Internationales Asienforum, Vol. 46 (2015), No. 1–2, pp. 17–38

Music and Non-Brahmin Priests of the Bora Sambar Region in Western Odisha

LIDIA GUZY*

Abstract
This article discusses the crucial role of music played by non-Brahmin religious specialists in multi-ethnic and inter-communal interactions of local categories in the Bora Sambar region of Western Odisha, India. The particular ritual musical traditions display a local multi-ethnic pattern of ritual inter-communal communication as well as the crucial role of music and sound within the local indigenous ontologies of spiritual liberation especially visible in rituals of mourning, memory and healing. A local society is revealed through its musical patterns, concepts and diverse categories of musicians. In Bora Sambar musicians act as ritual specialists responsible for spiritual, social and cultural transformation processes.

Keywords
Bora Sambar, ritual music, non-brahmin priests, post-mortem rites, Adivasi, Odisha

The Bora Sambar region

The Bora Sambar region lies in the Bargarh district, a western district of the Indian State of Odisha, bordering on the province of Chhattisgarh. Surrounded by the Gandhamardan Mountains to the north and south, the Bora Sambar region extends around the town of Padampur (Padmapur) on a plain drained by the Ong (Ang) river "which rises in the south west, describes a great semi-circle to the north and then runs eastward in a widening valley" (O'Malley 2007: 3). Bora Sambar literally means "the region of the deer swallowed up by the cobra". The language of the region is Sambalpuri.

The Raj Bora Sambar can be traced back to an autonomous "little kingdom", or chiefdom, of the indigenous Binjhal population, bordering on the

* LIDIA GUZY, Study of Religions Department, University College Cork (UCC) / National University of Ireland; l.guzy@ucc.ie.

tributary princely state of Patna. However, due to the "inaccessible forest tracts" (Sahoo 2007: 1) which covered large parts of the area and owing to the lack of written sources, a reconstruction of the structure and boundaries of the historical Bora Sambar kingdom remains difficult.

Bora Sambar, according to the Bengal District Gazetteers on Sambalpur of 1909, belonged to the Maharajas of Patna[1], "who were the head of a cluster of States known as the Athara Garhjat (the 18 forts)" (O'Malley 2007: 21). Bora Sombar presumably was one of the Athara Garhjats, whose chiefs were indigenous Binjhal. Recent research on princely states in Orissa/Odisha has shown the important role of indigenous or tribal communities in establishing the regional autonomy of the local sovereigns, who were also called "little kings", an analytical term introduced by Bernhard S. Cohn (1987) and further developed by Burkhard Schnepel (2002).

Under British colonial rule, the status of Bora Sambar changed from Raj Bora Sambar (Bora Sambar kingdom) to Bora Sambar Zamindari. With the establishment of the *zamindari* system by the British colonial authorities in the Bengal Permanent Settlement Act in 1793, many indigenous territories were conferred on feudal lords for the purpose of revenue collection (Bijoi 2007: 15–27; Munda 2002). During the British Raj (1858–1947), with its feudal princely states headed by hereditary rulers such as *maharaja* (great king), *raja* (king) and *nawab* (governor) and *zamindar* (holder of domains for land tenure and tax collection), the Bora Sambar region was the largest of the 16 *zamindari* of the Sambalpur district (O'Malley 2007: 21; 164). The traditional relationship between the Bora Sambar chiefs and the Maharaja of Patna remained intact. It is reported that under the British Raj "the Binjhal zamindar of Borasambar still affixes the *tika* [the royal sign on the forehead of the king] to the Maharaja of Patna at the time of his accession" (ibid: 76).

Bora Sambar: A name and a legend

The name Bora Sambar is mythologically linked to the small village of Bora Sambar and to its inhabitants from the indigenous Adivasi community of the Binjhal. The word *binjhal* literally means "without sweat" and the Binjhal have a local reputation as hard fighters and good workers. The Binjhal consider themselves to be the most ancient people of the region, the local "old people" (*purkha lok*), who cleared the jungle (*safo koriba*) and invented

[1] Strictly speaking the Maharaja of Patna was Sambalpur overlord of the 18 forts (*garh*) from sixteenth century onwards, though Sambalpur started as a junior branch of Patna State.

agriculture (*chas bas*), thus creating culture out of nature. Up to now, even if the Binjhal, traditionally agriculturalists, have to hire themselves out as daily workers (*buti*), their self-perception is still that of proud peasants and owners of their land. In former times, the Binjhal had their own language, Binjhal *basa*, which, apart from some fragments that have survived in the oral tradition in certain songs, is no longer spoken by even the oldest members of the community. Binjhal music is thus a form of cultural archaeological artefact, fragments of the sound vessel of a cultural memory. Culturally the Binjhal can be associated with the Gond complex of Western Odisha and Chhattisgarh, formerly Andhra Pradesh (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979; O'Malley 2007). However their relationship to the Gond complex remains unclear.

The population of the Bora Sambar region is an ethnic tapestry of diverse Adivasi communities and different categories of Hindu settlers. Today, the Adivasi communities have mostly assumed a peasant Hindu identity, while retaining a high self-esteem as being culturally distinct from other regions. Bora Sambar is still mostly agrarian and not yet transformed by industrialisation as some of the neighbouring districts have been.

Besides the Binjhal, the dominant groups in the area are local communities of Gond, Dumal, Soara and Khond. Other local communities in the Bora Sambar region include the Mali, Telli, Luhar, Gour, Kulta, Ganda (Harijan) and Brahmin. A strong inter-communal and inter-ethnic exchange between people is apparent in the use and functioning of ritual music.

Inter-ethnic ritual music in Bora Sambar

The Bora Sambar region is an example of the local predominance of non-Brahmin religious specialists. They are generally associated with a particular local community and have diverse names and functions depending on their specific religious tasks. A wide range of non-Brahmin priests is engaged in the ritual handling of the inauspiciousness of death or in the cure of psychological and physiological ailments interpreted as caused by non-empirical malevolent external forces. For the encounter with this spiritual world, non-Brahmin priests utilise music and the sound of their diverse musical instruments.

The guilt and expiation priest-musicians

One central ritual task of non-Brahmin priest-musicians in the Bora Sambar region is the handling of the period following the death of a person.[2] Music performed on diverse instruments is part of ritual transformation processes during post-mortem rites. Each of the various communities in the Bora Sambar region has a specifically named non-Brahmin priest-musician. In the Goura and Soara communities he is called the *ghugia*, in the Harijan communities the *birthya*, the Gond communities refer to him as the *porgonia* and the Mali and Kulta call him the *dusi*. These priest-musicians use specific musical instruments to perform their duties: the *ghugia* of the Goura use the Balu Boisi, a long bamboo flute, called the "flute of the bear"; the *ghugia* of the Soara and of some other Goura groups use the Brahma Veena, a cither-like instrument; the *porgonia* of the Gond and Binjhal use a Banna, which is also a sort of cither, while the *birthya* of the Harijan communities use the Damburu, a small drum shaped like an hour glass. The following ethnographic description is a detailed account of the Brahma Veena, Balu Boisi and Damburu.

The various vernacular terms designating these priest-musicians can be tentatively translated as "the guilt and expiation priest".[3] During mourning and remembrance rituals, these religious specialists take upon themselves the guilt (*daan*) of the dead person and accept the expiation (*daan*) of the deceased's family, symbolised by the acceptance of ritual donations (*daan*). In distinguishing between guilt and expiation, I try to spell out the different meanings of the polyvalent term *daan*, which indicates both, the guilt of the deceased and the ritual handling of his death by his family. During my field work,[4] I observed how important it was for my interlocutors to differentiate between the individual consequences of wrongdoing and the collective feelings of remorse in regard to the deceased, both of which are covered by the notion of *daan*.

The complex matter of post-mortem pollution has been discussed in the literature on Hinduism, especially in the work on pollution through alms in Hindu funeral rituals by Jonathan Parry (1980: 88–111) and Jeffrey D. Snodgrass (2001: 687–703). But whereas their discussion focused mostly on aspects of pollution in funeral rituals, this study emphasises the idea of an individual and collective responsibility created through the death of a

---

2 For an overview of how death is conceptualised in South Asia, see Schoembucher / Zoller 1999.

3 For this terminology see Hertz 1988.

4 This article is based on some results of my long-term ethnographic research conducted between 2002 and 2011 (see Guzy 2013).

person. This idea, I suggest, is expressed in the Bora Sambar region in terms of *daan* as the local concept of individual guilt and collective expiation.

FIGURE 1: Kagheshwar Bagh, a Gour and Soara *ghugia*, playing the Brahma Veena (Sakti village)

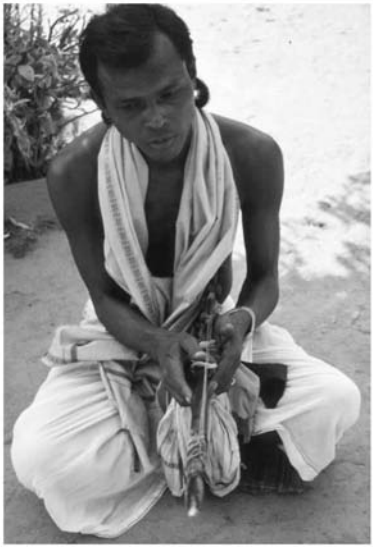


FIGURE 2: The Brahma Veena is kept in a sacred abode (Sakti village)

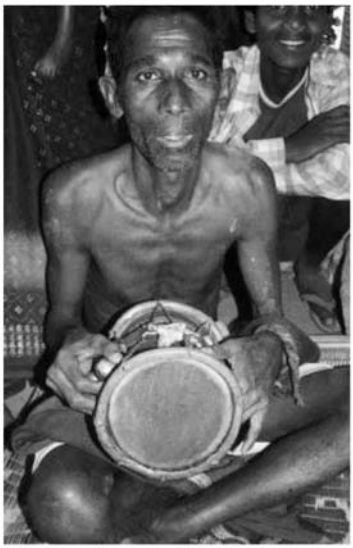
Daan Chheeka ritual

The Daan Chheeka ritual is common to all of the different communities in the Bora Sambar region. On the night of the eleventh day after the death of a person, the guilt and expiation priest sings songs and myths for the dead and for the ancestors. He sits at the threshold of the house of the deceased, playing a special instrument designed to communicate with the dead and the ancestors. The priest-musician advises the family to remain inside the house until the moment of giving him *daan*, the ritual donations. The whole night the priest-musician is supposed to sing *purkha geet*, the ancestor's songs to the deceased. In the morning, after having given the *daan* donations, the family of the deceased is allowed to leave the house in a symbolic act of re-socialisation and return to social life. This ritual and social transformation is called Daan Chheeka. Daan Chheeka (the breaking of guilt/rice) symbolically

signifies the "breaking" of the impurity and pollution which death has brought upon the family. It is the central ceremonial act of remembrance as well as of purification. It is considered as both: the taking-over of the guilt of the deceased and the acceptance of the expiation of his family, both symbolised in donations made by the ritual clients to the priest. This ritual indicates that the priest receives grains of rice, cooked food and new clothes from the family as well as bronze dishes used by the deceased before his or her death.[5] The acceptance of these ritual alms by the priest-musician is synonymous with the taking over of the guilt of the deceased. By receiving of the gift (*daan*) of guilt (*daan*) the priest-musician is considered to transform the

FIGURE 3: Bhalu Bans flute played by Sudarsan Raut, the *ghugia* of the Gour (village of Doheta)

FIGURE 4: *birthya* of the Harijan Budu Mohanand with the Damburu drum (village of Badgura)



5 For comparison, see Skoda 2005 who describes death rituals among the Aghria in Western Odisha. There, two categories of Brahmin are employed to ritually handle the inauspiciousness of death. Up to the eleventh day, a low Brahmin is responsible for the handling of the inauspicious *pret*, signifying the deceased who has not yet gained the status of ancestor. After the twelfth day, a high Brahmin handles the ritual communication with the auspicious ancestor (Skoda 2005: 473–483).

individual guilt into purity. The gift of guilt is never kept, but always given away.[6] The priest-musician transfers the "guilt gift" either to another guilt and expiation priest or to a local goddess. Through the temporary transfer of the guilt gift, given from one ritual actor to the next, the inauspiciousness of death is mitigated and transformed through the medium of music. In the virtual circulation of the "guilt and death gift", the local goddess is the preferred final receiver. Only the goddess has the power and the potential of purity to put an end to the gift circle. The circulation of the guilt gift is accompanied by popular hymns, sung by the priest-musician for the local goddesses.

In the context of the Daan Chheeka ritual, the polyvalent notion of *daan* designates at the same time alms, guilt and expiation. The transformative dynamic of the ritual is shaped by the crucial medium of music – a dimension in funerary and commemorative rituals which has not yet been investigated.

For the inhabitants of the Bora Sambar region, death is intrinsically connected with guilt. Guilt is either associated with the deceased's way of living and dying or with the part the deceased's family had in his or her death. Death thus always indicates a social responsibility which has to be faced and handled ritually. Ritual processes of recreation and regeneration, of purity as well as of remembrance of the dead are operated by the specific sounds of the diverse musical instruments played by the guilt and expiation priest-musicians.

According to the priest-musicians I interviewed, it is the sound of singing and instrumental music during the Daan Chheeka ritual that mediates and transforms post-mortem inauspiciousness (*ashubbo*) into auspiciousness (*shubbo*) and impurity (*ashuddo*) into purity (*shuddo*). By means of the *daan cheeka geet* (song/music) individual and collective guilt is absorbed, transformed and purified: "When playing the *daan chheeka geet*, I become heavy, very heavy – I take the burden of guilt (*daan*) from the deceased. I feel very exhausted, I feel very heavy after having played the whole night", one of the priest-musicians explains. "The Daan Chheeka music is purifying and sacred (*povitro*); sound is purifying ('dhaan chheeka git poche povitra heba; sur povitra koriba')", he continues. The whole burden of an ended life weighs on the guilt and expiation priest-musician. He carries this burden and transforms it by playing Daan Chheeka music.

By playing Daan Chheeka music, the priest-musician also handles the ambivalence of death: the dramatic experience of the radically and absolutely finished physical life and the belief that the soul of the deceased (*atma*) is

---

6 On the ambivalence and the "poisonous quality" of the gift and the "death gift", see the fundamental work by Marcel Mauss (1954); on the aspect of inauspiciousness of the gift, see Raheja 1988.

leaving the corpse and continues to live in another world. This transfer is considered dangerous, as humans are still attached to the deceased. Their inability to give the soul leave to depart to the other world might have dramatically dangerous consequences.[7] Their attachment to the deceased might namely put an end to their own life by way of "contagion". In order to prevent such contagious contact between the deceased and his or her progeny, an emotionally neutral and specialised mediator is summoned. Instead of those who lost a family member, the socially marginalised and thus symbolically "untouchable" guilt and expiation priest-musician begins, through the medium of the sound of his instruments and his songs, a dialogue between the soul, the community and the ancestors.[8]

The ritual activities of the guilt and expiation priests of the Bora Sambar region reveal the local conviction that the medium of sound is the best to grasp the experience of death, its physical and empirical transformation processes and the intended transition of post-mortem pollution to purity. As Robert Hertz (1907) has shown in his fundamental study on the representation of death, its universal ambivalence and the affiliated concepts of inauspi-ciousness and impurity are closely related to the transformational phases of the decomposing human cadaver. The musical expressions of Bora Sambar's priest-musicians operate as ritual purifiers, auspicifiers and spiritual absorbers of guilt during this precarious post-mortem transformation process.

The concept of *sur* – sound and liberation

All guilt and expiation priest-musicians of the Bora Sambar region I encountered regarded the notion of *sur* (sound) as crucial for their post-mortem communication with the deceased and the ancestors (*purkho lok*) as well as for their ideas about the release of the souls of the deceased (*mukti*). The concept of *sur* points to the idea of sound vibrations (*sabad*) and their rhythmic-melodic movements, and to the power of sound to transgress empirical and unempirical spaces. The priest-musicians of Bora Sambar view the sound vibrations designated by the term *sur* as a mutual means of connection, communication and influence between the living and the souls of the deceased and the ancestors. "When the soul is alive, then the beat of music is also audible ('sur au atma katha barta heba'). By listening to the

---

7 Piers Vitebsky describes a similar phenomenon (2008: 245–248 and 1993).

8 Piers Vitebsky (1993) describes these characteristic dialogues with the dead for the Adivasi Soara society.

sound, the soul will be released ('sur suniba bele atma mukti heba')", one *birthya* explains.[9]

The *sur* is perceived as a kind of moving vibrations, medium and expression of the fluidity between life and death, between the deceased, the ancestors and the living. According to the priest-musicians, the elusive sound created by their various musical instruments and by their vocal recitation and singing transports the memory of the deceased and accompanies the processes of transformation, purification and finally spiritual release.

The concept of *sur* as sound vibration as formulated by the priest-musicians of Bora Sambar bears a certain resemblance to ideas formulated in the trans-regional South Asian narrative Natyashastra, a classical treatise on the performing arts, including dance, drama and music of the 6th century B.C., where it is stated that the vibrations of sound are the origin of form and the universe (Vatsayanan 1996). However, although certain conceptual similarities are obvious, local interlocutors never alluded to this source. Hence, one suggestion is to consider *sur* as an indigenous concept and theory of sound, incorporating local specific hypotheses on communication and transcendence as a musical dialogue, but nevertheless reflecting the influence of trans-regional concepts.

Donations as cure – sound as spiritual liberation

The texts sung by the priest-musicians during Daan Chheeka rituals establish multiform relations between death and donations, indicating processes of transformation and transfer mediated through the sound and voice of the priest-musician. The following fragment of a Daan Chheeka song enumerates and specifies some of these relations.

SONG 1: Trancriptions of a *daan chheeka geet* sung by the Gour and Soara *ghugia* Khageshwar Bagh[10]

Sei Chandi Samalai Je prabhat hoila.	Down there, goddess Chandi is to be worshipped.
Daana dele data punya pathe jibu.	Oh donor, if you give me alms, you will go to a sacred place of merits/ virtues.

[9] Interview with *birthya* Alekha Panigrahi, 3 February 2009.

[10] Recorded by Lidia Guzy in the village of Shakti on 20 February 2006; transcriptions and translation by Surendra Kumar Sahu.

Daana Jesane sarba byadhi khandanam.	Oh donor! If you give me alms, you will go to the place of the sacred heavens.
Daana Jesane sarba papa khandanam.	By giving alms, we make good all types of sins.
Epari lagichanti data sahe asta koti daana.	Oh donor, there are one hundred millions of alms divided by god.
Kansa daana dele data bansa badhutiba.	If you donate bronze materials then it will help you to increase your next dynasty.
Lauha daana dele data sani saanti heba.	God Sani [the planet god] will be pleased by a donation of iron to him.
Arna daana dela brahmananda santi heba.	By donating rice as food, the whole world will be happy.
Bastra daana dele pitru nabe sarga pure homa kundare basibe.	By donating clothes, your forefathers will be seated in a sacred place in heaven
Chhela daana dele data pitru loka je chandana banaku jiba.	By donating a goat, your forefathers' souls will go to the sandalwood forest [a sacred place in heaven].
Gairu daana deke daata Baitarani.	Donating a cow's alms will help to cross the river Baitarani [to reach the place where the souls will be released].
Sapta purkha loka mane je mukti labhibe.	Seven generations of forefathers will be released.
Mahissi daana dele data akaala mrutyu.	By donating a buffalo as alms you gain premature death [i.e. an early liberation].
Bhumi daana dele data preta astana suhie rahibu.	After your death, your soul will obtain a good place to stay and to be happy.
Ehipari lagichanti sahe asta koti daana.	Such like this, there are one hundred millions of alms we can take.
Kakharu kati daana dele Chandi santi heba.	By giving a white melon pumpkin / gourd [during the ritual of goat sacrifice] you will make the goddess Chandi happy.

Mendhaa daana dele Kali santi heba.	Kali will be happy if you give her a sheep sacrifice.
Hansa daana dele byaadhi kati jiba.	If you give a duck as sacrifice, you will be released from all diseases.
Kukura daana dele bakra roga kati jiba.	By donating a hen, you will be cured of paralysis.
Sapta purkhara loka mane aasi ehi jaagare kara asirbada roga rasta kari dia dura.	Oh! Seven forefathers' souls, you come to this spot, give us blessings and relief.

The oral text sung during the Daan Chheeka ritual indicates that the ritual donation incites a supra-empirical dynamism and exchange between the family of the deceased, the priest-musician and the non-empirical world of the ancestors and the gods.

The sung text offers evidence for *daan* as gift/alms in a very similar way to trans-regional brahmanical ideas about offerings that should be made on such occasions. The oral text refers to *pap* (sin) and *punya* (merits/ virtue). The post-mortem situation of the deceased thus deals with the meritorious and bad deeds of the deceased that can be connected to the trans-empirical theory of karma, which accumulates the evil deeds and sins with the beneficial deeds and broadens the discussion around guilt by including *pap* and its opposite *punya*.

Post mortem guilt is purged by means of ritual donations directed to the priest-musician. The ritual alms given to him symbolise trans-cosmic transactions and generate benevolent effects in the world of the dead and the ancestors. On the one hand, the text discloses that the ritual gifts establish communication with the world of the ancestors. On the other hand, donations operate as means to attain a worldly as well as a soteriological rewards for the donors themselves – including the hope 1) to achieve a good afterlife ("Oh donor, if you give me alms, you will go to a sacred place of virtues"); 2) to obtain the cure of ailments in this world ("If you give a duck as a sacrifice, you will be released from all diseases / By donating a hen, you will be cured of paralysis")*;* 3) to effect a release of their ancestors from the cycle of rebirths ("By donating a goat, your forefathers' souls will go to the sandalwood forest"); and 4) to secure the appeasement of the divine non-empirical sphere in a general sense ("God Sani will be pleased by a donation of iron to him. By donating rice as food the whole world will be happy.").

Underlying this otherworldly economy of donations, which reflects the crucial social and symbolical value of the gift,[11] is the local concept of *mukti* (spiritual liberation or release). The inhabitants of the Bora Sambar region hold that every human being is animated by a soul (*atma*). The *atma* is considered to be reborn for seven generations before being finally released ("Seven generations of forefathers will be released"). This final liberation – the end of a circle of death and rebirth – of the soul, which may be conceived as a final absolute death that excludes the possibility of further rebirth, is called *mukti*. The song of the priest-musician hints to the possibility of precipitating the soul's liberation by means of appropriate offerings: "By donating a buffalo as alms you gain premature death" – the absolute death is gained before the rebirth circle of seven generations has been run through.

The song of the priest preserves the idea of buffalo sacrifices in the context of ancestor worship which today are no longer practised in the Bora Sambar region.[12] In Daan Chheeka on the one hand the cultural memory of the traditional ancestor worship as practised in the buffalo and cow sacrifice is re-enacted through the poetic recitations. The sacrificial nature can also be depicted in the symbol of *kakharu kati*, a term used to describe the action of cutting a type of pumpkin/melon/gourd also used as a substitute for blood/human sacrifices. The *kakharu kati* could thus represent a veiled – poetic – hint of the idea of human sacrifice for goddess Chandi, known in the region for her legends of human sacrifice. The line "kakharu kati daana dele Chandi santi heba" ("By giving a white melon you will make the goddess Chandi happy") could depict the idea of death as a human offering to goddess Chandi. On the other hand Daan Chheeka establishes a continuum between the specific local ancestor worship tradition and the hegemonic trans-regional Hindu belief in divine animation of the world and the universe and the belief in the idea of the cycle of rebirth. According to the Upanishads of the classical Brahmanic tradition, the Absolute, the Immortal One, is called Brahman; his human correlate functions as an *atman* (the self) that, in human form, can attain redemption (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) (Biardeau 1995: 32–34). In both the local and the brahmanic tradition the absolute death in terms of spiritual liberation (*mukti*) or redemption (*moksha*) is the highest aim of life.

---

[11] The idea of the gift as a most fundamental fact for the functioning of social communities has been underlined by Marcel Mauss. The social transactions in the form of symbolic or actual gifts or donations incite a social dynamism crucial for the vitality of societies. The social principle of the gift is characterised by reciprocity, fluidity and transfer (see Mauss 1923/24; Godelier 1996).

[12] Buffalo sacrifices (*gotr*) as crucial expressions of ancestor worship are still a vibrant cultural trait of the indigenous Desya population of Southern Odisha, such as the Gadaba of Koraput (Pfeffer 2001: 123–148; Berger 2007: 284–308).

The following poetic fragment sung during a Daan Chheeka ritual by Alekha Panigrahi, the *birthya* of the Harijan communities in the Bora Sambar region, exemplarily expresses the complex interchange between donations, sound and ideas of transformation and spiritual liberation.[13]

SONG 2: Translation of incantations recited by the *birthya* Alekha Panigrahi while playing the Damburu drum[14]

This is the song of *birthya* for god (Mahapuru), for the ancestors (*pitru lok*) and for his community (*jati bandu*).

I am the ocean, the water and you will release me!

The mother cries for her son, oh son!

The sister cries for her brother, oh brother!

The woman cries for another son [i.e. her husband].

Why do you come here, my friend?

What do you bring from there?

You are the donor of my clothes and of my food.

If you give me food and clothes then your soul (*atma*) will reside in heaven (*boikunto*).

Brothers, friends, brothers!

Through my community (*jati bandu*) and through myself I venerate you, oh god!

Relieve us!

Look at this woman. She cries for another son [i.e. her deceased husband].

Protect her! Take care of her!

Now your home is the Damburu drum!

The *birthya* accompanies his mythical recitations and poetic ballads with the Damburu drum. The Damburu is a small drum with two hemispherical bowls, similar in shape to an hour glass. The two membranes made from cowhide are connected by fanlike lacing and stretched by a wrapping in the middle.

---

13 For further examples see Appendix in Lidia Guzy 2012: 236–255.

14 Recorded by Lidia Guzy in the village of Siripalli on 1 April 2004.

The wrapping is held together by belts and small rattles. The Damburu is played with both hands, while the sound of the small rattles backs the beat of the drum.

Through the sound of his drum, his voice and his ritual poetry, the *birthya* recalls the memory of the dead and reflects on the finality of life and the solitude of death ("I am the ocean, the water and you will release me!"). He gives consolation by hinting at the persistence of the social community, thus creating a social continuity after the loss of a family member ("Through my community and through myself I venerate you, oh god! Relieve us!").

The verse "This is the song of *birthya* for god, for the ancestors and for his community", indicates that the *birthya* performs his songs both for the non-empirical world of the ancestors and the deities as well as for his social community. The dialogic form of the ritual incantations mirrors a structural pattern of exchange between the sounds of the Damburu drum and the voice of the priest-musician. With the last line: "Now your home is the Damburu drum!" the *birthya* expresses the identity between the drum and the non-empirical world of the deceased.

For the *birthya* and his Harijan community donations during Daan Chheeka guarantee a spiritual liberation of the souls of the deceased ("You are the donor of my clothes and of my food. If you give me food and clothes, then your soul will reside in heaven."). This religious message is mediated through the sound of the Damburu drum as well as the voice of the priest-musician ("Brothers, friends, brothers! Through my community [*jati bandu*] and through myself I venerate you, oh god! Relieve us!"). The *birthya* here ritually assumes both the role of the ancestors (*purkha lok*) and the role of his community. The exchange between a god, the ancestors and the mourning community is thus mediated once more in a dialogic form, indicating a homology between the medium, its form and its content.

Music and liminality

Besides being the medium of mediation, transformation and transfer, music in Daan Chheeka rituals is also an expression and a medium of liminality.[15] The threshold, on which the priest-musician sits during the Daan Cheeka ritual, symbolises his factual, ritual and non-empirical location between the world of the humans and the world of the ancestors and deities. Music transfers the priest-musician into the in-between phase between post-mortem in-

[15] For the symbolism of the threshold and the ritual in-between phase, see Turner 1969 and Arnold van Gennep's work on *rites des passages* (van Gennep 1986).

auspiciousness (*ashubbo*) to auspiciousness (*shubbo*) and impurity (*ashuddo*) to purity (*shuddbbo*), death and life, gods, ancestors and humans.

In former times, according to local narrations, the diverse guilt and expiation priests mutually exchanged their instruments during this liminal phase of communication with the deceased and ancestors. Hence, Daan Chheeka ceremonies indicate a strong ritual interchange, transition and proximity between the local communities of the Bora Sambar region. For example, it is said that in former times Daan Chheeka rituals were sometimes performed by two priest-musicians of two socially related communities. In this sense the priest-musician of the Goura, the Goura *ghugia,* was supposed to perform the Daan Chheeka ceremony with both his own community's instrument – the flute Balu Boisi – and the ritual instrument of the Soara – the lute Brahma Veena. The Brahma Veena and Balu Boisi, so it is narrated, were first placed crosswise on the doorstep of the mourning house and then played by the particular priest-musicians, either by the *ghugia* for his Soara community or by the Balu Boisi player for the Goura community. Today, the guilt and expiation priests generally use their own specific musical instruments. Some of the instruments of the priest-musicians have been abandoned in the course of time. The Balu Boisi, for example, is no longer used by either the Goura or the Soara communities. It has been replaced by the performance of mantras, religious recitations without any instrumental accompaniment. The Balu Boisi had been forgotten until it was rediscovered in the course of the present research and has since gained a new regional popularity as an instrument for artistic musical performances during folk festivals.

FIGURE 5: The Damburu drum

Ambivalence of social status and social change

Most guilt and expiation priests have an ambivalent and contested social status. Generally, the priest-musicians regard themselves as having a higher status than their ritual clients. Their self-esteem is backed by certain myths surrounding the origin of their instruments, as the following narration, told by the *birthya* about the origin of the Damburu drum, illustrates: "The first Damburu drum was created by Brahma for his elder son Shiva in order to venerate the dead and the ancestors. God Shiva himself killed the first cow from which the skin of the drum was taken."[16] In the context of the myth, the handling of the cow's skin, which in real life is a reason for the social marginalisation of the Harijan community, becomes an instrument and expression of positive identity. Through the person of the mythical elder brother Shiva, social stigmatisation is inverted into religious specialisation. Equating the guilt and expiation priest with the social category of "elder brother" classifies him as socially and ritually senior to other members of his community. In the Bora Sambar region, fraternal seniority signifies a traditional hierarchical classification in a patrilinear social structure of status formation.

Yet contrariwise, the local lines of the guilt and expiation priests of the particular communities are generally considered by their ritual clients to be of an inferior, marginalised status. Thus, these religious specialists are always the social "other", regardless of the fact that they are sometimes perceived to be of a higher and sometimes of a lower status. In some way they belong to one's own community, yet at the same time do not.[17] Indeed, the Daan Chheeka work is generally regarded as an inauspicious religious duty (*ashubba karjo*). The handling of death and the dangerous physical and spiritual transformations and transfer processes connected with it involve an uncertain social status.

The ambivalent and precarious social status of the non-Brahmin guilt and expiation priests makes many of these priest-musicians extremely reticent to enter into a public or official discourse about their handling of ritual pollution or contagion. Some families of non-Brahmin priests have completely abandoned or "cut" (*band korila*) their traditional ritual occupation and given up their role of spiritual "trash" absorber and cleaner. They refuse to continue their ritual tasks and have given up performing their music. They would like to change their ritual occupation, or have people forget it, in

16 Interview with *birthya* Alekha Panigrahi, 20 January 2008.

17 For a parallel example of this ambivalence, see Fürer-Haimendorf's description of the role of the pordhan in (former) Madhya Pradesh. The pordhan's role is very similar to the role of the porgonia in the Bora Sambar region (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979: 363–393).

order to rid themselves of the stigma of ambivalence linked to their ritual proximity to the inauspiciousness (*ashubba*) and impurity (*ashudda*) of death. Increasingly, the purifying process of *ashubba karjo* is reduced to the final step of donating the guilt of the deceased to the altar of a local or regional goddess or god – thus omitting the mediating work of the guilt and expiation priests, whose roles are taken over by the regional deities.

FIGURE 6: A wandering *gosain* with his Sarangi on the way from Paikmal to Padampur

Some years ago, for example, some *ghugia* guilt and expiation priests of the Binjhal, Goura and Soara communities ceased to define themselves as *ghugia* priests. Instead, they started to speak of themselves as *goswami* or *gosain* (Hindu saint/ascetic). As an alternative to performing vocal and instrumental rituals for the ancestors, they began to carry out ritual worship for gods and goddesses such as Soni, Trinath, Durga, Ganesh, Shiva and Saraswati. The *gosain* have exchanged their musical instrument, the traditional Brahma

Veena, for with a one-stringed violin, called Sarangi, in which the goddess Saraswati is supposed to reside.

The former *ghugia* today recites the myths and songs from the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu Puranic narrative. He travels from village to village as a wandering singer and priest. No community calls him to perform his worship and he no longer chooses a specific community. He arrives by himself in order to recite and sing his various religious stories. In return for his performance, he receives lentils and uncooked rice from the villagers. Besides the songs from the Bhagavad Gita, certain melodic hymns for local goddesses, sung by these newly emerged itinerary priests, have gained a special regional fame.

As a result of the disappearance of the tradition of the guilt and expiation priests, certain local and regional deities of the Bora Sambar region have gained a new popularity. As a rising number of guilt and expiation priests abandon their ritual task of mediating communication with the hereafter, regional gods and their temples that fill this gap become more attractive. This is for example the case with the cult of the Goddess Tarini[18], a former jungle goddess of the Kheonjhar region of southern Odisha, who in recent years has won pan-Odishan fame. Her popularity and vibrant worship is visible in the recently constructed Tarini temple next to the road between Padampur and Paikmal. Her prominence is due to the fact that her worship is considered to finalise the circles of inauspiciousness and impurity passed through in the context of post mortem memorial rituals. By means of religious songs sung for her, the goddess Tarini can, namely, be incited to absorb ritual impurity. For the same reasons, the regional temples of Harishankar and Nursingnath have regained popularity in recent years.

Another example of social change is the recent discourse on Daan Chheeka led by senior representatives and authorities of the Gond community from Chhattisgarh and Odisha.[19] The elders of the Gond community have decided to completely abandon the tradition of Daan Chheeka. The ritual work of Daan Chheeka has been categorised by them as *kin kamo* – a bad or mean work associated with begging (*magiba/vikya lok*) and, thus, a low social status. The senior authorities and representatives of the Gond collectively refused to be associated with the socially pejorative category of beggars any longer. The *porgonia,* the ritual specialists of the Gond, thus had to abandon

---

[18] The Goddess Tarini is a former local goddess who has gained exceptional regional popularity around Odisha due to the spread of her worship through the Internet. See Mallebrein 2004: 155–165.

[19] The Gond of the Bora Sambar region are spread over the territory of both states. This discourse was recorded in the Padampur region in 2010.

the tradition of musical recitations and invocations as well as the ritual begging for rice during the mortuary Daan Chheeka rites. Following the verdict of the elders of their community, they collectively destroyed their traditional instruments. The *porgonia* priest-musicians have today radically broken with the tradition of accepting the spiritually poisoned gift (*daan chheeka*). The former non-Brahmin priests of the Gond refuse to make any further comment on their tradition: "The community has decided – all is closed now."[20]

In silencing their tradition through a self-inflicted memocide,[21] the former *porgonia* define themselves today simply as Gond. Their Daan Chheeka tradition has been totally abandoned and replaced either by 1) domestic ancestor worship, in which texts referring to dominant South Asian ideas of Brahman or to dominant trans-local narratives of the Vedas are recited; 2) by worship in the village temple of the god Bura Raja or Shiva, where the dead are purified (*suddo pai* = in order to make them pure); or 3) by purification rites at the river Ganga, where the dead are considered to receive an absolute and definitive redemption.

Through the shift from local dialogues to dominant South Asian narratives and through the destruction of their ritual instruments, a violent cultural amnesia seems to be spreading through the subaltern Gond community of the Bora Sambar region. The local system of the non-Brahmin guilt and expiation priest-musicians and their music is generally highly vulnerable to processes of modernisation, memocide, cultural forgetting and the rejection and reduction of rituals. The social change which is traceable in a multitude of internal cultural dynamics becomes dramatically visible in the abandonment and the highly symbolic collective destruction of the traditional instruments. In an act of auto-aggression the community creates a new social identity by force, which adopts new religious and musical traditions, a process most noticeable in the rise and popularity of new religious centres with devotional music characterised by ritual recitation, devotional hymns and rhymes of praise dedicated to regional Hindu goddesses.

---

20 Anonymous interview, 15 February 2007.

21 The term "memocide" denotes the cultural dynamics of a collective and culturally eradication of the cultural memory of a minority society due to the influence of hegemonic value-ideas of a majority society. In the Indian context, the hegemony of Hindu values has produced a memocide in many small indigenous communities through the spread of hegemonic religious practices, ideas and narratives (see Samaddar 1998).

Conclusion

The diverse non-Brahmin priest-musicians of the Bora Sambar region are a living archive of cultural and musical wealth. Through their various musical traditions, they preserve a unique cultural consciousness and a local system of ideas and values regarding divinity, death and healing. In the Daan Chheeka ritual, human loss is made present in the experience and perception of the sound (*sur*) of particular instruments. The experience of sound seems to entail healing and restructuring effects through its sensual and transformative powers. In this context, the people of the Bora Sambar region understand the symbolic and factual flow of donations during Daan Chheeka as a transfer of gifts from one world to another. The movement and flow of alms is metaphorically equated with the micro-movements of sound vibrations, expressing ideas of post-mortem transformation processes and the absence of the deceased. The concept of *sur* establishes music in the Bora Sambar region as a medium of spiritual purification, prevention and finally healing. The sound, *sur*, which itself is transitional and temporary in nature, operates as a cultural metaphor of transfer, transition and memory.

Furthermore, ritual sound can establish an aesthetic distance, which becomes effective in the healing and exorcising powers ascribed to many of the musical practices discussed. The sound itself is associated with motion and linked to spiritual liberation (*mukti*). The effect of aesthetic distancing is metaphorically intensified by the migrant, wandering status of most of the musical performers. The begging involved in particular traditions of migrant music hints at connections between local concepts of religious musical performances and trans-regional religious traditions, such as the hegemonic Hindu value of asceticism.

All of the diverse musical traditions of non-Brahmin priest-musicians of the Bora Sambar region are connected by their proximity to ambivalent and dangerous rituals and situations of life – a social and ritual condition that classifies the non-Brahmin priest-musicians as "impure" and "inauspicious" and, therefore, of a precarious and ambivalent social status.[22] I would suggest that the symbolic identification of precarious and ambivalent ritual music with its performers, hints to a convergence between the medium music and its message: the transitional, migrant or passing character of music represents both 1) the ritual transition and the ritual transformation of spiritual impurity and inauspiciousness and 2) the ritual passing and banish-

[22] The same ambivalence and mixture of impurity and inauspiciousness relates also to low-status Hindu Brahmins, seen for example in low-status Brahmins dealing with funeral rites within the Agharia peasant community of Western Odisha (Skoda 2005).

ing of ailment. These transformations always imply a precarious position between the worlds. The liminality of the ritual music seems, in consequence, to stigmatise its performers socially.

Furthermore, the sounds of the specific instruments of priests-musicians of the Bora Sambar region are on the one hand acoustic metaphors and a sonic language expressing indigenous theories of sound and the sacred. On the other hand the importance of sound in the region demonstrates the interplay between trans-regional Hindu narratives and local concepts, indicating significant effects of hegemonic Hindu value-ideas in the region. Thus, moments of a memocide of vulnerable traditional cultural and musical concepts merge simultaneously with a flowering of musical creativity.

References

Biardeau, Marleine (1995): *L'Hindouisme. Anthropologie d'une Civilisation*. Paris: Champs Flammarion.

Bijoi, C. R. (2007): Adivasis of India. A History of Discrimination, Conflict and Resistance. In: Aditi Chanchani / Kavita Kanan / Mamata Dash / Rosemary Viswanath / Sinduja Ananthkrishnan / Vidhya Ragan (eds): *This is Our Homeland. A Collection of Essays on the Betrayal of Adivasi Rights in India*. Bangalore: Equations, pp. 15–27.

Berger, Peter (2007): *Füttern, Speisen und Verschlingen. Ritual und Gesellschaft im Hochland von Orissa, Indien*. (Indus – Ethnologische Südasien-Studien, 11). Berlin: Lit-Verlag.

Cohn, Bernhard S. (1987): Some Notes on Law and Change in North India (originally published in 1959). In: Bernhard S. Cohn: *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 554–574.

Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von / Fürer-Haimendorf, Elizabeth von (1979): *Gonds of Andhra Pradesh: Tradition and Change in an Indian Tribe*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Guzy, Lidia (2013): *Marginalised Music. Music, Religion and Politics from the Bora Sambar Region of Western Odisha*. Zurich: Lit-Verlag.

Godelier, Maurice (1996): *L'enigme du don*. Paris: Edition Flammarion.

Hertz, Robert (1907) : Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort. *Année Sociologique* 1, pp. 48–137.

Hertz, Robert (1970): *Sociologie religieuse et folklore*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (originally published in 1928).

Hertz, Robert (1988) : *Le péché et l'expiation dans les sociétés primitives*. Paris: Èditions (originally published in 1922).

Mallebrein, Cornelia (2004): Entering the Realm of Durga. Patkandha – A Hinduised Tribal Deity. In: Angelika Malinar / Johannes Beltz / Heiko Frese (eds): *Text and Context in the History, Literature and Religion in Orissa*. Delhi: Manohar, pp. 273–299.

Mauss, Marcel (1923/24). Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *L'Année Sociologique*, seconde série / 1923–1924, pp. 30–186

Mauss, Marcel (1954): *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Cohen West (originally published in 1950).

Munda, Ram Dayal (2002): India's Protection and Promotion of Tribal Rights: Obligations under ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1957 (No. 107). Paper submitted at Indigenous Rights in the Commonwealth Project South and South Asia Regional Expert Meeting, 11th–13th March 2002.

O'Malley, L. S. S. (2007): *Bengal District Gazetteers Sambalpur*. New Delhi: Logos Press (originally published in 1909).

Parry, Jonathan (1980): Ghosts, Greed, and Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priests. *Man* (New Series) 15(1), pp. 88–111.

Pfeffer, Georg (2001): A Ritual of Revival among the Gadaba of Koraput. In: Burkhard Schnepel / Hermann Kulke (eds): Jagannath Revisited: Studying Society, Religion and the State in Orissa. Delhi: Manohar, pp. 123–148.

Raheja, Gloria G. (1988): *The Poison in the Gift. Ritual, Prestation and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sahoo, Bhakta Puran (2007): Borasambar: A Peep into its Origin & Early History. In: Bora Sambar Cup 2007 Souvenir. Padampur.

Samaddar, Ranabir (1998): *Memory, Identity, Power: Politics in the Jungle Mahals 1890–1950*. London: Sangam Books.

Schnepel, Burkhard (2002): *The Jungle Kings. Ethnohistorical Aspects of Politics and Ritual in Orissa*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.

Schoembucher, Elisabeth / Zoller, Claus Peter (eds) (1999): *Ways of Dying: Death and its Meaning in South Asia.* Delhi: Manohar.

Skoda, Uwe (2005): *The Aghria. A Peasant Caste on a Tribal Frontier*. Delhi: Manohar.

Snodgrass, Jeffrey G. (2001): Beware of Charitable Souls: Contagion, Roguish Ghosts and the Poison(s) of Hindu Alms. *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 7(4), pp. 687–703.

Turner, Victor (1969): *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure.* (The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

van Gennep, Arnold (1986): *Übergangsriten*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verlag.

Vatsyayan, Kapila (1996): *Bharata: The Natyashastra*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Vitebsky, Piers (1993): *Dialogues with the Dead*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Vitebsky, Piers (2008): Loving and Forgetting: Moments of Inarticulacy in Tribal India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(2), pp. 243–261.