ Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 247.

§ 5 of this essay, South Indian cheek-piercing and tongue-piercing rites belong in the Śākta rather than the Śaiva cultic sphere. Even when they are performed to propitiate Murukaṅ, as in the case of the *vēl-kāvaṭi* ordeal, such acts of self-skewering can be viewed as a ritual borrowing from the Śākta traditions of Dravidian India (keeping in mind Murukaṅ's lance, the sacred *vēl*, replicas of which are used by Tamil Hindu devotees for cheek-piercing and tongue-piercing rites, also represents the *śakti*, or female divine energy, of this god). The Purāṇic episode of Bāṇa dancing while streaming with blood before Śiva cannot be taken as a mythological prototype for the complex of Śākta practices of ritual flesh-piercing of South India; for these latter observances, I must once again remark upon a complete lack of any Hindu etiological myth explaining their origin.

§ 7.4. A mythical prototype of the *kāvaṭi* ordeal

Also the ritual carrying of the *kāvaṭi* in honour of Murukaṅ has its archetypal model in an experience of “initiatory death” allegedly lived by a figure of demon devotee, the *asura* Iṭumpaṅ, who, after submitting to Murukaṅ, becomes wholly regenerated, freeing himself from his evil side. The most renowned etiological myth about the institution of the ceremonial carrying of the *kāvaṭi*, that is, the one associated with the Murukaṅ sanctuary on the Paḷaṅi Hill (Tamil Nadu), relates to the encounter of the *asura* with the god in terms of the former being killed and later revived by the latter.¹⁷⁴

The myth states Iṭumpaṅ, after surviving the defeat of a host of *asuras* by Murukaṅ, was entrusted by the Vedic seer Agastya (whose figure is associated with the spread of Brahmanical religion over South India) with carrying on his shoulders two sacred hills from Mount Kailāsa, Śiva's northern abode, to southern India to make them into two new Śiva-worship sites. When the pious demon reached the hills to take them away, a carrying yoke (*kāvaṭi*) and eight snakes materialized in front of him. He then loaded the hills onto the *kāvaṭi*, using the snakes as ropes, and started his trek to the south. After a long march that echoes on the mythical plane, the one made by the bearer of a ceremonial *kāvaṭi*, Iṭumpaṅ reached Paḷaṅi and decided to rest there, thus, setting down his *kāvaṭi*. When he was about to leave again, however, he realized he could not lift his holy burden anymore because the hills had become fixed to the ground. He then climbed one of the two hills, on whose top he found a boy who claimed to be their owner. Because the boy refused to go away to allow Iṭumpaṅ, to carry the two hills farther south, Iṭumpaṅ

¹⁷⁴ Though strongly supported by Tamil tradition, the ritual carrying of the *kāvaṭi* to a Murukaṅ shrine is not alluded to in the *Caṅkam* corpus, the oldest surviving literature in Tamil.

attacked him, but the boy — who was, of course, Murukaṅ himself in disguise — killed Iṭumpaṅ, with a lance. The merciful god, however, resuscitated the *asura* and took him into his service, making him the guardian of the thus created Paḷaṅi shrine. Besides, Iṭumpaṅ received from Murukaṅ the promise that whoever would make a vow to carry a *kāvaṭi* to Paḷaṅi as he had done, would be blessed by Murukaṅ.¹⁷⁵

In this mythical narrative, there is no mention of the self-injury practices associated in Tamil traditions with the ritual carrying of the *kāvaṭi*; yet clearly resulting from the myth is the belief the votive ordeal aims, as a whole, at reproducing on a symbolic plane the transformation of the demon devotee, Iṭumpaṅ, into a vehicle of Murukaṅ's power, which is identified with the *kāvaṭi* itself. Indeed, Murukaṅ's power is believed to reside in the ceremonial carrying yoke adorned with peacock feathers, the peacock being his *vāhana* or celestial vehicle, as well as in the iron skewers, long metal spikes and tiny lances being inserted through the penitent's flesh during both the *vēl-kāvaṭi* and *alaku-kāvaṭi*, analogies of Murukaṅ's piercing of Iṭumpaṅ's flesh with a *vēl*. Ecstatic votaries who submit to Murukaṅ by carrying the symbols of this deity to the top of Paḷaṅi Hill, or to other hill temples consecrated to his cult, ritually re-enact the initiatory experience supposed to have been first lived by the *asura* Iṭumpaṅ in the role of Murukaṅ's exemplary devotee, yet turning it into self-sacrifice through symbolic death.

§ 7.5. Legendary asceticism, one more possible archetype

At the close of this review of some possible mythical prototypes of Hindu devotional ordeals, it can also be mentioned that the Śaiva-Śākta practices of self-torture carried out by piercing or pricking one's flesh or skin with pointed objects of various kinds somehow seem to echo the famous *Mahābhārata* episode relating to the death of the formidable warrior and ascetic Bhīṣma on the so-called *śara-śayyā* or *śara-talpa*, namely, a 'bed/couch of arrows.' Bhīṣma is not an *asura* like Bāṇa and Iṭumpaṅ but rather the epic symbol *par excellence* of asceticism, bravery in battle, and moral rectitude; nevertheless, he is also the commander-in-chief of the army of the Kauravas, the arch-enemies of the Pāṇḍava heroes protected by Viṣṇu. The religious and symbolic ambivalence of Bhīṣma is, therefore, analogous to that of the *asuras*, depicted as champions of asceticism and, at the same time, the arch-enemies of the socio-cosmic order established by the *devas*.

¹⁷⁵ F.W. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukaṅ: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 119-20; D. Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 48-49. For reasons unknown, in his book Clothey transliterates the name of the *asura* as "Iṭampaṅ".

We are told in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (6. 114) that, on the tenth day of the battle of Kurukṣetra, Bhīṣma was mortally wounded by a swarm of arrows from the Pāṇḍava warriors after he had mounted a strenuous resistance against them. In consequence of this attack, Bhīṣma fell from his chariot. The text of the epic specifies there was not a two-finger space left unpierced on the surface of his body. At that juncture, the countless arrows on which the hero had been impaled kept him raised above the ground by forming a sort of couch made of upright darts — verily a torture-bed — under his body. Importantly, the text says Bhīṣma’s mortal wounds were those caused by the arrows shot by Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍin, often acting as the representatives of Śiva and the Goddess in the *Mahābhārata*’s overall architecture. Śikhaṇḍin is a male reincarnation of Ambā, a princess of Kāśī or Banaras. Rejected by her betrothed, owing to Bhīṣma’s direct responsibility, she burnt herself alive after extracting from Śiva the promise she would be reborn as a male warrior who would take her desired vengeance by killing Bhīṣma. In the episode of the fall of Bhīṣma, it is as if Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍin, symbolizing the destructive aspect of Śiva and the Goddess, had put to death the mighty warrior as the victim of a sacrifice.¹⁷⁶

The old Bhīṣma, who had received from his father the gifts of invincibility in battle and of fixing the date of his own death, vowed to survive in this half-dead condition on his “bed of arrows” until the day the sun would start its northern course (*uttarāyaṇa*), which he esteemed to be a highly propitious day on which to die. The Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas ceased fighting and gathered around the dying hero to pay him the last homage in consideration of his admirable faith and endurance of pain. Here there may be some analogy with the public attending the performance of a Hindu votive ordeal; indeed, the image of Bhīṣma’s “arrow-bed” is reminiscent of the flesh-piercing practices meant to propitiate Śiva and the Great Goddess, or their son, Skanda/Murukaṇ. This similarity was pointed out long ago by B.K. Sarkar, who likens Bhīṣma’s fifty-eight-day long lying on the *śara-śayyā* before his death to the *bāṇphōṛā* ritual of the *gājan* festival of Bengal, culminating on the *viṣuvat* day, and claims the former might have furnished the original idea of the latter as a possible classical parallel to it.¹⁷⁷ In the regional tradition of Orissa, too, the *viṣuvat* or vernal equinox day, on which all kinds of acts of religious self-torture are performed in that state in honour of Śiva and the Goddess, is mythologically connected with Bhīṣma’s survival period on the “bed of arrows.”¹⁷⁸ Likewise, some scholars hold that the *śara-*

¹⁷⁶ Arjuna as a multiform of Śiva: cf. Hildebeitel, ‘Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises,’ *passim*. Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin as personifications of the Goddess: cf. M. Biarreau, ‘Études de mythologie hindoue IV,’ *BEFEO* 63 (1976): 210 n. 1, 220ff.

¹⁷⁷ Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, 106.

¹⁷⁸ Cp. Patnaik, *Festivals of Orissa* (slightly edited by me): “According to [the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*], when Bhīṣma, the grandfather of [the Kauravas] and the Pāṇḍavas, lay on the bed of arrows (*śara-śayyā*), he felt thirsty and there was no water nearby in the ravaged battle-field of Kurukṣetra. Then Arjuna with his powerful bow thrust an arrow deep into the ground and water immediately shot out in a stream to quench the thirst of the dying warrior [this episode is

śayyā of Bhīṣma is probably at the origin of the “thorn couch” (*kaṇṭaka-śayyā*) of a class of Indian *sādhus*, who lie and sleep on a couch studded with rows of iron nails.¹⁷⁹

Subsequently Bhīṣma kept waiting for the day of the beginning of the *uttarāyaṇa* while remaining in a kind of “yogic” ecstasy that, similar to the experience of an individual performing a Hindu devotional ordeal, made him totally indifferent to pain. In such a condition he discoursed on high topics based on *dharma* principles for the benefit of the assembled warriors. Already Monier Monier-Williams noted that “the voluntary bodily suffering undergone by Bhīṣma for so long a period, pierced and agonized by sharp arrows, was the supposed efficient cause of the divine knowledge of which he became possessed and which he was able to impart to others in his long series of discourses,”¹⁸⁰ thus establishing an equation between voluntary self-torture and divine knowledge. Because Bhīṣma’s *śara-śayyā* brings to mind a terrible instrument of self-torture, the equation in question can be easily transferred to any Hindu devotee being “initiated” to divine knowledge through ecstatic self-torture practices. The latter, it may be surmised, might even have preceded the creation of the epic tale of Bhīṣma’s agony on the “bed of arrows.” The unsettled question, in this case, can be formulated in the following terms: did the composers of the *Mahābhārata*, when they created the powerful literary image of Bhīṣma’s *śara-śayyā*, draw inspiration from their observation of some Śaiva, Śākta, or even tribal ritual ordeals, or was it the reverse — namely, the epic narrative of the “ascetic” death of Bhīṣma, his body pierced by innumerable arrows, that in course of time came to function as a partly unconscious legendary prototype for such ritual performances?

Self-mortifications in Hindu devotional ordeals and legendary asceticism (e.g. in the case of Bhīṣma’s “arrow-bed”) have in common these facts: that they stress the excess of violence in the tests of endurance and that the latter are, in both cases, said to be passed with relative ease, if not with a certain pleasure. In addition, Hindu devotional ordeals and legendary asceticism stress self-discipline, detachment from the exterior world, the control of one’s emotions, and analgesia or indifference to pain. On the other hand, Hindu ritual self-torture does not obviously have the epic dimension of legendary asceticism, which is presented as a continuous progression in self-

recounted in the *Mahābhārata* (6. 116. 10-24)]. Out of contentment and compassion Bhīṣma conferred to Yudhiṣṭhira, ‘Those people who would offer cold water to thirsty people on this day would not only be free from all sins, but also the departed souls of their ancestors as well as the Gods in heaven would be pleased.’ This saying of the holy scripture is observed with great reverence and people all over the country offer sweet-water to thirsty people as a religious rite” (p. 19). Patnaik here refers specifically to the Orissan tradition consisting in celebrating the vernal equinox as *Paṇā Saṁkrānti* (*paṇā* = water; *saṁkrānti* = passage of the sun to another sign of the zodiac), a festivity taking its name from the special sweet-water which is prepared to be offered to thirsty people on that occasion.

¹⁷⁹ M. Monier-Williams, *Brāhmanism and Hindūism: Or, Religious Thought and Life in India, as Based on the Veda and Other Sacred Books of the Hindūs* (4th ed., New York: Macmillan & Co., 1891), 560-61; Crooke, *Popular Religion and Folk-lore*, 1: 92.

¹⁸⁰ Monier-Williams, *Brāhmanism and Hindūism*, 563.

testing until the achievement of the sought-for superhuman powers by the legendary ascetic. Self-mortifications by Hindu devotees who have vowed to subject themselves to an ordeal are not a matter of asceticism in the strict sense but rather a display of divine power. And if they, taken together, appear as a kind of mass asceticism, they do not, by themselves, allow Hindu penitents to acquire permanent superhuman skills — except, as is believed by many Hindus, when they are practiced over several years.¹⁸¹

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¹⁸¹ Cf. G. Tarabout, 'Sans douleur. Épreuves rituelles, absence de souffrance et acquisition de pouvoirs en Inde,' *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique Noire* 17 (2005): 153-60.

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