

RITUAL VILLAGE MUSIC AND MARGINALISED MUSICIANS OF WESTERN ORISSA/ODISHA, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This work presents the summarised results of an anthropological and ethno-musicological documentation of hitherto unknown traditions of sacred music performed by marginalised musicians and priest-musicians of the Adivasi (indigenous) Bora Sambar region of western Orissa/Odisha, India. The work is based on more than 30 months of ethnographic research in rural regions of western Orissa/Odisha.

Keywords: sacred music, goddess worship, music and religion, western Orissa/Odisha, marginalised musicians

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the crucial role of music for a local society of the Boro Sambar region of western Orissa/Odisha. The data for the present study has been collected during a long-term ethno-musicological fieldwork in rural and urban western Odisha, undertaken from 2002 to 2010.² The aim of my investigations was to document and analyse the unknown and vulnerable musical and artistic traditions of marginalised musicians of the Bora

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² The project was first overseen by the German Research Council in the context of the Orissa Research Project from 1999 to 2005, then it was followed by a project on local museums and music documentation from 2006 to 2010 (Guzy, Hatoum and Kamel 2009, 2010), funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (Volkswagenstiftung). I would like to thank the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) as well as the Volkswagen Foundation (Volkswagenstiftung) for their generous grants without which the research could not have been undertaken.

Sambar region of western Odisha, especially of Harijan³ Ganda village musicians and of various non-Brahmin priest-musicians of ambivalent social status. Even if almost no ritual in rural India is performed without music, ritual village music is not a popular topic in ethnographic ritual studies on village India.⁴ The long-term ethno-musical researches by Ulrich Wegner (1986 a/b; 1987, 1988) and by Mireille Helffer (1969 a/b) on Nepal, the recent works by Nicolas Prévôt on musicians in Chhattisgarh (Prévôt 2008: 75–88; *ibid* 2005), the overview on Asian "*Tribal Music*" by Stephan Slawek (2001/2002) and the study by Christine Guillebaud (2008) on itinerant musicians in Kerala and by Rolf Killius on Kerala's percussion temple music (2006) as well as Georg Pfeffer's ethnologic account on the music of the Dombo in Koraput in southern Orissa (Pfeffer 1994: 14–20), are notable exceptions. In contrast, there are numerous ethno-musicological works on the so-called "classical" Indian music, namely North Indian *raga*-music and the south-Indian carnatic music.⁵ There is also a rich research tradition in relation to the "classical" musical traditions of Eastern India (Ray 1985; Pattnaik 1971; Vir 1999).

With this article on the living musical traditions of the rural Bora Sambar region of western Odisha, I deliberately try to focus on village music traditions, which have for the most part not been recognised as valuable cultural expressions and have in consequence remained over—and unheard as well as under researched until now. But it is not my aim to incorporate these indigenous (local) musical traditions into the canon of "classical" Indian music theories and practices. I think that they harbour their own complexities and theories—and are thus equally valuable. Furthermore, to "make classical" a musical tradition, which has its local and regional colour, means to run the risk of destroying or at least overlooking its specificity through systematisation and classification under hegemonial categories and hierarchies.

My deliberate aim is thus to focus on an ethnographic description. As such, I aim at revealing an internal system of indigenous (local) theories on music and social structure in the Bora Sambar region of western Odisha.

³ "Harijan" is hereby a euphemism within the framework of the reforms introduced by Mahatma Gandhi (1933–1948) to re-designate the socio-economically underprivileged social strata of Indian society—commonly known as "untouchable" castes—positively as "children of God." The socio-economically underprivileged, marginalised or excluded social groups in India are today rather called *dalit* ("depressed," "broken," "torn to pieces").

⁴ To mention only few: Carrin 1997, 2006; Mallebrein 2000, 2001; Mallebrein and Stietencron 2008; Otten 2008, 2010.

⁵ For an overview see Daniélou 1979; 1982; Ray 1985; Arnold 2000; Vir 1999; Wade 1979; for a study on the *raga* music see Koch 1995; Widdess 1995; Moutal 1991; for the courtly musical culture of North India see Bor and Bruguière 2003.

THE CONTEXT

In western Odisha local discourses on the divine are enshrined in particular concepts of sacred sounds. My research on the immaterial side of culture of western Odisha showed that ritual music transports an indigenous knowledge, value and belief system. Music of marginalised musicians, the music of the non-Brahmin priest-musicians and the dance of the ecstatic ritual priest-dancer of local goddesses disclose a *thea-phony*, a local theory of the goddess (thea) resonating *in* a system of sounds (*phony*) and mediated *in* the human body.

THE ARGUMENT

The paper argues that subaltern⁶ musicians and non-Brahmin priest-musicians play a crucial role in the socio-religious life of the region. Village musicians such as the Harijan musicians Ganda happen to be mediators between diverse social groups as well as the clients of today's peasant indigenous Adivasi categories such as the Binjhal, the Gond, the Khand, the Sahara and the Gour. The term Adivasi⁷ (Hindi *adi*, meaning "beginning" and *vasi*"dweller") refers to around 100 million people (according to new Census data from 2011) forming more than six hundred socio-culturally autochthonous Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian language and kinship groups in India administratively labelled as "schedule tribes" (see Pfeffer 1997: 3–27) and designated as "indigenous peoples" by United Nations definitions.⁸

As musicians and clients, the Harijan Ganda musicians can be compared with the Dombo musicians of the indigenous Koraput-complex of Southern Orissa (Pfeffer 1994: 14–20). These two features – the musicians' vital mediator-client role and the socio-cultural and emotional importance of music in the region seem to represent the cultural pattern of

⁶ I am using "subaltern" in terms of marginalised. The term "subaltern" dates back to more recent critical-historical studies as well as to the school of Indian historian Ranajit Guha. These moved the underprivileged, toiling-oppressed and historically disadvantaged social-cultural groups that were still being discriminated against into the centre of their research focus. For an introduction to the subject, see Guha (1982).

⁷ As a political term, Adivasi has been forged by Oraon and Munda students who founded the first Adivasi Mahasabha in 1915. For the Government of India, however, the administrative term "Scheduled Tribe" is used and refers to a category of people who are eligible to benefit from quotas which tend to compensate the inequalities resulting from a lack of socio-economic development (Guzy and Carrin 2012: 1–18).

⁸ According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and according to its working definition of Indigenous Peoples, "Scheduled Tribes" are considered "indigenous peoples" by transnational multilateral agencies such as the UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank and the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples or IWGIA (International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs).

an indigenous Adivasi complex of Bora Sambar, interwoven with pan-Indian Hindu ideas and values. It is argued that the specific cultural identity and memory of the region, being a local symbiosis of pan-Indian Hindu and regional Adivasi cultures, are transmitted and conserved through specific local musical traditions and configurations of local hierarchies. These are evidenced in the ritual and social position of village musicians. My thesis is that one crucial way in grasping the local knowledge, value, belief-system and social structure of the Bora Sambar region is the analysis of its ritual music.

THE REGION

The Bora Sambar region lies in the *Bargarh* district of western Odisha. It is the region around the town of Padampur, surrounded by the highlands of the 90 km long Gandha Mardhan. According to the Sambalpur Gazetteers of 1971 (Senapati and Mahanti 1971), the territory of Bora Sambar (Raj Bora Sambar) is estimated to be 2,178 square kilometres and to have 476 villages. The Bora Sambar region is located in the area bordering on Chhattisgarh and literally means "the region of the deer swallowed up by the cobra." The language spoken in this region is *Sambalpuri*.

The Bora Sambar region is blessed with a rich musical heritage and a sacred landscape formed by the Gandha Mardhan mountains. The feeling of a regional and cultural distinctiveness is expressed and transmitted through its local music. This music is an expression of a specific cultural memory and identity transmitted through the re-enactment of local vocal, instrumental and orchestral musical traditions revealing as such a particularly local configuration of social structure, culture and religious belief system.

THE POPULATION

The population of the Bora Sambar region lives in small rural communities of semi-tribal and caste groups of Binjhal, Gond, Dumal, Khand, Mali, Telli, Kulta, Brahmin, Gour and Ganda (Harijan) origin. Today the communities live mostly as peasants with a highly distinctive cultural self-esteem to belong to the Bora Sambar region.

Bora Sambar: A Name and a Legend

Mythologically, the name *Bora Sambar* can be traced back to Bora Sambar, a small Binjhal village. The legend relates that the Bora Sambar kingdom (Raj Bora Sambar) originated in this very village 150 to 200 years ago. Strictly speaking, we should rather refer to it as the local chiefdom of the Binjhal. Later, the centre of the chiefdom or local kingdom shifted to the small town of Padampur.

The name of the village recalls the mythical place where a deer was swallowed up by a cobra. The following story about the village and the region is told: "Once upon a time a cobra (*bora*) attacked a deer (*sombar*). At the moment when the big snake opened its jaws and tried to kill the deer, the Binjhal saved it." Ever since this time the Binjhal became the guardians and representatives of this region, so the legend.

The Binjhal

The local Binjhal community claims to have mythological roots in the Bora Sambar region. The Binjhal have Adivasi status, by the Indian administration they have been accorded as "Scheduled Tribes." Binjhal means "without sweat" and locally the Binjhal are known as tough fighters and hard-working labourers. The Binjhal consider themselves to be descendants of the most ancient people in the region, the *purkha lok*, who cleared the jungle (*safa koriba*) and then introduced agriculture (*chas bas*), that means they created culture by taming nature. Even today, although the Binjhal may be day labourers (*bhuti*) besides following their traditional occupation as agriculturalists, they still have the proud self-perception of being peasants who own their land. The Binjhal once had their own Binjhal language—called Binjhal *bhasa*—which is no longer spoken even by the oldest members of the community. Only some fragments of this tongue in sung form are remembered by the old people. Binjhal music thus represents a kind of cultural archaeological find, audible as shards of sound vessels of the cultural memory.

The most important deity of the Binjhal is the goddess Bindyabasani. Yearly, during the summer month *choit* (April/May) religious services and big festivals in her honour take place. In addition, the god Dongra Bura and the goddesses Bhima Buri, Patneshwari, Samley and Buri Ma are venerated.

THE VILLAGE ORCHESTRA – GANDA BAJA

Ganda baja is maybe the most prominent musical and ritual feature of the Bora Sambar region. It is an instrumental orchestral⁹ music, performed exclusively by musicians originating from the marginalised Harijan caste Ganda (also called Pano). The instruments forming the *ganda baja* village orchestra can be divided into three categories: membranophones (*dhol*, *nissan*, *tasa*, also called *timkiri*), an aerophone (*mohuri*) and idiophones (*kastal/jhang* or *jumka*). Membranophones are musical instruments that produce sound by a stretched membrane (animal skin). Aerophones are musical instruments which produce sound only by using air without any string or membrane and idiophones are musical instruments which resound in themselves, without any strings, air or membranes.¹⁰

Dhol

The *dhol*, which is the village orchestra's leading instrument, is a large membranophone. This large, long drum (90 cm to 1.5 metres in length) is made from the trunk of a tree and strung with cowhide (*gai chomora*) on two sides. Along the length of the *dhol* run strips of cowhide (*badi*) which are attached to the instrument by rings (*kol kola*). The skin of the right-hand side, named *tali*, is made from calf's skin; the left-hand skin *dhaaya* is made from cowhide. The *tali* is slightly smaller (37 cm in diameter) than the *dhaaya* (38 cm in diameter). The *dhaaya* is beaten with a rubber stick (*khanda/nara*) of about 40 cm in length; the *tali* side is played with the right hand. The *dhol* player, known as the *dholya*, directs the changes of the rhythms of the *ganda baja* orchestra. Rhythms usually emerge spontaneously with the *dholya* giving the lead. Musicians gain knowledge of the rhythmic and melodic patterns by listening to various rhythms from early childhood on. It is said that the voices of the goddesses appear first in the *dhol* drum and express their moods by changing the rhythms.

⁹ An instrumental orchestra is understood as an ensemble of instruments, where the interplay of the diverse instruments has a choral character but which does not contain any form of human vocals. The instrumental orchestral tradition of South Asia differs fundamentally from the traditional (classical) form of Indian modal music. The classical Indian modal music is characterised by individual solo performers and solo compositions (Daniélou 2004: 10–11). It lacks the choral character of instruments playing together as "voices." The South Asian orchestral tradition could rather be compared to the tradition of European orchestral performance (chamber orchestra, opera orchestra etc.), except for the facts a) that musicians belong to special social groups or ethnic categories, b) that the music is restricted to special occasions (Sachs 1923: 2–3) and c) that it represents specific regional traditions of ensembles of regional instruments (see Sachs 1923: 3–11), as for example the *Naykhibaja* of the Newar (Wegner 1988) or the *Damai baja* (Helfffer 1969 a/b), also known as *Pancai baja* of the Damai (Tingey 1994), in Nepal.

¹⁰ The classification refers to the Hornbostel-Sachs scheme of a universal fourfold division of musical instruments: membranophones, aerophones, idiophones and chordophones (strings) (Hornbostel and Sachs 1914: 553–590).

Nissan

The *nissan* drum, another membranophone, has a tapered form, resembling a melon cut in half. It is reported to be the most ancient instrument of the village orchestra. A *nissan* is made of wooden and iron sheets and is played with two rubber sticks (*chimta*). The leather (*chipra*) of the drumhead is made of cowhide or goatskin and often covered with colourful paintings. In the Bora Sambar region and Sambalpur area *nissan* drums were traditionally decorated with deer antlers, but as hunting deer has been forbidden, today this form of embellishment has nearly disappeared.

The *nissan* is always played with maximum strength, thus producing a deep and penetrating sound, which is compared to the "*sound of the thunderstorm*" and identified with the horrifying strength of Goddess Nissani.

Tasa

The *tasa* (also called *timkri*), a small membranophone, is a drum made from clay (*matul*) and strung with cowhide (*gai chomra*). The drumhead is attached with leather strips to the tapered body of the instrument (*mola*). It is played with two thin bamboo sticks. The *tasa* produces a high and thin sound. Even if the sound of the *tasa* drum is not associated with a specific goddess, it contributes to the divine drum chorus.

Mohuri

The *mohuri* is an oboe-like instrument. According to the Ganda musicians, its sound plays a crucial role in changing the character of the music and rhythm. It is often compared to the "*seductive voice of a capricious woman*," as the musicians explain, but can also be associated with the "*desperate wailing of a mother crying for her dead son*." Those poetic descriptions refer to the arbitrary character of the *mohuri*'s sound, which is considered the most difficult instrument to play in the orchestra. The sound of the *mohuri* is identified with the expression of the specific goddess, which enters the musical scene during a *ganda baja* performance.

Kastal

The *kastal* or *jhang* are iron cymbals; they may be replaced by a kind of rattle called the *jumka*. Their sound is associated with the goddess Gantheshwari ("the goddess of bells" [*gantha*=bell]).

Ideally, an orchestra consists of five instruments and might include five to seven players. Sometimes, it is also called *panchabadya* referring to the five instruments assembled. Similarities can be traced between *ganda baja* and other orchestral traditions like those of Chhattisgarh (Prévôt 2008: 75–88) or Nepal (Helffer 1969 a/b; Tingey 1994; Wegner 1988).

All *ganda baja* instruments play together in tune and rhythm. It is central for the formation of a Ganda musician to listen to the play of other musicians and to learn to play together with them. Besides the command of one's instrument, playing *ganda baja* thus implies a sophisticated culture of listening. The beat of the right-hand *tali* side of the *dhol* provides orientation for the *tasa*, which in response beats a double rhythm. The beat of the left-hand *dhaaya* side of the *dhol* provides orientation for the *nissan*, which answers with a counter-rhythm to the beat of the *dhaaya*. As the sound of the *mohuri* is intended to resemble the flirting of a women's voice, it is played in an extremely alluring way. All the instruments in the inter-village orchestra are worshipped before being played. Notably, they are used for the worship of gods and goddesses, but at the same time require worship themselves. The instruments are usually only touched by the musicians, but there is no ritual prohibition to touch the instruments. However, no one should step over them as this is considered disrespectful and is supposed to cause a curse by the goddesses. The instruments are stored in a secular context: they are kept by the particular musician who plays an instrument. The sacredness of the instruments evolves mainly through the ritual context and the sound vibrations transforming the instrument to the mediator as well as to the corpus of a particular goddess.

In the performances of *ganda baja*, notions of an identity between music and goddesses come to light. Various goddesses are assumed to appear through the sound of specific instruments and their rhythms (*par*), while the polyrhythmic structure of the orchestra is understood as the manifestation of their voices.¹¹ In the rural regions of Bora Sambar, no socio-religious ceremony, such as marriage or *puja*, the ritual service for gods and goddesses, may be celebrated without *ganda baja* music, played exclusively by the Ganda musicians. A village orchestra, usually formed by inhabitants of one and the same village, is called to the neighbouring villages for the celebration of such musical-religious events. The musicians

¹¹ Rhythms are recognised as the specific language of a goddess and accordingly named: Durga Par (the rhythm of Durga); Maha Kali Par (the rhythm of Maha Kali); Ma Mangala Par (the rhythm of Mother Mangala); Ma Tarani Par (the rhythm of Mother Tarani); Oila Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Oila); Subakesi Par (the rhythm of Subakesi); Talsa Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Talsa); Bontei Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Bontei); Chandraseni Par (the rhythm of Chandraseni); Ganga Devi Par (the rhythm of goddess Ganga); Parvati Par (the rhythm of Parvati); Lakshmi Par (the rhythm of Lakshmi); Boiravi Par (the rhythm of Boiravi); Buri Ma Par (the rhythm of Mother Buri); Patneshwari Par (the rhythm of Patneshwari); Samleshwari Par (the rhythm of Samleshwari).

are invited though turmeric powder by the different local communities of Binjhal, Gouro, Dhol Khond, Mali or Kulta in order to perform in their villages. Thus, the music of the Ganda musicians connects local communities, places and religious concepts. The *ganda baja* can be considered as an inter-village orchestra, representing a force of relatedness, connection and communication between different villages and communities. The Ganda musicians play the role of ritual and social mediators,¹² linking Adivasi and semi-Adivasi local groups and mediating local values as well as local power configurations. The *ganda baja* orchestra thus plays a double role: on the one hand, the *baja* transcends local communities in its function as a ritual inter-village orchestra. On the other hand, through its musical expression of transcendence, the *baja* creates a sensual experience of the local community in terms of communication with a holy sphere and the manifestation of the powers of local goddesses.

In pre-colonial and colonial times, musicians were engaged and patronised by local *rajās* or landowners (*zamindar*) of the Raj Bora Sambar kingdom (later Padampur). Local power holders employed village musicians for the performance of politico-religious rituals, legitimating their social and symbolic power during such events as *dusshara*, the festival of the goddess Durga, and of the clan goddess Patneshwari.

A proverb describes the ritual relationship between musicians and the local king: "*ager baja, poche raja*"—in front of the local king, there should always march the village orchestra. While performing in front of the *raja* or the *zamindar*, the musicians had to wear colourful and extravagant clothes, a tradition that can still be traced today in the multi-coloured clothes and longer than usual hair of village musicians. The performance of the politico-symbolic powers of the power holder was designed to be a cheerful event, associated with public entertainment and joyful festivities.

GANDA BAJA MUSIC AND GODDESS-EMBODIMENT: THE BOIL RITUAL

The instrumental orchestras of the Ganda musicians play a central role in the *boil* rituals of goddess embodiment and ritual healing. Every Monday during the worship of the Goddess Durga, the Goddess will appear in the body of her priest: "*boil*" comes upon the *pujari*. The *ganda baja* orchestrates the act of possession with specific rhythms. The goddess manifests herself in the dance and speech of the priest. This weekly *boil*

¹² For comparison with the Pano in Koraput, see Pfeffer 1994: 14–20.

tradition is an artistic ritual healing performance that integrates dance, music, and ritual speech in order to heal patients (*kosti*). Once a year, during the festival of *dusshara* or Durga *puja* in honour of the goddess Durga, which takes place during the month of *dusshara* (October), *boil* rituals gain a special intensity. At this time, the spirit of the goddess comes with a particular power and efficaciousness upon her priest (*pujari*), who becomes her trance medium—*boil*.

AN EXAMPLE: A BOIL RITUAL IN SARGIVAL VILLAGE

In Sargival, one of the villages of the Bora Sambar region, the Goddess Durga is worshipped weekly in a goddess spirit possession¹³ ritual—*boil*. But during *sula puja*, the 16 days worship of the goddess Durga taking place before the tenth day of *dusshara*, *boil* performances take on a particularly intensity, and are ascribed a special efficacy to cure the ailments of attending patients.

To start the *boil* ritual during *Dusshara*, the *dhunkel* instrument, an earthen pot (*handi matire*), is played by the *dhunkel*-player (*dhunkelya*) at the altar of the *dhunkel*, called the *dunkhel kutti* (*kutti*=place), *Durga kutti* or *sula kutti*. The altar is a separate square room with mud walls, located inside the house of the village priest (*pujari*). Here, the *dhunkel* instrument is kept and the local gods and goddesses are venerated. The *dhunkel*-player begins the ritual with a sung meditation, accompanied by the *dhunkel* to call the goddesses and gods into the altar. The *dhunkel* is placed on a straw crown (*dhora/oira*) and topped by a straw mat (*kula*). It is rubbed with an iron rod (*jumka bari*) fixed on a bamboo bow (*dhun*). A straw string, which is fixed on the bow, is simultaneously plucked in order to create a dull, low sound. The sounds of the *dhunkel* are considered to be the sounds of the goddesses Durga and Lakshmi. They are also held to attract or call all other gods and goddesses into the place of the ritual and thus to prepare the following manifestation of the goddesses. The *dhunkel* player, who also is called *dhunkel gayako* ("the singer of the *dhunkel* instrument"), sings mythical stories (*katani*) about the seven sisters (*sato bhani*) Rohela, Talsa, Krishtei, Subokeshi, Nila Rani, Onjona Rani and Dohona Rani. The names of the mythical sisters may vary from village to village, but they are mostly known under the names given here.

During this ritual prelude for the *boil* ritual, the *dhunkel* player sings the story of the origin of the *dhunkel* instrument. With this song together with the sound of the *dhunkel* instrument, the microcosmic character of the

¹³ With this term I am referring to Roche (2000: 288–295).

instrument is put in relation with the macrocosm of the local worldview, as the following narrative fragment illustrates:

"When the 7 sisters did the puja for Shiva, Shiva told them: If you want to satisfy me, you should meditate. You should meditate with the dhunkel.

The 7 sisters got the dhunkel from the Adi Khond village. There lived a female singer (gauni) who played the dhunkel.

The 7 sisters took the Khond gauni to their kingdom. Brahma then told the 7 sisters about the making and playing of the dhunkel.

Brahma told the 7 sisters to take a straw mat (kula) from the Mahar (bamboo maker) and then he told them to take a pot (handi) from the khumbar (potter).

Brahma himself gave a bamboo, for the bow (dhun) to the 7 sisters. For the bow, the 7 sisters made the string (sitalpot) and the straw crown (oira) by themselves.

From the blacksmiths (luhar) the 7 sisters took the iron for making the iron rod (dhunbari)."

According to the accounts of *dhunkel* artists, the *dhunkel* is made for meditation as well as for the worship of all gods and goddesses. No kind of trance or goddess spirit possession occurs during the *dhunkel* performance (*boil ne ase*). Singing accompanied by the *dhunkel* (*dhunkel gana*) has merely the function of narrative story telling, ritual preparation and ritual accompaniment. The sound of the *dhunkel* only calls and attracts the goddesses and gods, but it does not transform the musician itself.

When the persistent, monotonous sound of the *dhunkel* is heard by the villagers, people start to gather in the altar of the *dhunkel* instrument (*dhunkel kutti*). The local priest (*pujari*), who some moments later will transform to *boil*, the trance medium of the local goddesses, is a middle-aged man with long hair who belongs to the Adivasi Mali community. Some years ago, after an apparition of the Goddess Durga in a dream, he became her priest.

While the *dhunkel* is played, he performs the worship (*puja*) for the goddess Durga. Coconuts, flowers and incense-sticks (*agerbati*) are sacrificed in the *sula* or *Durga kutti* to please the goddess. Finally, the priest meditates without moving. For this part of the ceremony, he is

wearing white clothes. After the end of his "white puja" (*dhola puja*) and his meditation, the music of the *ganda baja* village orchestra starts outside the *Durga/dhunkel kutti* but it can clearly be heard inside.

While the monotonous sounds of the *dhunkel* instrument are held to recall the divine local narratives, the wild sound of the *borua par*, the holy rhythms of *ganda baja*, leads to an escalation of the ritual atmosphere and incites the following eruption of the divine power embodied by *boil*, the trance-medium.

Inside the small and crowded altar, the tension rises. The rhythm and the volume of the *ganda baja* orchestra rise and fuel the nervousness and excitement of the crowd.

A villager acting as assistant priest (*pujari*) helps the main priest to change from his white clothes into a red female sari skirt. Slowly, the main priest (*pujari*) starts to lose control over his body. His eyes close and his limbs become heavy and powerless. Finally, the assistant priest touches his head with a small lamp of melted butter (*ghi*). Touched by the light, the almost unconscious priest starts to tremble. He is moving his head as if he is weeping. "*Boil asila!*" ("*Boil* has come!"), the people whisper. "*Ma asila*" ("the mother (goddess) has come"), they tell each other. Now the mother goddess has taken possession of her priest, and the priest himself has become "*boil*." *Boil*, the priest turned trance medium, then takes an iron chain—a symbol of the local goddess—from the ground with his right hand. He grunts and falls into a wild ecstatic dance. During the dance *boil*—the possessed priest—starts to silently sing a melody.

Immediately after the priest has transformed himself into *boil*, the trance medium, physically and psychologically suffering patients (*kosti*) approach him from out of the crowd and wind garlands of flowers around his neck. The trance medium *boil* trembles and starts to utter predictions and incantations. In a repetitive tune he is chanting different names of goddesses:

"Mother is with you – Mother is with you – Mother will save you – Mother will save you – Durga Ma (mother) – Durga Ma – Maha Kali Ma – Maha Kali Ma – Mangala Ma – Mangala Ma – Tarini Ma – Tarini Ma – Oila Ma – Oila Ma – Subakesi Ma – Subakesi Ma Talsa Ma – Talsa Ma – Bontei Ma – Bontei Ma – Chandraseni Ma – Chandraseni Ma – Ganga Ma – Ganga Ma – Parvati Ma – Parvati Ma – Lakshmi Ma – Lakshmi Ma – Buri Ma – Buri Ma – Patneshwari Ma – Patneshwari Ma – Samleshwari Ma – Samleshwari Ma – Mother is with you – Mother is with you – Mother will save you – Mother will save you – Mother will save you."

While *boil* chants to the patients, the music from outside, which up to now has driven on the ceremony, stops. For a time, the tension level of the priest's trance is moderated. But as the *ganda baja* music sets in anew, the priest's—*boil*'s body starts to tremble again and he commences to move in a circular movement. After moving around for some time with closed eyes, *boil* steps outside the altar. Here, he meets the *ganda baja* musicians, playing their instruments: *dhol*, *nissan*, *tassa*, *mohuri* and *jumka*. The *dhol* player (*dholya*) takes a leading function in the following trance performance. He visibly interacts with *boil* and drives forward an ecstatic communication process. A provocative dialogue between the sound, beat and rhythm and the dance of the trance medium sets in. The *dhol* seems to offend *boil*. The *baja*, which means "music," but also signifies "bite," literally "bites" (*baja*) the goddess. An aggressive communication unfolds between the beats of the *dhol* and the dance of the trance medium, who expresses the answers and reactions of the goddess through its wild ecstatic movements, which are derived from the local *dalkhai* dance, supposed to be an Adivasi dance of the Soara, Binjhal and Gour communities.

The music, the rhythms, the dance and the cries of the crowd touch everyone gathered around the sacred space of the dance of *boil*. There is a thrill about the ritual escalation, about the sudden appearance of *boil*, the goddess embodied in her trance medium. But the crowd is also excited about the power and effectiveness of the ritual performance. The *boil* ritual and the consultation of the *boil* trance medium are particularly believed to make fertile those who attend the performance—both men and women. The dance and the wild music are held to manifest a curative and procreative energy which flows from the goddess personalised in *boil* to the participants of the ritual. The iron chain and the iron sword that *boil*, the trance medium, carries, are symbols of the power of the goddess. In *boil*'s body the goddess dances for her believers. She is wild and she can give fertility. But it is also the feminised male priest transformed into a divine woman, who is held to have obtained healing and transformative powers. The creative and procreative power of the goddess, according to the belief of her worshippers, is not only manifested in *boil* as a medium, but transferred from the Goddess to the possessed priest.

GODDESS EMBODIMENT AND THE SIXTEEN RHYTHMS

The goddess spirit possession *boil* is musically symbolised by a specific sequence of rhythms, the *sulapar*, or 16 holy rhythms. These rhythms are named after 16 different goddesses and are said to express their speeches and characters. As different rhythms (*par*) are beaten, different goddesses

manifest themselves in the body of the possessed trance medium. The concept of *bol*, the rhythm, plays a crucial role both in structuring the ritual performance of the trance medium *boil*, as in the healing of patients (*kosti*). *Sulapar*, the sixteen possession rhythms, represent the polyrhythmic and polyglot interacting of the different goddesses with each other. The musicians aurally recognise the identity of the specific goddesses and rhythms.¹⁴ As the structure of 16 rhythms is a core element in all *boil* rituals, I would tentatively describe it as a rhythmic sound liturgy within the ritual of goddess embodiment.

DRUMS AND THE GODDESS

Rodney Needham has pointed out that "*there is a connection between percussion and transition*" (Needham 1967: 613) and that "*practically everywhere it is found that percussion is resorted to in order to communicate with the other world ...*" (ibid: 610). In the Bora Sambar region, the drums *dhol*, *nissan* and *tasa* are directive for inducing trance. These membranophones are identified with local goddesses and they are simultaneously equated with goddess embodiment. The *dhol* drum plays a crucial role in communicating with the goddess. By means of the *dhol*, a musician proves his strength (*shakti*) in order to detract the goddess' power of embodiment from himself and to direct it towards the priest. On multiple layers of meaning the drum is instrumental for mediating and transferring and directing the power of the goddess as well as itself identified with the divine entity.

BOIL AND DANCE

As well as the percussion centred sound of the *ganda baja* orchestra, the dance of the trance medium *boil* signifies the appearance of the goddess. She dances in the body of the possessed priest, who hence becomes a dancing goddess himself. In the dance patterns of the *boil* ritual the traditional elements of *dalkhai*, the most popular folk dance style in the Sambalpur district of western Orissa, are integrated into the performance of goddess worship. The *dalkhai* dance is traditionally associated with puberty rituals for unmarried girls preparing young women and girls for their social and biological maturity. It is generally conceived as an expression of sensuality and a symbol of erotic attraction. Integrated into *boil* performances, *dalkhai* patterns indicate the intimate dialogue of the trance

¹⁴ Locally, the identifications of rhythms and goddesses can vary.

medium and the goddess. The trance medium *boil* is conceived as the "divine dancer"—the sacred dancer of the goddess Durga—referring both to his ritual activity and power. The erotic power of the dance symbolises the power of fertility ascribed to all *boil* rituals and its trance mediums.

BOIL AND RITUAL SPEECH

A third element of the *boil* ritual besides the rhythms of *ganda baja* and the priest's dance is the ritual speech of *boil*. For the most part, it consists of spontaneously created poetries sung by the trance medium. The rhythmic and repetitive uttering of the names of gods and goddesses intertwines with a specific melody only known to the trance medium *boil*. The melody of the ritual speech whispered by *boil* is a personal characteristic of the trance medium. It may express the affiliation to his guru or *boil*'s own personal note. Here, the medium of dance interconnects with the medium of music and rhythmic speech to form an intermedial ritual.

The ritual incantations of *boil* show a repetitive linguistic and melodic structure that can be described as a balancing of pairs of successive syntactic unities. This is the kind of "parallelism" highlighted in the ethno-linguistic discussion about "*talking in pairs*" (Fox 1988). A parallelism, according to Roman Jakobson, is an elementary operation of oral communication that consists of a "*coming together of two elements. (...) By this definition, parallelism is an extension of the binary principle of opposition to the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic levels of expression*" (Jakobson, cited by Fox 1988: 3). For Jakobson, even the rhetoric figures of comparison and metaphor were semantic variations of parallelism. Fox collects observations attesting to the dual structure of ritual language in many cultures, which he calls "dyadic language." The parallelism of sentences is considered by Fox to be a characteristic of poetic language, understood as a special vocabulary that is rarely used in other contexts. Parallel sentences and word constructions, the ordering of words and sentences in an alternating, repetitive form are characteristic for the ritual language of oral societies (Fox: 1–3, 6–11)¹⁵. *Boil*'s trance song with its parallelism of sentences and alternating repetitions seems thus a pertinent example of ritual poetry.

¹⁵ For comparative ethnographic studies on ritual language see Demmer and Ganszle (2007).

PRACTICES OF ASCETICISM

Boil rituals are embedded in cycles of interconnected micro-rituals including temporal ascetic practices. The *boil* ritual on *dusshara/durga puja* is preceded by a preparatory phase of sixteen days. During the *sula puja* (=the sixteen worship) that starts from the celebration of *puojuntya*—the festival of mothers who celebrate their sons, the local priest (*pujari*) fasts for 16 days until the day of *nowomi*, the ninth day and the day before the day of *dusshara*. During this time the priest may not rest on any wooden bed (*kotha*) but has to sleep on the ground. He is supposed to take a bath three times a day as well as to perform the worship of the sixteen goddesses three times daily: in the morning hours (*sokale*), at 12 a clock (*bar baje*) and in the evening (*sondhya bele*) hours. With these ascetic practices of cleansing and control of body and mind, the priest prepares himself for the contact with the goddesses during the *boil* performance on *durga puja*.

MARGINALISED MUSICIANS

The *ganda baja* musicians who are orchestrating the *boil* performances are without exception male and originate from a subaltern impoverished Harijan caste, called Ganda or Pano. Besides their activity as musicians, the traditional trade of the landless Ganda was the weaving of simple cotton clothes used as underwear. With the emergence of a cotton industry in Orissa over the last 50 years, this trade fell in decline and today many Ganda earn their living as agricultural day-labourers.

The indigenous term "*Ganda*" which literally means "*the bad smelling*" refers to the activity of tanning the leather for drums but also expresses the socio-cultural concept of "untouchability" or "pollution" of the Ganda musicians. From the perspective of the local culture, Ganda musicians are considered to be "untouchable" (*achua*) for two reasons. First, because their drums are made from cowhide and second, because by playing the oboe *mohuri*, they touch their own saliva while creating sounds. The direct physical contact with cowhide and saliva classifies them as extremely impure and thus symbolically and symbolically and socially as "untouchable." But it is exactly this socio-symbolic "untouchability" that qualifies the *ganda baja* musicians for contact and communication with the divine sphere of the local goddesses. Here, the paradoxical character of the local and pan-Indian category of "untouchability" or "pollution"¹⁶ becomes

¹⁶ Modern South-Asian scholarship is divided about the complex subject of caste as culturally specific socio-religious ordering in South Asia system based on the principles of hierarchy as a value and on its

visible in the shape of a ritual inversion. In the ritual performance, the socially marginalised become spiritually powerful by communicating with the sacred powers of the goddesses. In Bora Sambar region, the ideological notion of being "untouchable" is, so to say, prerequisite for successful contact with the "untouchable"—the intangible, immaterial, prohibited sphere of the sacred. The power of performance of the goddess is thus transferred to the socially most powerless performers who, during the ritual performance, take in and transmit the divine powers of the goddesses. That the socially powerless have physical and spiritual power inverse to their social status is a widespread notion all over India. Thus, by their marginal status they are qualified for ritual specialisation and the handling of strong, uncontrolled, divine powers feared by others.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to present an indigenous theory of power visible in village music and *boil*—performances of the Bora Sambar region. During *boil* rituals, the symbolic and musical powers of the orchestral instruments, their sounds and rhythms, unite with the ritual strength of the socially marginalised musicians. Thus an indigenous theory of power takes shape, based on the empowering effects of music in a ritual context. The ritual effectiveness of music furthermore hints to an indigenous media theory where polyrhythmic music is socially and culturally considered as a crucial vehicle and message of the otherworldly.

The marginalised status of the musicians directing the *boil* performance plays a substantial role in the inner logic of the ritual. The polyrhythmic music of the village orchestra musicians is generally understood as an "untouchable," intangible sacred entity, expressing notions of the divine as a wild, uncontrolled power, manifesting itself in the

significant socio-cultural phenomenon of "untouchability" in term of social exclusion, deprivation and marginalisation of the social bottom. The "caste system" as an etic translation of a complex regional and local socio-cultural configuration is based on social differentiation, separation and division of labour, and is religiously justified by opposing social categories of socio-religious purity versus impurity, pollution (see Dumont 1981; Deshpande and Sundar 1998: 2157–2159; Gupta 2005: 409–427; Marriott 1976: 189–195; Moffatt 1979; Natrajan, 2005: 227–241; Parry 1986: 453–473; Quigley 2003: 495–508; Reddy 2005: 543–584; Raheja 1988).

¹⁷ Another example of the cultural idiom of social marginalisation and spiritual specialisation are the subaltern Sidhis in Gujarat (Basu 1994). Ritual ambivalence is also found in other regions and religions of South and South East Asia as for example among the Korean Shamans, where the shaman—*mudang, mansin*—is a stigmatised unfortunate who has a story of social suffering before becoming a legitimised shaman (Kendall 1988: 31–46; 1996: 21), or in Japanese Shinto rites, where *burakumin*, the Japanese untouchables perform the ritual butchering of animals and tanning of leather for drums used in the most sacred Shinto rites (Alldritt 2000).

rhythms of the instruments and in the dance of the possessed priest. The instruments mediate and manifest the other world of the goddesses, while the subaltern social status of the musicians, as we have seen, paradoxically qualifies them for communication with the divine world. But although it is the musician alone, who has the capacity to control the goddess, he remains socially marginalised even while interacting with her: in contrast to the ritual priest and trance medium, Ganda musicians are not allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the *dhunkel kutti* altar, where the goddess embodiment takes place.

The village music traditions of the Bora Sambar region reveal a particular symbiosis of local Adivasi traditions and hegemonic pan-Indian social structures and ideas. Local and pan-regional cultural ideas congeal and express themselves in the particular musical traditions and rituals of the region manifesting thus the locally specific configurations of values, beliefs and hierarchies: The village music of the Bora Sambar region transports and transmits as well as indigenous theories of sacred, social and ritual powers as local and pan-regional structures of social marginalisation.

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