

Bronze *Bhūta* Masks: An Analysis of the Collection of the DakshinaChitra Museum

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Abstract: The term *bhūta* (also spelled as *būta* or anglicised “bhuta”) refers, among others, to a multi-layered phenomenon including a complex belief system, elaborate rituals, animal sacrifice, state of trance, and oracles. These aspects find their expression in various visual and performing arts such as music, dance, dialogue, masks, facial make-up, and decorations made of natural materials. This article analyses the so far unpublished collection of contemporary *bhūta* masks as well as one *bhūta* figurine displayed at the DakshinaChitra heritage museum at Muttukadu near Chennai in South India. The museum exhibits 18 heritage houses from the four southernmost states of India. Inside the Ilkal House at the Karnataka section, ritual objects of the *bhūta* worship from Tulunadu are displayed. This collection of *bhūta* artefacts is typical for numerous collections of *bhūta* masks and objects, recently manufactured for international museums. They cater to the increased demand for those items based on their appreciation as folk art or fine art. The brief introduction to the *bhūta* cult will be followed by a description of the eminent features of *bhūta* masks in general. The main part of this article is an art historical description of the collection of *bhūta* masks and other related metal objects at the DakshinaChitra museum. The collection consists of a Jumādi/Dhūmāvati² mask, along with a breastplate and a backdrop, called *aṇi*. In addition, there are masks of Pilichāmuṇḍi, Viṣṇumūrti and Pañjurli as well as a Pañjurli figurine. The collection is completed by another unidentified *bhūta* mask. The investigation of these masks leads, among others, to the question whether there exists a specific style for *bhūta* masks and figurines. Another crucial question is how such ritual objects get into museum collections. Furthermore, we need to consider how these exhibitions contribute to the public perception of *bhūta* cult objects. These questions are discussed at the end of this article.

¹ I am grateful to the staff of the DakshinaChitra museum for kindly supporting this examination.

² The mythological background of each *bhūta* as well as the iconographic features represented by the masks will be described in the respective sections.

INTRODUCTION

Bhūta worship is one of the so-called folk-beliefs³ which exist besides the Sanskrit tradition of the brahmanical Hinduism especially in the rural areas of India. This religious practice is mainly followed by the rural population, especially by lower classes as for example members of Scheduled Castes (Beltz 2009a: 11). In contrast to the puranic gods which are worshipped as remote deities often in the form of icons, *bhūta* spirits are personalised deities who are believed to interact with their devotees during ritual ceremonies, referred to as *kōla* (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: vii). *Bhūta* spirits require propitiation from their devotees and offer protection and blessings in return as well as they punish misdoing (Rai 1996: 172). In general, phenomena of folk religion often do not exist in isolation from brahmanical Hinduism; they frequently influence each other (Horstmann 1993b: 103). The name *bhūta* itself might originate from the Sanskrit word *bhūta*, meaning “deceased person”, “spirit” or “ghost” (Rond 2010a: 8). In Tuḷu, the word *bhūta* or *būta* refers to a male or female deity (Nambiar 2009: 22). *Bhūta* worship is a multi-layered phenomenon which encompasses a complex belief system, elaborate rituals, animal sacrifice, state of trance, and oracles. These aspects find their expression in various visual and performing arts such as music, dance, dialogue, masks, facial make-up, and decorations made of natural materials.

The investigation of the material culture of *bhūta* worship in general and *bhūta* masks in particular is associated with the theoretical discourse on dance/performance iconography which arose amongst European and American scholars in the 1990s and has recently been transferred to Asian contexts, for example by Jukka O. Miettinen who worked on material from mainland Southeast Asia (Miettinen 2008). Dance/performance iconography systematically studies all visual material related to (dance-)performances (Smith 1999: 113). Obvious examples are pictures, reliefs or sculptures which represent dance, drama, etc. (Seebass 1991: 34). I argue that in a wider usage of

³ This form of religiosity is characterised by an easier accessibility for common people through rituals which include dance, music, dramatic elements but also possession ceremonies. The rituals aim in most cases at the immediate well-being of their devotees in the form of agricultural fertility and the continuity of the family (Brückner 1993: 143).

the term, visual objects related to performances (not only their visual representations), such as costumes, headdresses, props, and masks, are also relevant for this area of research. However, there is an obvious need for the study of material culture related to performances as art objects in their own rights. Their systematic analysis has been neglected for most of the 20th century and dance and drama images and objects related to performances have rather been used as ancillary illustrations for publications of different genres (Heck 1999: 1). The art historical approach towards dance/performance iconography⁴ follows the general iconographic approach which comprises of a descriptive analysis of the art objects. This methodology had been systematised by Panofsky in 1939 (Seebass 1991: 33). In a first step, the constitutive elements of the object are described. This is followed by the second step which encompasses the discussion of the meaning of the art work including the examination of the cultural context and comparison to similar examples (Seebass 1991: 33f.).⁵ Both elements will be combined in the analysis of the *bhūta* masks at DakshinaChitra to provide a consistent representation and interpretation of those masks. Besides the theoretical framework for this investigation, the information available on *bhūta* masks and the availability of published research on this topic needs to be considered, too.

Bhūta worship has gained international attention since the mid-19th century due to its documentation by the Basel mission, which supported Christian missionary stations in the Tulunadu region (Nithesh n.d.). Since then, research has mainly been conducted by either cultural anthropologists or linguists. Therefore, the focus has been on the rituals of the *bhūta* cult and their (regulative) role in the society or the orally transmitted legends of the *bhūtas*. While those studies often considered the performative dimension of the *bhūta* worship, they neglected visual aspects, such as masks, figurines, costumes, etc. The earliest publication which gave importance to the art historical study of *bhūta* masks is Heidrun Brückner's article "Zu Kult und Ikonografie von Tulu-

⁴ According to Tilman Seebass, there are two different approaches towards dance iconography: the choreological approach studies the visual material to obtain information on dance technique. The art-historical approach considers the visual material related to dance as art works in their own right with literal and symbolic meanings attached (Seebass 1991: 33).

⁵ My investigation will to some extent also discuss the third level, called iconology, that investigates the symbolic dimension of the art work under consideration of the influence of artist, patron, and audience (Seebass 1991: 34).

Volksgottheiten an der Westküste Südindiens”, published in 1993 in an anthology about non-brahmanical deities in India: “Die anderen Götter. Volks- und Stammesbronzen aus Indien”. Three pages discuss the masks’ iconography, and the article is accompanied by seven photographs (Brückner 1993: 145ff.). *Bhūta* masks became also popular as art objects, for instance, through the exhibition “Wenn Masken tanzen – Rituelles Theater und Bronzekunst aus Südwestindien” at the Museum Rietberg, Zurich, in 2009. The catalogue edited by Johannes Beltz includes a general introduction and two scholarly articles along with photographs and descriptions of the masks and figurines which were on display. The most relevant article from this publication for the present essay is “Ritual, Mythos und Kunsthandwerk” by Balan Nambiar. The text provides general information on *bhūta* worship, discusses typology and iconography of the masks, and describes the creation process. The growing popularity of *bhūta* masks on the art market is reflected in the publication of short articles by gallery owners, such as Frédéric Rond’s (see Rond 2010a and b), published shortly after the major exhibition at the Museum Rietberg in 2009. The latest article by Subhashini Aryan and B. N. Aryan seems to consist mainly of information obtained from those earlier publications with a focus on typology and iconography as well as on the creation process. The small number of research projects and publications on *bhūta* masks points out the need for further investigations of this topic.

Hence, this article analyses the so far unpublished collection of contemporary *bhūta* masks as well as one *bhūta* figurine displayed at the DakshinaChitra heritage museum at Muttukadu near Chennai in South India.⁶ The museum exhibits 18 heritage houses from the four southernmost states of India (DakshinaChitra 2014). Inside the Ilkal House at the Karnataka section, ritual objects of the *bhūta* worship from Tulunadu are displayed. This collection of *bhūta* artefacts is typical for numerous collections of recently created *bhūta* masks and objects, purchased or even ordered by international museums and art galleries. They cater to the increased demand for those items based on their appreciation as folk art or fine art. Doubtlessly, also the discussion of contemporary *bhūta* masks, which were obtained for a museum

⁶ The collection consists of a Jumādi/Dhūmāvati mask, along with a breastplate and a back-drop, called *aṇi*. Furthermore, there are masks of Pilichāmuṇḍi, Viṣṇumūrti and Pañjurli as well as a Pañjurli figurine. The collection is completed by another unidentified *bhūta* mask. The iconography of these *bhūtas* will be described and contextualised in the respective sections on these objects.

presentation, challenges the traditional art historical preference of historical material and questions the erstwhile exclusive religious association of *bhūta* masks. Following an introduction to the *bhūta* cult which is based on secondary sources, such as anthropological studies, there will be a brief description of the eminent features of *bhūta* masks in general. Those sections shall explain the usage and ritual significance of the *bhūta* masks. The main part of this article is an art historical investigation of the collection of *bhūta* masks and other related metal objects at the DakshinaChitra museum. The examination of these masks leads to the question whether there exists a specific style for *bhūta* masks and figurines. Furthermore, the display of ritual masks demands a debate on how such ritual objects come into museum collections as well as how these exhibitions contribute to the public perception of *bhūta* cult objects. These aspects are discussed at the end of the article.

THE BHŪTA CULT

The regions, which are mainly associated with *bhūta* worship are located at the south-west coast of India. They consist of the Dakshina Kannada district, which is the southernmost part of the state Karnataka with the urban centres Udupi and Puttur, and the Kasaragod district, which comprises the northern tip of Kerala (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 111). This region is also known as Tulunadu or Tulava region named after the language Tuḷu, spoken by the majority of its inhabitants. There is a great variety of oral literature in Tuḷu, which is an expression of the folk culture, and therefore, intricately linked and intertwined with the *bhūta* worship. Of special significance are Tuḷu oral epics and the shorter narrations of the legends of different *bhūtas*, called *pāḍḍanas*⁷ (Rai 1996: 163). Interestingly, these legends are considered as evidence for the old-age tradition of the *bhūta* cult, since they refer to historical personalities, e.g. King Buthala Pandya who lived approximately in the first century CE (Rond 2010a: 8). However, seemingly, *bhūta* worship is an indigenous belief system of this area, predating the migration of Indo-Aryan language speakers more than 2000 years ago. Elements as the totemistic origin of certain *bhūtas* and the usage of natural materials such as palm leaves for dresses are also believed to have derived from these ancient practices (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 4).

⁷ According to Marine Carrin, the name *pāḍḍana* is derived from *pardū* = “sung” (Carrin 1999: 109).

According to several scholars, there are 300 to 500 different *bhūtas* who are actively worshipped in Tulunadu.⁸ Naturally, not all *bhūtas* are worshipped by everyone, and only about 25 *bhūtas* can be found throughout the whole region.⁹ The other *bhūtas* are of special local significance or receive worship only by members of a particular community or caste (Gowda 2005: 18). Scholars divide *bhūtas* into different categories according to their origin. Uliyar Padmanabha Upadhyaya and Susheela Upadhyaya mention the following categories: 1. *bhūtas* with totemistic origin, 2. those associated with puranic deities, such as Viṣṇu, Śiva or different forms of the mother goddess, 3. heroes who became spirits after a heroic or tragic death¹⁰, 4. ferocious spirits of persons who died due to social injustice, and 5. serpent spirits (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 3f.).¹¹ Throughout the year, *bhūtas* receive worship on family altars or shrines where they are installed. The presence of the *bhūta* is symbolised by his/her weapons, shield, bell, flywhisk, jewels, and lamps (Nambiar 2009: 22). Furthermore, the mask of the *bhūta* may be kept there as well as small *bhūta* figurines made of metal or painted jack wood as the one depicted in figure 1.¹²

⁸ According to the census in 1971, 356 were counted (Nambiar 2009: 50), while Rai even suggested that there are 400 to 500 *bhūtas* (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1996: 4).

⁹ For a list of the most popular *bhūtas* and their characteristics see Dusche (2016: 15).

¹⁰ This *bhūta* category has to be clearly demarcated from the *preta* (“ghost”) concept. The spirits of those who died a heroic death (e.g. suicide caused by social injustice) might become *bhūtas*. They are worshipped in shrines and return in the form of mediums to impart justice. In contrast, those who experience an untimely death (e.g. suicide without noble reason) might become *pretas* (“ghosts”) whose presence is feared by the community (Carrin 2018: 109f.).

¹¹ Other categories would be *bhūtas* of human birth, mythic birth, or animal form (Carrin 2018: 109). These categories correspond largely to the three types of *bhūta* masks.

¹² The photos in figures 1 and 4 to 27 were taken by the author at the Ilkal House, DakshinaChitra museum, Muttukadu, India, in August 2014. All the depicted objects in figures 4 to 24 were made by Rajesh Acharya, Udupi, Tulunadu (Karnataka): Jumādi mask, breastplate and *aṇi* (fig. 4–10) in 2007; Pilichāmuṇḍi mask (fig. 11–14) in 2007–2008; Viṣṇumūrti mask (fig. 15–17) in 2006; Pañjurli mask (fig. 18–20) in 2007 and the Pañjurli figurine (fig. 21–24) in 2007. Figures 25–27 show an unidentified *bhūta* mask of an unknown artist from Tulunadu (Karnataka) which cannot be precisely dated. The information on those details is obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation. Figures 2 and 3 were taken by the author in Udupi, India, in 2017.



Fig. 1: Wooden figurine of a standing female *bhūta*, painted with different colours.

The most elaborate ritual of the *bhūta* cult is the annual worship ritual which is often conducted after the harvest and can last between three to seven days (Brückner 1993: 143ff.). It follows a basic structure with some minor variations in different regions or communities. There is a broad distinction

between cults which involve the entire village, called *bhūta kōla* or *bhūta nēma*, and cults of kinship groups or households named *bhūta agel* or *tambila*¹³ (Claus 1975: 55). The following description focuses on the village cult but can also vary according to the specific ritual requirements of each cult. It has many similarities with other folk rituals, such as the Thira and Theyyam (also called Theyāṭṭam) ceremonies in Kerala¹⁴ (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 13). The main protagonists in those rituals are the impersonator, who usually belongs to one amongst four communities of the Scheduled Castes, and the *pujāri* (ritual specialist) who conducts the rituals and offerings. He normally also belongs to a non-brahminical caste, for instance, the Pambada (Brückner 1993: 143).

On the day of the main ritual, the insignia, and figurines of the *bhūta* are brought in a procession to the place designated for the ritual performance and are installed on a temporary altar. Additionally, a *maṇḍala* (a ritual diagram) is drawn in front of this altar. The impersonator prepares himself for the ritual by doing his make-up. These preparations are accompanied by women, who sing the *pāḍḍana* (oral epic) of the *bhūta*.¹⁵ Thereafter, the impersonator dances before and after tying the anklets (*gaggara*) and falls into trance several times. After worshipping the guardians of the eight directions and the village deity, the impersonator retreats to the changing room (Gowda 2005: 33f.). In some cases, there is an intermediate stage during which the *pujāri* carries attributes of the *bhūta*, such as sword and belt, and might also fall into trance (Brückner 1993: 145). During the second part of the *kōla* ritual, the impersonator wears the full costume with *aṇi* (a semi-circular backdrop tied to his back) and mask. The devotees as well as the impersonator invoke the spirit of the *bhūta*. Dances performed during this part of the ritual might last for hours. As soon as the impersonator gets possessed

¹³ The term *agel* or *agelu* is derived from ancestor worship, while *tambila* refers to family deities (Brückner 1993: 144).

¹⁴ Mutual influence also exists between the *bhūta* worship and Yakṣagāna, the semi-classical folk theatre of Karnataka (Aryan 2012: 111).

¹⁵ In some cases, the *pāḍḍana* is recited by the impersonator himself before he does his make-up and wears the costume (Brückner 1993: 145).

by the *bhūta*, he functions as an oracle, settles disputes, and accepts offerings of the devotees in the place of the *bhūta*. Finally, *prasādam*¹⁶ is distributed, the *bhūta* blesses the devotees through the impersonator and leaves again. At the end of the *kōla* the objects of worship are taken back to the shrine¹⁷ or place where they are normally kept (Gowda 2005: 33f.).

The social function of the *bhūta* worship is of major importance to the community. On the one hand, the hierarchy¹⁸ of the *bhūtas* reflects the stratified social system and even the administrative order of this region (Gowda 2005: 30). Furthermore, ritual functions within the *bhūta* ceremony make visible and justify the social order within the community (Dusche 2016: 21). On the other hand, those rituals have a regulatory function, too (Claus 1975: 56). The *bhūta* ritual itself creates a temporary inversion of social realities: the privilege to perform a certain *bhūta* is a hereditary right of the male members of selected families. They embody male as well as female *bhūtas*. The impersonators usually belong to Scheduled Castes, such as the Parava, Pambada, Kōpala, Nalke, and Panara castes (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 13). While possessed by the *bhūta*, the impersonator is regarded as the entity itself and receives the worship of upper caste members, for instance, by wealthy landlords or Brahmin priests, even though in daily life he belongs to a lower caste. Furthermore, incidents of oppression and discrimination are also preserved and narrated through the *pāḍḍanas*. Therefore, the *bhūta* worship is the exception to the rule, which contributes to the stabilisation of the social system since injustice is addressed in a ritualistic world of illusion (Gowda 2005: 36). In addition, the *bhūta* worship unites the village population. All communities, even members of other religions, such as Jains and Muslims, participate in the ritual and have their respective tasks. *Bhūta* worship is not monopolised by a single community and is also not dominated by Brahmins. It is a joint affair which requires the participation of all castes and communities (Gowda 2005: 25).

¹⁶ Food which is presented to a deity (in this case the *bhūta*) and is returned to the devotees as a material blessing.

¹⁷ These shrines can be clearly distinguished from those of the brahmanical Hinduism. They are referred to by specialised local terms, such as *garōdi* (Carrin 2018: 115).

¹⁸ In the brahmanical worldview, *bhūtas* are considered lower in status than puranic deities. Amid *bhūtas*, *rājandaivas* who are perceived as warriors or nobility have the highest rank (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 113f.).

BHŪTA MASKS AND METAL OBJECTS

As mentioned before, metal *bhūta* masks, called *muga* (“face”), play an important role in *bhūta* worship, for example, as the mask which is worn by the impersonator (Brückner 1993: 145). They can also become objects of worship, being considered as *bhāṇḍāra* (ritual treasure of a deity). *Bhūta* masks are supposed to function as a vessel for the spirit of the *bhūta* during specific rituals. Therefore, only perfectly maintained masks can receive worship (Nambiar 2009: 50f.). According to the believers, the mask attracts the *bhūta*’s spirit so that the mask can have its specific power even outside the ritual. During the ritual *kōla* performances, *bhūta* masks can be used in three different ways: some masks are worn by the impersonator for a certain time of the *bhūta* ceremony. They cover the whole face including the facial make-up at that time. This is the common usage in the northern parts of Kerala (Brückner 2009: 57f.). In contrast, the masks in southern Karnataka are usually fixed on top of the *aṇi*. In rare cases, masks can be also carried in the hand of the impersonator, such as the boar mask of Jumādi’s attendant Baṅṭe (Nambiar 2009: 51).¹⁹

Bhūta masks can be divided into three broad categories which overlap with the general categories of *bhūtas* described in the introduction. To the first category belong *bhūta* masks of totemistic origin, which are normally depicted with animal heads. The second category consists of masks of *bhūtas* derived from the brahmanical Hindu pantheon, usually shown with auspicious marks on their foreheads. The third category contains *bhūta* masks of humans whose spirits receive worship after their death (Rond 2010a: 9). Those categories overlap in practice, and each *bhūta* has a variety of forms and regional variations. Furthermore, the same mask can depict one or another *bhūta*, depending on the context or temple where it is kept (Nambiar 2009: 45). Facial stylisation and common ornamental details complicate a clear identification of many *bhūtas* based on the appearance of the masks (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 114). Other important metal objects are breastplates

¹⁹ According to Brückner, carrying the mask instead of wearing it is a sign of the lower status of that *bhūta* (Brückner 1993: 149).

made of bronze or silver, called *mirèkaṭṭu* (Brückner 1993: 145).²⁰ The half-male half-female deity Jumādi is often represented in shrines by her breastplate alone. Breastplates are usually decorated with jewels and serpent motives. Small *bhūta* figurines are crafted with their weapons and insignia riding specific *vāhanas* (“vehicles”). As figurines, *bhūtas* of totemistic origin are often depicted in a human form with their totem animal as *vāhana*. Since *bhūta* masks and figurines are objects of folk art, they exhibit sometimes disproportionate body parts. The heads of the figurines might be too tall in comparison with the body, and limbs can be tubular. In general, the iconographic features of these objects vary from region to region (Aryan and Aryan: 115).

Bronze casting has a long tradition²¹ in Karnataka. According to Subashini Aryan and B. N. Aryan, the oldest preserved *bhūta* mask can be dated to the 18th century (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 111). Brass and bronze are the most common material for *bhūta* masks, but there are also masks carved of wood, and in rare cases they are made of gold or silver. The masks are cast in high relief and are 30 to 40 cm high or even taller (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 114), and their weight comes up to 10 kg (Nambiar 2009: 50). Originally, bronze casting of *bhūta* masks was a seasonal occupation of people in rural areas who were otherwise mainly engaged in agriculture. The masks were created for the *bhūta kōlas* and sold at the festivals (Ranjan and Ranjan 2007: 378). Today, the main centres for bronze casting in Karnataka are Udupi and Puttur. *Bhūta* masks and figurines are sold in craft shops in Udupi, predominantly located close to the central Śrī Kṛṣṇa Maṭha (see fig. 2). The other objects for *bhūta* worship (wooden idols and metal objects) are created by the craftsmen community called *viśvakarma*. The creation of those objects for worship is considered as a holy task and the craftsmen refer to *śilpaśāstras*²² as basis for their work (Nambiar 2009: 51). The fact that the creation of a *bhūta* mask is even described in the *pāḍḍana* on the *bhūta* called Maisandaye underlines the huge importance of this work (Brückner 2009: 60–63).

²⁰ Besides masks (*muga*) and breastplates (*mirèkattu*), silver belts (*voḍyanè*), swords (*kaḍsalè*, *kartalè*), flywhisks made of yak-tails (*cāvala*, *cāmara*), bells (*maṇi*, *gaṇṭhè*), and small figurines are also paraphernalia of the *bhūtas* (Brückner 1993: 145).

²¹ The oldest bronze sculpture of this region can be dated to the 7th century CE (Rond 2010: 8).

²² *Śilpaśāstras* are manuals which discuss general rules for the creation of artworks, such as statues and paintings.



Fig. 2: *Bhūta* figurines on display in a handicraft shop in Udupi, India.

The traditional smiths use different methods to cast bronze objects for *bhūta* worship. Breastplates and flat facial masks can be cast with sand moulds. Small *bhūta* figurines are usually cast massive, which makes them heavy for their comparably small size. A relatively new method which came in usage for the past 40 years has been the embossing of metal *aṅṅis* created from metal plates (Nambiar 2009: 52 & 54). The most complicated technique is the casting of hollow objects using the lost-wax technique, also known as *cire perdue*. The mask is formed out of wax on a fire-resistant base and is covered with different layers of a mixture of mud, sand, and cow dung. A hollow mould for the mask is created by heating the object, causing the melting of the wax which will run out of the openings (see fig. 3). The metal alloy, prepared for the mask, is poured into the mould. The metal solidifies after a few seconds and once it is cooled down, the cover of the

bronze mask is broken and removed. Finally, the mask is polished, and details are engraved manually (Plattner 2012 [video]: 08:50 min).



Fig. 3: Lost-wax technique in a traditional workshop in Udupi, India.

BHŪTA MASKS AND ACCESSORIES AT THE DAKSHINACHITRA MUSEUM

The DakshinaChitra heritage museum displays a collection of five *bhūta* masks and some other metal objects related to *bhūta* worship. The masks are kept in two rooms of the Ilkal House at the Karnataka section of the museum. They shall be described in the following passages. Four out of five masks at DakshinaChitra were created by the craftsman Rajesh T. Acharya who currently runs a family workshop and a showroom for metal craft in Udupi. He is an internationally acclaimed artist who has received awards, such as the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya Award, and participated in various festivals and craft and art exhibitions, such as “Wenn Masken tanzen” at the Museum Rietberg (Zurich/Switzerland).²³

²³ Details obtained from the information board at the Ilkal House, DakshinaChitra, August 2014.

Jumādi/Dhūmāvati

Jumādi is a ferocious form of the mother goddess Devī who is well known for her thirst which has to be satisfied with non-vegetarian offerings (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 53). She is connected to the brahmanical Hindu pantheon and is also known by the Sanskrit name Dhūmāvati. The assumed relationship to the brahmanical Hindu gods supports her status as a *rājandaiva* (a *bhūta* of highest rank, visualised as a royal warrior); therefore, she is a protector deity of the higher castes (Nambiar 2009: 36). However, the following discussion will show that there are also striking differences to the brahmanical conception of Dhūmāvati.²⁴ Jumādi is worshipped in all parts of Tulunadu but in different forms. Usually she is accompanied by Baṅṭe, a dumb assistant who entertains the assembled audience (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 53).²⁵



As reflected in the costume (fig. 4), through the facial mask with moustache and by the breastplate, Jumādi is considered as half-male and half-female and can also be addressed in both ways (Nambiar 2009: 36). According to the most popular legend, Jumādi is Pārvatī's child. Starting from her birth, her thirst could not be quenched. So, she approached Viṣṇu. After she gained his favour by returning the jewels which had been stolen by Brahmā, Viṣṇu tried to quench her thirst. But she could neither be satisfied with water nor with blood.

Fig. 4: Jumādi *bhūta* costume, containing bell metal cast facial mask, metal breastplate, *aṇi*, waist-gear, shirt of red fabric, palm-leaf skirt, metal sword and flywhisk.

²⁴ In tantric traditions, Dhūmāvati belongs to the group of the ten Mahāvidyā's: Kālī, Tārā, Tripurasundarī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Chinnamastā, Bhairavī, Dhūmāvati, Bagalāmukhī, Mātāṅgī, and Kamalā (Zeiler 2008: 43).

²⁵ Baṅṭe's characteristic mask is a boar mask which he carries in his hands. The Baṅṭe masks are similar to or sometimes identical with Pañjurli masks, such as the one described below, in the section on Pañjurli.

Finally, she was sent to earth where *bhūta* Babbu quenched her thirst with coconut water. After this incidence, people began to worship Jumādi and she feels satisfied by their offerings. In return, she fulfils wishes and maintains justice and harmony (Nambiar 2009: 36). Another legend suggests a different mythological origin of Jumādi and provides an explanation why she has a female body and a male head: Śiva and Pārvatī wanted to kill a demon called Dhūmāsura who could only be killed by someone who is male and female at the same time. At one point, when Pārvatī got hungry, Śiva could not provide her with enough food and finally told her to eat him. In this way, both merged into Jumādi and were able to kill the demon (Rond 2010a: 11). The legend partially resembles one of Dhūmāvati's myths of origin²⁶: according to this Sanskrit narrative, Satī was overcome by hunger, and when Śiva refused to provide food to her she consumed him. Śiva persuaded her to disgorge him and, in the end, cursed her to become a widow (Kinsley 1997: 181). A comparison between both myths shows that in the *bhūta* version the swallowing of Śiva was suggested by himself and has a desirable result which is lacking in the Sanskrit narrative. This might explain the positive connotations of this *bhūta*.



Fig. 5: Jumādi *bhūta* mask (bell metal cast facial mask).

²⁶ According to the other myth of origin, Dhūmāvati emerged from the smoke of Satī's burning body on her father's sacrificial fire (Kinsley 1997: 181).

The Jumādi mask in figure 5 is made of bell metal. The mask has been cast by Rajesh Acharya in Udupi in 2007.²⁷ The face shows typical features of *bhūta* masks: the eyes are almond-shaped and seem to be protruding out of the head. There is a hole in the centre of each eye so that the mask can be worn by the impersonator during a *bhūta kōla*. The mask has a sharp, triangular nose. The grinning mouth stretches from corner to corner of the mask and is slightly opened, displaying the teeth, as well as fangs at both upper corners. The eyebrows are curved and continue from one side to the other side of the face. These features create the ferocious expression of the mask. A typical feature of the Jumādi mask is the curved beard over the upper lip. Twirling beards are common for male as well as female *bhūta* masks (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 114). The Sanskritisation of Jumādi as Dhūmāvātī is also reflected in this mask. Amidst the forehead, there is a sun on top of a crescent moon which can be seen in figure 6. Sun and moon are *śaiva* symbols which link this *bhūta* to the Hindu god Śiva. The mask also has the traditional ornaments common to all *bhūta* masks. There is a collar-like extension under the chin. Furthermore, the ears are decorated with disc shaped earrings with a flower design. Those earrings are topped with a triple cobra head. The mask is adorned with a semi-circular *nāga* crown (“snake” crown), starting over the ears. There is a row of elongated ornaments close to the face, and on top of these, the crown is surmounted by seven cobra hoods with conical ornaments filling the gaps in between.



Fig. 6: Sun and moon on the forehead of the Jumādi mask in fig. 5.

²⁷ Information on the artist as well as place and date of purchase were obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.

A comparison of the features of this mask with Sanskrit narratives reveals several similarities and differences to the most common iconographic descriptions: Dhūmāvātī is supposed to be ugly, with fearsome eyes, a long nose (resembling a crow), and grey, dishevelled hair as well as long, crooked, or missing teeth. Her body is decorated with ornaments made of snakes (Kinsley 1997: 176 & 180). This is in accordance with the facial features and ornaments of the *bhūta* mask. However, typical elements of Dhūmāvātī's description are missing, such as her appearance as an old widow who is riding a chariot without draught animal, the crow banner, and her attributes – the winnowing basket, skull bowl and garland, Yama's buffalo horn and spear (cf. Kinsley 1997: 176 & 180 and Zeiler 2008: 44). The following descriptions of other *bhūta* masks will demonstrate that the above-mentioned facial features and ornaments are common to many *bhūta* masks and cannot be exclusively assigned to Dhūmāvātī's iconography. However, the auspicious marks on her forehead which underline her connection to the brahmanical pantheon are even contradicting the textual descriptions of Dhūmāvātī as a widow.²⁸ Therefore, the above-mentioned similarities seem to be largely owed to general stylistic features of *bhūta* masks while typical iconographic elements of Dhūmāvātī are absent.

Breastplate (mirèkaṭṭu) and Backdrop (aṇi)

Jumādi's breastplate depicted in figure 7 has voluminous breasts with a flower design in centre and a round belly with a big navel, accentuated with a flower design. A triple cobra hood rises above each shoulder. The bodies of these thick snakes covered with a scurf design extend downwards, curve around the breasts and end below the navel. This snake decoration is a common iconographic feature of Jumādi breastplates. The upper body is decorated with three successive short and thin necklaces. The last one contains a half-moon shaped pendant in its centre. From that pendant, an ornamental band runs down to the navel, interrupted by a pad that resembles three petals, which connects both breasts. The breastplate is of special significance for

²⁸ David Kinsley assumes that there is another tradition, which is depicting Dhūmāvātī in a positive way, beautifully adorned with garlands and ornaments, giving joy and being attractive and seductive. This version of the goddess has been depicted in a small number of paintings (Kinsley 1997: 190).

Jumādi's worship. The presence of this goddess is often symbolised by a breastplate in the shrine, which can be the main object of veneration (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 114). The representation of Jumādi in the form of a breastplate with voluminous, round breasts again contradicts the Sanskrit description of Dhūmāvātī who is supposed to have dry, withered and hanging breasts (Kinsley 1997: 176).

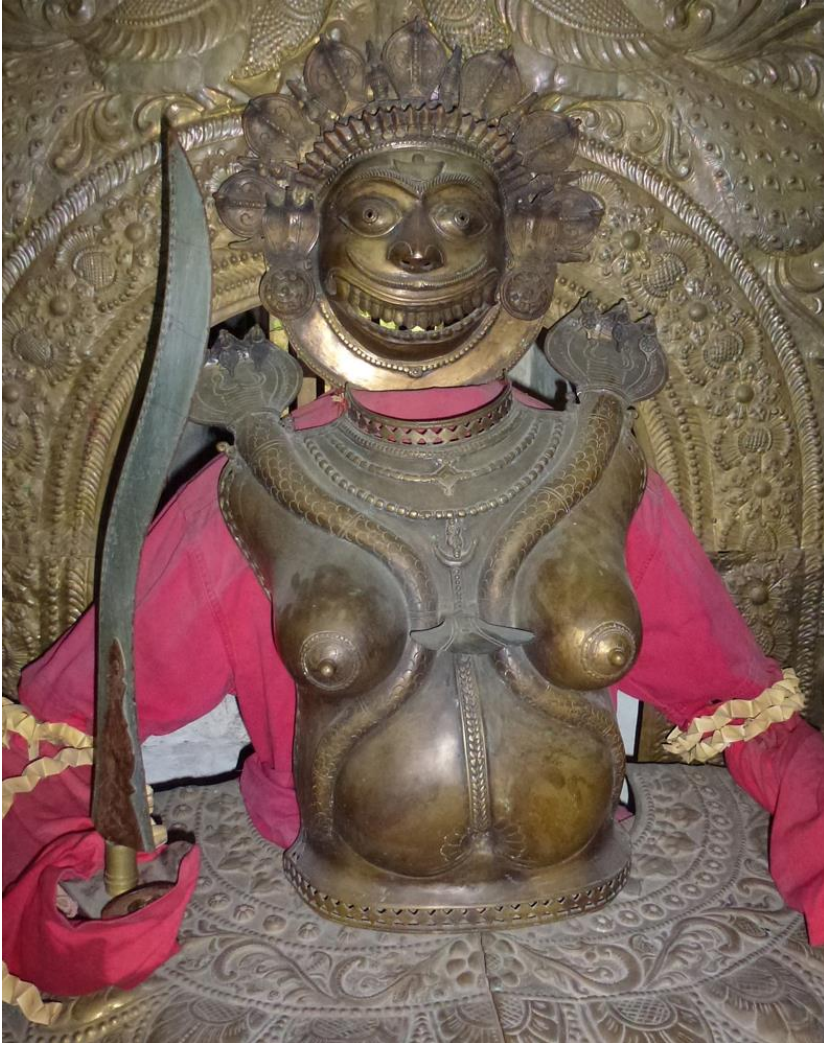


Fig. 7: Breastplate portion of the Jumādi costume.

The Jumādi set is completed by a metal backdrop, the *aṇi*. Originally, a soft, pliable and pale coloured palm frond was used to create the *aṇi* (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 13). *Aṇis* made of metal are a recent innovation and have been in use only for the last 40 years (Nambiar 2009: 52 & 54). With their straight side and the curved top, they resemble the *prabhāvalī* of Cōḷa bronzes. Both lower corners of the *aṇi* are decorated with a similar depiction of the two-headed eagle Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa (fig. 8). Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa is perceived as the embodiment of the destructive energy of Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Nārasimha and is therefore used as a symbol of power. This motif is popular particularly in Karnataka, where it has been the royal emblem of the Wodeyar dynasty. It is frequently found as decoration on temples, and today it is the state symbol of Karnataka (Sastri n.d.). Floral bands run around the *aṇi*'s inner border. On top of them are two peacocks facing each other, heads turned backwards (fig. 9). Peacocks are common in Indian mythology (e.g. as *vāhana* of Murugaṇ) and are an auspicious symbol for rain. Two further broad bands with floral motifs are found below the upper border of the *aṇi*, separated by two smaller ornamental bands. In the centre on top of the *aṇi* is a *kīrtimukha*, shown in figure 10. *Kīrtimukha* literally means "face of glory"²⁹. It is a ferocious mask found as a motif above openings, such as doors. According to the philosophy to treat equal with equal, it is supposed to ward off evil (Nambiar 2009: 33). The usage of decorative motifs of the Hindu mythology also shows the Sanskritisation of Jumādi/Dhūmāvātī, and the introduction of metal *aṇis* mirrors the increasing integration of pan-Indian elements.

²⁹ Sanskrit: *kīrti* "fame", "glory"; *mukha* "face".



Fig. 8: Detail of Jumādi's aṅi: Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa.



Fig. 9: Detail of Jumādi's aṅi: peacock.



Fig. 10: Detail of Jumādi's aṅi: kīrthimukha.

At the DakshinaChitra museum, the Jumādi mask, breastplate (*mirèkaṭṭu*), and *aṇi* are presented with further accessories on a dummy. Jumādi's weapon, a curved sword, called *kaḍsalè* or *kartalè*, is in the right hand, and the left hand is holding a flywhisk, known as *cāvala* or *cāmara* (Brückner 1993: 145). Those attributes hint at important characteristics of Jumādi. For example, Michael Dusche interprets the swords which are carried by some *bhūtas* as a symbol of their juridical powers (Dusche 2016: 21). However, these attributes are again different from Dhūmāvati's hand-attributes according to Sanskrit tradition (winnowing basket, skull bowl, buffalo horn, spear), which were mentioned above. The dummy figure wears an elaborate apron-like metal waist gear (*jakkelu aṇi*), decorated with floral motifs similar to the *aṇi* on top of a skirt made of palm leaves. Those objects along with the make-up of the impersonator and personal ornaments made of natural materials or metal are considered to form the complete manifestation of the *bhūta* called *iḍi rūpa* (Brückner 1993: 145). However, this *iḍi rūpa* of the *bhūta* Dhūmāvati is independent of the iconography of the brahmanical Dhūmāvati. The connection between the two might solely be owed to the similarities of their myths of origin. And this seems to be rather a stylistic device that promotes the acceptance of Jumādi/Dhūmāvati as *rājandaiva*.

Pilichāmuṇḍi

The Tuḷu name Pilichāmuṇḍi³⁰ derives from the words *pili*, which means “tiger”, and Chāmuṇḍi who is another ferocious form of Devī. This *bhūta* is most likely of totemistic origin. When villagers suffered from the attacks of tigers from the jungles that fed on their domestic animals, they might have tried to appease the tigers' spirits. But Pilichāmuṇḍi became also linked to the brahmanical Hindu pantheon by a common legend about her origin. According to this narration, Pilichāmuṇḍi was born from a bird's egg and gifted to Śiva and Pārvatī. Pārvatī made the tiger her pet and told her to look after the cattle. But Pilichāmuṇḍi could not resist killing one cow each day. When she finally killed even Śiva's favourite cow, she was sent to earth to protect the cattle and crops there (Rond 2010a: 10).

³⁰ Variations can be Pilichandi or Pilicaundi.



Fig. 11: Pilichāmuṇḍi *bhūta* mask (bell metal cast facial mask).

The Pilichāmuṇḍi mask (fig. 11) of the collection at DakshinaChitra was cast from bell metal by Rajesh Acharya in Udupi between 2007 and 2008.³¹ The mask on top of an arch-shaped stand has an almost square-cut face. The lower part of the face forms a snout, but the centre is merged with a sharp human nose with accentuated nostrils. A prominent feature of the face is a twirling beard consisting of four strands of hair on each side, visible in figure 12. Therefore, Pilichāmuṇḍi is another example of a female *bhūta* depicted with beard. Under this beard stretches the mouth from one side of the face to the other. It is slightly opened so that the teeth and four sharp fangs are exposed. Those elements should underline the ferocious nature of the tiger

³¹ Name of the artist, place and date of purchase were obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.

bhūta, who needs to be satisfied with offerings and is said to kill people who commit errors during sacrifices³² (Nambiar 2009: 40). The almond shaped eyes have round eyeballs engraved in their middle, but they contain no holes. Since the mask is fixed on a stand it is likely that it was either meant to be kept on an altar for worship or created as an art object from the beginning. Between the eyes, there is also the auspicious mark which shows the link to the brahmanical Hindu pantheon.



Fig. 12: Mouth and beard (Pilichāmuṇḍi mask in fig. 11).

The Pilichāmuṇḍi mask is decorated with a *nāga* crown and snake earrings. The semi-circular crown runs around the head. The bottom side has four ornamental bands of which the first two are part of the forehead. The lowest line might depict stylised cobra hoods. On top of all four bands is a row of small cobra hoods. The crown is finalised by 13 big cobra hoods alternated with conical ornaments having engraved small symbols of the sun and the moon, as depicted in figure 13.

³² Even the impersonator has to look ferocious, and the face is painted with a tiger make-up, consisting of white stripes on a yellow foundation and red *nāma* on the forehead (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 53).

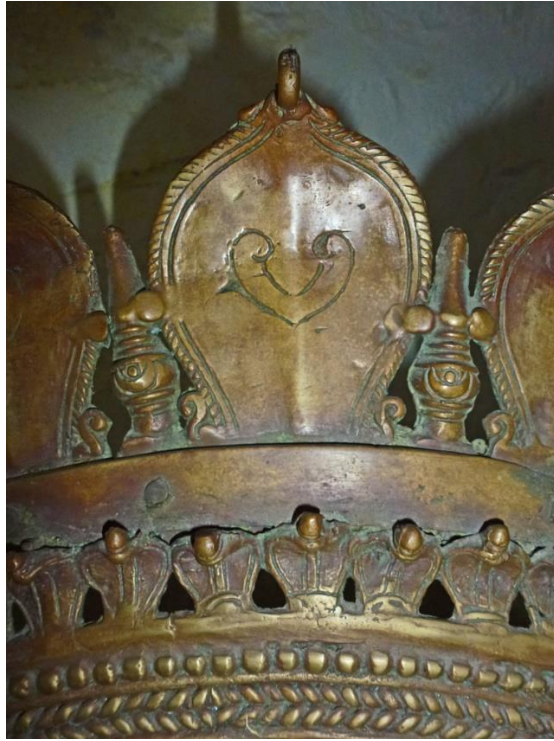


Fig. 13: Detail of the *nāga* crown (Pilichāmuṇḍi mask in fig. 11).

Interesting features are the disc-shaped ornaments below the ears shown in figure 14. Two joined human palms emerge from the centre of these ornaments, and there is also a human head visible above them. These discs are surmounted by triple cobra heads. Different Pilichāmuṇḍi masks as well as some Pañjurli³³ masks contain figures emerging from the earrings. There are two different figure combinations which can be found on these masks: man and elephant, or man and cattle. Considering the totemistic origin of the *bhūta* masks which contain these elements, the figures might stand for men and animals that should be protected in exchange for worship and offerings.

³³ This *bhūta* is described in the sections on the Pañjurli mask and figurine.

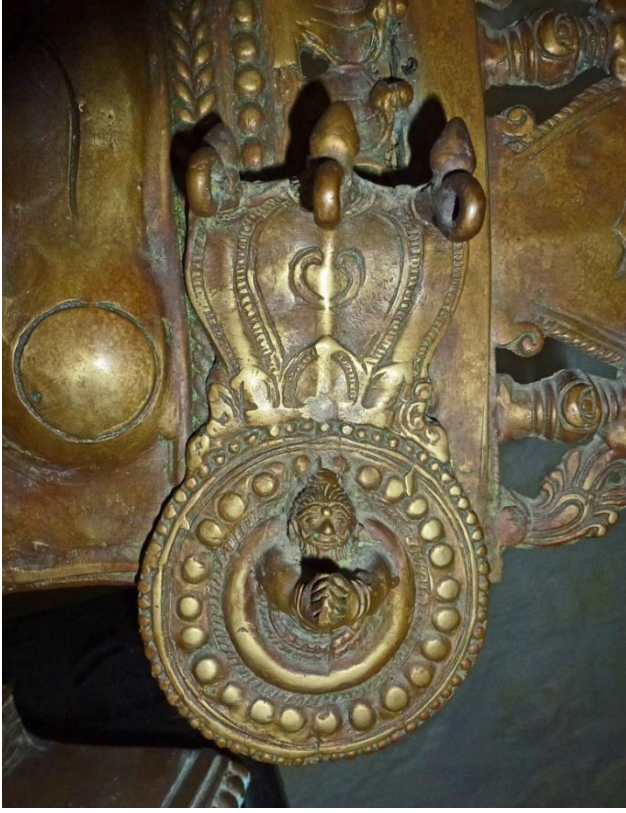


Fig. 14: Ear ornament with human figurine (Pilichāmuṇḍi mask in fig. 11).

A comparison with the previously discussed Jumādi/Dhūmāvātī mask shows that both are depicted with similar facial features, irrespective of the human or animal nature of the mask. Decorative elements, such as the snake ornaments are also common to both masks. Therefore, they seem to be general features of *bhūta* masks, and parallels to specific iconographies of brahmanical deities as the goddess Dhūmāvātī might be accidentally.

Viṣṇumūrti

The *bhūta* Viṣṇumūrti has been imported from the Malayālam speaking communities. Accordingly, Viṣṇumūrti is popular in the southern parts of Tulunadu, which belong to Kerala or are close to the border (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 57f.). The name Viṣṇumūrti contains the Sanskrit word *mūrti* which is the

term for the different forms of a god. Viṣṇu is supposed to have ten different incarnations, called *daśāvātara*³⁴, which appear each time when the human world is close to destruction. The *avatāra* concept is a common tool to link local gods or heroes to puranic deities (Horstmann 1993a: 90).³⁵ In the *bhūta* cult, all incarnations are mentioned, but Viṣṇu's fourth incarnation, Nārasimha, is the most prominent. In his incarnation as Nārasimha, Viṣṇu took the form of a man-lion to defeat the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu and save his son Prahlāda. Different episodes of this legend are also reflected in the *bhūta kōla* through narration in songs and dances. For example, Nārasimha breaking out of a pillar is denoted by a common trance or the remedy for killing the demon by firewalking and the impersonator falling into the burning charcoal. Nārasimha's ferocious nature is depicted by the impersonator through red face make-up with black stripes (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 57f.).



Fig. 15: Viṣṇumūrti *bhūta* mask (bell metal cast facial mask).

³⁴ The *daśāvātaras*: Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Nārasimha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Kalki. According to different traditions, the list can vary and for example include Buddha instead of Balarāma (Horstmann 1993a: 91).

³⁵ Monika Horstmann mentions three different developments which lead to the incorporation of local deities into brahmanical Hinduism through the *avatāra* concept: the adaptation of a local or tribal deity, the deification of deceased heroes as well as the deification of charismatic, living personalities (Horstmann 1993a: 103).

As a *bhūta* mask, Viṣṇumūrti is depicted as a lion which is supposed to be Nārasimha, the man-lion. Even though the mask has an animal face, Viṣṇumūrti is not categorised as a *bhūta* of totemistic origin but rather as a *bhūta* derived from the Hindu pantheon since all legends are found in Sanskrit texts. The Viṣṇumūrti *bhūta* mask at DakshinaChitra, depicted in figure 15, is made of brass, almost entirely coloured golden. It was created in 2006, also by the artist Rajesh Acharya in Udupi.³⁶ The face of the Viṣṇumūrti mask is dominated by a huge, protruding, oval snout. The open mouth is extending from one end of the snout to the other. It is open so that the sharp, knife-like teeth are displayed. On top of the mouth is the typical twirling moustache, consisting of one big and two small strands of hair. In the top view of the mask in figure 16, the big, pear-shaped nose of the mask, decorated with an engraved nose ring beneath it, is clearly visible. A prominent feature of this mask is a pair of huge, round eyes, almost popping out of the face. In contrast to the golden colour of the rest of the mask, they have a dark brass colour. The eyes are subdivided into concentric circles and there is no hole in their middle. Since the eyes are facing upward they would not have provided any sight from inside the mask in any way. If the mask should be worn in front of the face, the performer could probably see through the open mouth of the mask. The curved eyebrows of the mask consist of engraved hair which is separated by an auspicious mark in centre. This conical ornament ending in a point is an allusion of the *vaiṣṇava tilaka* which denotes the *vaiṣṇava* origin of the *bhūta*. It distinguishes masks with a *vaiṣṇava* affiliation, such as the Viṣṇumūrti mask, from those masks which are of *śaiva* origin. The *vaiṣṇava* influence in this region and the respective visual codes can be traced back to the philosopher Madhvācārya who established the Udupi Śrī Kṛṣṇa Maṭha in the 13th century (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 113). Furthermore, the eyebrows are enhanced by a line on the upper side and small dots on top of it. These ornaments can also be found on *vaiṣṇava* idols or as face make-up of devotees, especially of the ISKCON³⁷ denomination.

³⁶ Name of the artist, place and date of purchase were obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.

³⁷ The abbreviation ISKCON stands for “International Society for Krishna Consciousness”, popularly known as “Hare Krishna Movement”.



Fig. 16: Top view of the Viṣṇumūrti mask in fig. 15.

The huge *nāga* crown of this mask resembles a mane around the face. As visible in figure 17, it contains more decorative details than the previously described *bhūta* crowns. The first of the four ornamental bands consists of stylised snakes, followed by a row of small cobra hoods. The next bands contain flowers and ornaments respectively. The crown is topped by eleven cobra hoods, separated by conical ornaments. Further elements of the Viṣṇumūrti mask are the disc-shaped ear ornaments with a flower design, which are surmounted by a triple cobra hood and an ornamented collar with a zigzag border similar to those of the Jumādi mask. Viṣṇumūrti and Pilichāmuṇḍi are both depicted as big cats and the masks have similar facial features (except for the eyes). However, the auspicious mark on the Viṣṇumūrti mask's forehead and its crown are more elaborate than in the case of the Pilichāmuṇḍi mask. Maybe this can be explained by Viṣṇumūrti's strong association with puranic deities.

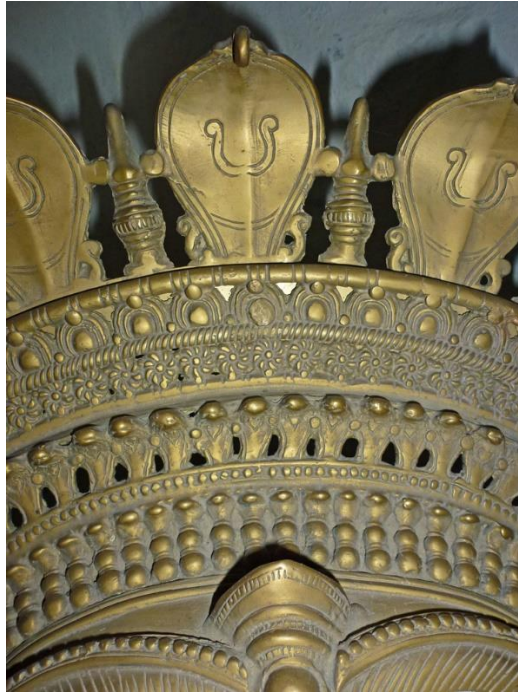


Fig. 17: Detail of Viṣṇumūrti's *nāga* crown (Viṣṇumūrti mask in fig. 15).

Pañjurli

Pañjurli³⁸, the boar *bhūta*, is popular all over Tulunadu. He is considered as one of the most powerful *bhūtas* and is worshipped as a family deity as well as in public shrines. Pañjurli has many different local forms, male as well as female, and respectively, there are numerous local legends and *pāḍḍanas* which have been collected in the so-called “Pañjurli epic” (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 52). Pañjurli is another *bhūta* of totemistic origin. In ancient times, wild boars that destroyed the crops might have inspired villagers to start worshipping Pañjurli to appease the spirits of the boars. Until today, members of the Scheduled Tribe Malekudia worship a clan deity in the form of a boar. Therefore, Pañjurli might have been originally a tribal deity (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 115). A further indication for Pañjurli's non-brahminical

³⁸ The name is derived from *pañj* which is the Tuḷu word for “boar”.

origin is the fact that he receives non-vegetarian offerings (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 53). As many other popular *bhūtas*, Pañjurli was connected to the brahmanical Hindu pantheon posterior. According to a legend, Pārvatī had a boar (or even several) as a pet. Since the boar Pañjurli frequently destroyed the garden Śiva got angry and killed him. On Pārvatī's request, he was brought back to life and sent to earth to protect truth and righteousness (Rond 2010a: 10). He is considered to be the protector of *dharma* who does not tolerate wrong behaviour of his devotees. Another legend connects Pañjurli to Viṣṇu, as he is supposed to be born from the sweat of Viṣṇu. Even though Pañjurli is also depicted as a boar, he should not be confused with Viṣṇu's Varāha *avatāra*. Both are totally different in origin and function (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984: 58).³⁹ This differentiates Pañjurli as a *bhūta* of totemistic origin from the previously discussed Viṣṇumūrti who is identified with Viṣṇu's Narasiṃha *avatāra* and thus directly connected to pan-Indian, puranic deities.



Fig. 18: Pañjurli *bhūta* mask (bell metal cast facial mask).

³⁹ Nevertheless, Brückner assumes that Viṣṇu's Varāha *avatāra* roots in beliefs similar to the legends around Pañjurli's origin (Brückner 1993: 146).

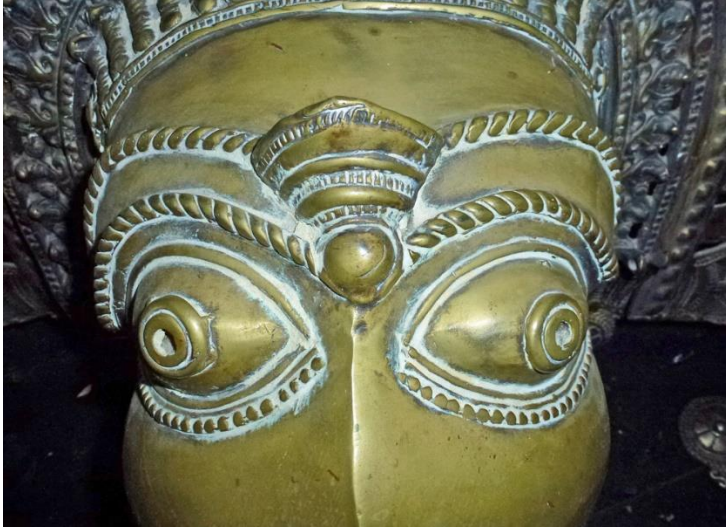


Fig. 19: Eyes of the Pañjurli mask (fig. 18).

There are simple as well as highly ornate boar masks, and Pañjurli figurines are crafted of different materials as brass or bronze. The Pañjurli mask at the DakshinaChitra museum shown in figure 18 is a brass mask, also created by Rajesh Acharya in 2007.⁴⁰ The long, cone-shaped boar's face ends in a trunk, which is decorated with two small ornamental bands around the rostral plate. The almond shaped eyes are slightly protruding and have a hole in the centre of the pupil, as it is visible in figure 19. Therefore, it would be possible for an impersonator to see through the eyes while wearing this mask. The Pañjurli mask has the same auspicious mark on the forehead as the Viṣṇumūrti mask. Despite the totemistic origin, a connection of Pañjurli to the brahmanical Hindu pantheon, in this case probably to Viṣṇu, is visualised. The eyebrows are curved and their design resembles a rope. There is a second parallel band with the inverted design which starts in line with the upper border of the mark on the forehead. The Pañjurli mask has a typical three-stepped *nāga* crown, visible in figure 20. The first row consists of stylised snake hoods. The second row displays a rare motif. It consists of small snakes, depicted fully, with their hoods erected and the rest of the snake curled in s-

⁴⁰ Name of the artist and date of purchase were obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.

shape. The crown is topped by eleven cobra hoods with engraved details on a small band with dots. In the gaps between the cobra hoods are spear-like ornaments.



Fig. 20: Detail of Pañjurli's *nāga* crown (Pañjurli mask in fig. 18).

In contrast to some masks which are mainly used on altars to denote the presence of the *bhūta*, the Pañjurli mask plays an important role during the *kōla* ritual. The impersonator wears it for certain parts of the ritual along with a circular *aṇi* and a palm-leaf skirt. The mask can be attached to the top of the *aṇi* or fixed in front of the face. A unique method is applied by an impersonator at the Pañjurli *nēma*⁴¹ at Padangady (Dakshina Kannada district): he holds the lower border of the mask with his mouth while the top is attached to his crown (Bhat 2015 [video]: 19:11 min). A notable feature of the boar mask is its multifunctionality. It can become a 'vessel' for different *bhūtas* according to the context and manner of its usage: for example, the boar masks can represent the *bhūta* Baṅṭe who is Jumādi's assistant. In this case, the mask will get carried in front of the body to denote the lower status (Brückner 1993: 149).

⁴¹ Here, the usage of the term *nēma* is ambiguous because the description explains that the ritual happened at a family house. Usually the term *nēma* is reserved for community cults, while rituals on family level are called *bhūta agel* or *tambala*. It is possible that the terms are nowadays used interchangeably by the practitioners.

Pañjurli Figurine

The small *bhūta* figurines which are used as objects of worship in *bhūta* shrines or during the *bhūta kōla* are normally cast solid. *Bhūta* figurines usually hold the *bhūta*'s insignias, such as weapons, bell, flowers, and flywhisk in their hands. Gods derived from the brahmanical Hindu pantheon and those *bhūtas* of human origin are often shown on a *vāhana* (Nambiar 2009: 51). This way of depiction is even adopted for *bhūtas* of totemistic origin. They are portrayed as human warriors, and their totemistic origin can only be deduced from the respective animal that they use as *vāhana*, e.g. the boar for Pañjurli. Through this way of depiction as warriors, they undergo a change of status and become equivalent to the *rājandaivas* (Brückner 2009: 59).⁴² There are different types of Pañjurli figurines, which exist of course for other *bhūtas* as well. Pañjurli can be depicted simply as a boar (top row in fig. 2). There are female Pañjurli with human faces and a breastplate, Pañjurli with a boar's face riding a horse or boar, and male Pañjurli with human faces riding a boar (fig. 2, bottom)⁴³. The male Pañjurli riding a boar has his origin most probably at the Malarbar coast of Kerala and is today the most widespread type. From this region, male Pañjurli figures from the 16th or 17th century have been preserved (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 115f.).⁴⁴ Today, this type of *bhūta* figurines is also cast in Karnataka.

⁴² These iconographic features of a royal warrior are also reflected at some festivals in a ritual in which the impersonator is pulled on a wooden *vāhana* around the temple (Brückner 1993: 146).

⁴³ *Bhūtas* derived from the brahmanical Hindu pantheon or of human origin also get depicted as standing figure with a human face and human body, dressed with a *dhoti*. Their faces are often similar to the mask of that *bhūta* (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 116).

⁴⁴ A comparison to the oldest dated *bhūta* mask which is from the 18th century (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 111) suggests that *bhūta* figurines might have been integrated into the *bhūta* worship prior to the masks.



Fig. 21: Pañjurli bhūta figurine made of brass.

The Pañjurli figurine at the DakshinaChitra museum shown in figure 21 is a male Pañjurli riding a boar. Although this type is supposed to have its origin in Kerala, this Pañjurli was cast by Rajesh Acharya in Udupi in 2007,⁴⁵ which shows that this type of Pañjurli is now also popular in Karnataka. The massive brass figurine is fixed on a rectangular pedestal. It consists of four parts: the boar mount, the male figure astride the boar, the *aṇi* fixed on his back, and the apron like waist-gear. The most prominent feature of the boar (see fig. 22) is its huge head with unnaturally big eyes. The mouth is open, showing two tusks. A vertical ornamental band divides the boar's head into two halves. The boar is decorated with a collar containing bells around its neck and is wearing anklets on all four legs, which are similar to those used by human impersonators.



Fig. 22: Boar mount of the Pañjurli figurine in fig. 21.

⁴⁵ Name of the artist, place and date of purchase were obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.



Fig. 23: Close-up of the human cavalier (Pañjurli *bhūta* figurine in fig. 21).

The human figure (see fig. 23) has a male face with a moustache and a round mark on his forehead. On the sides of the face, there are snake earrings, consisting of huge discs with a flower design, topped by a second smaller disc close to the face and a stylised cobra hood. In contrast to the previously described *bhūta* masks, the crown does not contain any snakes but is a semi-circular, openwork crown. Further ornaments of the human cavalier are a v-shaped short necklace, ending on the chest, and a long necklace, ending below the chest, which resembles the boar's collar. The man is holding a sword in the right hand and a bell in the left hand. He is wearing a round skirt-plate (*jakkelu aṇi*) which is decorated with huge metal pearls and a flower design at the border. The back of the figure is covered by the *aṇi* which has straight sides extending to the double height of the person, ending in a curved top. As decoration, there is one line of small and one line of big pearls, and the *aṇi*'s border has a zigzag design. As also seen on Jumādi's *aṇi*, there is a *kīrthimukha* in the centre of the top, shown in figure 24. Above this *kīrthimukha* is a crescent moon with a pinnacle in the centre. This pinnacle might suggest a support for an umbrella, which is a royal symbol (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 115). Therefore, it can be assumed that this Pañjurli has the status of a *rājandaiva*.



Fig. 24: Kīrthimukha of the Pañjurli figurine in fig. 21.

Unidentified Bhūta Mask

The last mask of the collection at the DakshinaChitra museum (fig. 25) has not been assigned to any particular *bhūta* yet. The mask is made of copper and it is 59.7 cm high, 50.8 cm wide and 27.9 cm deep. Considering the patina and the slightly damaged condition of the mask, it seems to be older than the other masks of the collection, but the exact period of crafting and the creator of the mask are unknown. The *bhūta* mask has an almost rectangular shape with both cheeks slightly bent inwards and a round chin. The open mouth with rectangular teeth and fangs (see fig. 26) faces downwards and extends from one side of the mask to the other. A long tongue with parallel sides and a round tip is protruding downwards. The lower half of the face is

dominated by a big drop-shaped nose with a moustache beneath, which consists of three parallel lines forming two curves. The almond shaped eyes are near the sides of the face, and they neither contain an engraved pupil nor a hole for vision. Therefore, the mask might have been kept on a *bhūta* altar or was fixed on top of an *aṇi*, instead of being worn in front of the face during a *kōla* ceremony. Instead of eyebrows, three v-shaped ornamental bands run down the forehead and end on the nose. There is also a longish *tilaka* mark in the centre of the forehead. The mask is decorated with a basket-shaped *nāga* crown. The lower end consists of two ornamental bands topped by two rows of cobra hoods. The cobra hoods of the first row are slightly smaller than the ones of the second row which are in the latter case also separated by ornaments. All cobra hoods are slightly bent forward and the tips of the lower row are fixed on the back of the upper row. Both rows are very fragile. The earrings, shown in figure 27, are each consisting of two discs surmounted by a single cobra hood. Both discs have a spare ornamental decoration, the lower one being slightly bigger than the upper one. The ornaments follow the side-line of the face and crown. There is also a round collar around the neck, ending below the earrings. It is enclosed with a zigzag border. The design of the earrings with the two discs, the basket-shaped crown, the v-shaped bands on the face as well as the collar resemble the decorative elements of a Pañjurli figurine rather than other *bhūta* masks. While all previously discussed *bhūta* masks have been cast by the same artist, this mask appears to belong to a different artistic tradition or regional school.



Fig. 25: Unidentified *bhūta* mask (copper facial mask).



Fig. 26: Mouth and tongue of the unidentified *bhūta* mask in fig. 25.

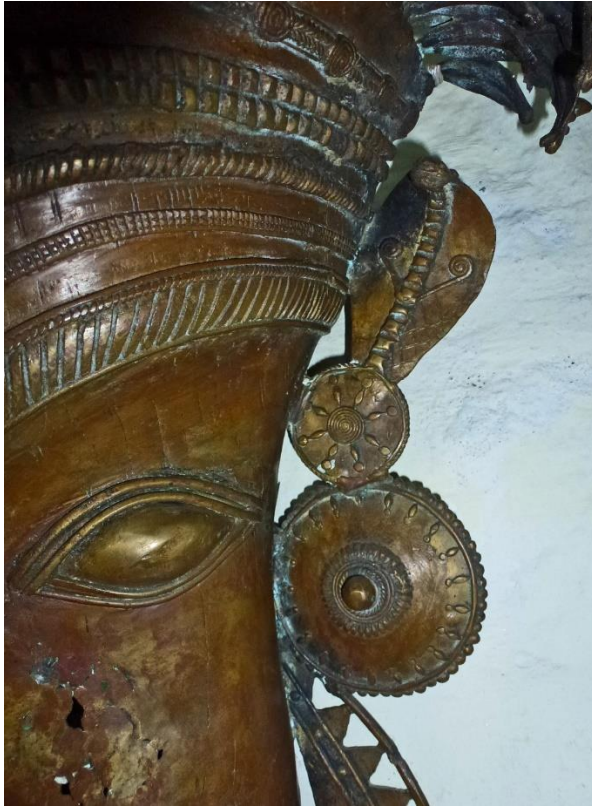


Fig. 27: Ear ornaments with two discs (unidentified *bhūta* mask in fig. 25).

As already mentioned, this *bhūta* mask is slightly damaged. On the left side (from the onlooker's point of view) is a hole near the end of the moustache. The metal has been ripped off at several parts of the right cheek and there is a big hole in the centre under the crown. Additionally, the centre of the *nāga* crown's border is bent downwards. Since this *bhūta* mask has no explicit iconographic elements, such as an overall animal shape or special ornaments, it is difficult to identify the depicted *bhūta*. Female *bhūtas* are often depicted with tongues sticking out of the face, resembling the tongue sticking out of the face of the pan-Indian Hindu goddess Kālī (Aryan and Aryan 2012: 114). Above all,

there are also forms of male *bhūtas* portrayed with a protruding tongue, so we cannot even safely assume that this mask depicts a female *bhūta*.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

After examining these *bhūta* masks the question arises how masks meant to be ritual objects, either to be worshipped on altars or used in *kōla* ceremonies, find their way into museum collections. Traditionally, objects meant for worship (figurines and masks) undergo a final ritual at the end of the manufacturing process during which the spirit of the deity is infused into the mask (*prāṇa pratiṣṭha*). The craftsman performs a ritual, in some cases accompanied by the sacrifice of a cock. Then he engraves the eyeballs of the mask. Therefore, the ceremony is also referred to as “opening of the eyes”. Finally, the mask undergoes a ritual ablution, called *abhiṣeka*, with coconut water or palm juice. After this ritual, the mask is said to contain the power of the depicted *bhūta* and is supposed to effect people who come in contact with the mask (i.e. carriers fall into trance, for example). Without this ritual, masks and figurines are considered lifeless (Nambiar 2009: 55). If the masks have not been ordered by a temple, they might never undergo this ritual and can therefore be easily sold as art objects. The Pañjurli figurine as well as the *bhūta* masks, except for the unidentified one at the DakshinaChitra museum, have all been purchased from the artist Rajesh Acharya directly. It seems likely that they were never meant for worship in a temple and have not undergone the *prāṇa pratiṣṭha* ceremony. As already mentioned, the Pilichāmuṇḍi mask even lacks holes in the middle of the eyeballs and therefore could not be worn in any ritual. Hence, these masks exemplify the visual objects of the *bhūta* cult and represent the artistic quality of these objects in the museum.

According to the *bhūta* belief system, if an image or mask gets damaged, it loses its spiritual qualities and cannot be worshipped any more. Ideally, *bhūta* masks would be used in *bhūta kōlas* only once and kept and worshipped in shrines thereafter. Since these masks are very costly they are

⁴⁶ See Beltz (2009b: 71). Figure 7 shows the female *bhūta* Jumādi with a protruding tongue. The mask has great similarities to the mask of the male *bhūta* Baṅṭe (fig. 9), who is also depicted with his tongue sticking out (Beltz 2009b: 71). Baṅṭe normally functions as Jumādi assistant and can also be represented by a boar mask (Brückner 1993: 149).

sometimes reused and repaired to extend their lifespan. Damage, as for example seen on the unidentified *bhūta* mask in figure 25, can happen easily, especially to fragile elements of the objects. The metal alloy used as material for the masks is only resistant in thick parts, while thin parts break or rub off easily. Theoretically, damaged masks must be removed from the shrines and discharged into the sea. In practice, they might end only in temple ponds or get sold to collectors or art dealers. Maybe the unidentified *bhūta* mask has been sold after its ritual usage to the “Oriental Arts & Crafts Exporters” where it was purchased for the DakshinaChitra museum.⁴⁷ However, a threat to *bhūta* masks kept in shrines comes from their recent popularity. After the European exhibitions “Wenn Masken tanzen” at the Museum Rietberg in 2009 and “Autres Maîtres de l’Inde” at the Musée du Quai Branly in 2010, the art community has become aware of this artistic tradition. Therefore, masks in good condition have been robbed from the shrines to sell them for high prizes (Rond 2010b: 1f.).

Another consideration is whether it is meaningful to designate a specific “*bhūta* style” displayed in all metal objects related to *bhūta* worship. Elements as accentuated, bulging eyes, the mouth stretching from one side of the face to the other, often displaying teeth, and moustaches for male and female *bhūtas* as well as snake ornaments are typical features of most masks and *bhūta* figurines. Therefore, they cannot be considered as iconographic markers of a specific *bhūta*. As the comparison between the Viṣṇumurti mask and Pilichāmuṇḍi mask has shown, they are both resembling wild cats with minor differences in the ornamentation. Similarly, a boar mask is used for the popular *bhūta* Pañjurli, but also for Jumādi’s assistant Baṅṅe. Thus, the initially quoted differentiation between three categories for *bhūta* masks seems to be based solely on their mythological origin and not on their visual appearance.⁴⁸ Although the mythology of the *bhūta* is the most important criteria for the attribution of the mask, it is not depicted in the form of individual iconographic elements. Coming back to the comparison of the animal masks, the formation of an art-historical categorisation of masks based on,

⁴⁷ Information obtained from the accession-catalogue of DakshinaChitra/the Madras Craft Foundation.

⁴⁸ Masks of *bhūtas* with totemistic origin, *bhūtas* derived from the brahmanical Hindu pantheon, and *bhūta* masks of humans whose spirit received worship after their death (Rond 2010a: 9).

for example, specific animal characteristics shared by a group of masks would be one option. However, those types are not congruent with the three categories deduced from the mythological origin since Pilichāmuṇḍi is counted as a *bhūta* of totemistic origin, while Viṣṇumurti is linked to Viṣṇu's Nārasimha *avatāra* and counted as *bhūta* derived from the brahmanical Hindu pantheon. While categories based on the appearance are appealing for an art historical study, they seem to be irrelevant for practitioners since no anthropological study has ever mentioned such a differentiation based on the visual appearance of masks.

There are also notable stylistic differences in the execution of masks and figurines of different periods, as we have seen while comparing the contemporary *bhūta* masks by Rajesh Acharya with the unidentified mask. The creation of *bhūta* masks is still executed by hereditary craftsmen who cast the masks according to their family traditions. These traditions might determine the work process and iconographic and stylistic features (Nambiar 2009: 52). Furthermore, there are stylistic differences between the *bhūta* figurines from Northern Kerala and the Karnataka part of Tulunadu. Therefore, it seems likely that variations in the appearance of *bhūta* masks are also owed to different regional traditions.

Even though they most probably exist for several hundred years, metal objects, such as masks and figurines, are a later addition to the *bhūta* cult. The other visual art material related to the *bhūta* cult, for instance, facial make-up, costumes and the original *aṅgis* are made of natural materials such as palm leaves. They are typical examples of tribal or other local traditions, while the metal objects show the influence of the brahmanical Hindu tradition on *bhūta* worship. They frequently incorporate iconographic elements of the Hindu mythology too, such as marks on the forehead and decorative motifs, for example, the *kīrtimukha*. Therefore, the special aesthetic of the *bhūta* masks and figurines was achieved by the combination of typical iconographic elements of the *bhūta* cult and the influences of brahmanical Hinduism. This leads to the question whether *bhūta* masks and figurines might also indirectly provide information on the relationship between local traditions and brahmanical Hinduism in Tulunadu. In his mode as a *rajandaiva* Pañjurli is depicted as a royal warrior who is seated on a boar *vāhana*. Here, seemingly, the boar face or mask of the *bhūta* has been transformed into a

boar mount. As described earlier, Brückner interprets this configuration of the iconography as a positive change of status achieved by using iconographic markers of brahmanical deities. However, an alternative reading might also be possible. For instance, during the struggle for religious superiority between brahmanical Hinduism and Buddhism in Orissa in the 11th century, the depiction of brahmanical Hindu deities as *vāhana*⁴⁹ was a visual device to annihilate the deity which serves as a mount (Donaldson 2001: 424).⁵⁰ Could Pañjurli as *rajandaiva* on a boar *vāhana* in this regard be also considered as an attempt of brahmanical Hinduism to dominate the local belief? But an answer to this question would require a multidisciplinary study of *bhūta* iconography in comparison to brahmanical Hindu iconography from the same region as well as an investigation of the differing ritual functions of *bhūta* masks and figurines under consideration of textual material such as *pāḍḍanas* or temple inscriptions.

⁴⁹ For example, Viṣṇu as well as his *vāhana* Garuḍa and a lion are depicted as *vāhanas* of Buddhist deities (Donaldson 2001: 424).

⁵⁰ As Gudrun Bühnemann explained in her lecture “Crushed Underfoot: Patterns of Subjugation and Extreme Dependency in the Buddhist Iconography of Nepal” at Bonn on 13th January 2020, the same principle can be observed in Nepal. Some Buddhist deities use brahmanical Hindu gods as *vāhanas* as a sign of superiority in an environment of religious rivalry.

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