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Of Metal and Cloths: The Location of Distinctive Features in Divine Iconography (Indian Himalayas)

DANIELA BERTI

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*Les nobles sont groupés autour du trône comme un ornement et disent à celui qui y prend place ce qu'il est.*¹

– E. Le Roy-Laduric, *L'Etat royal*, 1987

In most Hindu temples in contemporary India, the statue of the deity to which the cult is offered can be seen undressed, without any ornamentation, only when the deity is awakened in the morning to be washed, beautified by makeup, dressed, and embellished with jewellery and flowers. Such a preparation will sometimes be concealed from the devotees' sight by drawing the curtains of the sanctum, so that the deity may be "seen" only when completely ready – often almost invisible under cloths, jewellery, and colourful garlands. For instance, during the Rām Sītā cult in the royal temple of Sultanpur in Kullu (Himachal Pradesh), the statue of the goddess Sītā can be seen by devotees only during the morning worship, when the priest has to wash the image before dressing it; once the priest has finished her makeup she is completely wrapped up in her sari and covered by pearl necklaces (Figure 3.1). Her husband, the god Raghunāth, to whom the temple is dedicated, is also presented to devotees completely submerged under flowers. In fact, nearly every ritual image, even aniconic (such as the diagrams drawn by Brahmin priests at the time



Figure 3.1. The god Raghunāth and, on his left, the goddess Sītā, completely wrapped up in her sārī, seated on the throne after the daily cult (Kullu).

of fire oblations), is often completely hidden by cloths or flowers.

References to this peculiar way of honouring the deity and of presenting it to devotees are found in Sanskrit literature. According to texts on Hindu iconography, the beauty of an image depends on the choice of the material or on the respect for canonical proportions, and is a crucial element in fostering the deity's desire to enter a statue and inhabit it.² In addition, the care with which the image is prepared and made beautiful is a central phase of the daily worship, detailed in ancient texts as well as in modern manuals of rituals.³ At the end of the preparation of the deities, the customary act of making them look at themselves in a mirror also suggests that the deity must check and appreciate the work done by the priest. In cults performed in contemporary India, the idea of beauty appears to be especially related to the important Hindu notion of *darśan* (seeing), implying the auspiciousness of seeing the god's image and of being seen by it. As D.L. Eck wrote, Hindus go to the temple to see the image of the

deity “especially at those times of day when the image is most beautifully adorned with fresh flowers and when the curtain is drawn back so that the image is fully visible.”⁴ Gérard Colas, in his study of Vaiṣṇava temple images, both in texts and in /p.87/ contemporary Tamil Nadu practice, has pointed out that their beauty is one of the means “to seduce the devotee and to stimulate his devotion.”⁵ He notes also that the beauty of an image is in direct relation to its celebrity, which means also its power (*śakti*) – all notions that will be discussed in this chapter.

In spite of these considerations, whenever we deal with a given temple statue, even if the elements of its decoration seem to be essential to the worship, divine presence and power are mostly concentrated in the consecrated image itself. By contrast, in the case I would like to discuss here, the localization of the deity’s presence is much more ambiguous, and the representation of a deity cannot be said to be concentrated in a single figure, such as a statue or a symbolic object: it is composed of different elements assembled together. This is particularly the case of some mobile representations of village gods in the Kullu valley: they consist of wooden palanquins on which are affixed many metal faces (*mohrā*) figuring the concerned deity (and sometimes its attendants), and which are “decorated” with many other items – cloths, jewellery, “hair,” and so on.

The problem that this kind of representation poses to a study of ritual iconography is that, in this case, the divine presence does not seem to be concentrated in a unique object (for instance, the *mohrā*), but is delocalized and distributed throughout the various components – the wooden frame, the *mohrā*, as well as the other items with which the palanquin is prepared. This differs from palanquins and chariots elsewhere in India, in which a figure of the deity, concentrating in it all the divine power, is put on a mobile support. Here, by contrast, the deity’s power is present in the whole assemblage of the representation. The assemblage is the deity.

The palanquins we are going to consider are built according to a general standardized model over a large area. Such a structural standardization does not preclude the possibility that village people may immediately recognize a deity’s identity when looking at the

palanquin. We will therefore also have to examine how a deity is iconographically constructed so that it may be identified at first glance.

Village Gods' Iconography

The village gods and goddesses in the Kullu valley are called *devī-devtā*, literally, “goddess-god.” *Devī-devtā* is a large category of deities that have a temple in the village and are linked to a specific territory /p.88/ over which they exercise their influence. This area may cover one village as well as a group of villages.⁶ *Devī-devtā* have their cult organized in a characteristic way, relying on the intervention of various functionaries – priest, medium, administrator, musicians; besides the main temple image, fixed and immovable, there exist various mobile figurations including the one I will analyze, the palanquin.

Some local intellectuals have published booklets intended to create a repertoire of the *devī-devtā* for different districts.⁷ Each deity is depicted on a page organized on the model of an identity card, with a photo of the deity's palanquin on the top and various short factual statements on the side or below, under standardized headings: name of village or jurisdiction, names of temple functionaries, description of palanquin, and so on, and, under the heading “other information,” specific powers or competences (Figure 3.2). For example,⁸ Bālākāmeśvar is characterized as “god of rain, frees from diseases”; Dharaks “gives a son, takes out malevolent spirits (*bhūt*), takes the animal sacrifice during *Navarātrī* [“nine nights,” a festival]; people go to him on Monday, Friday and Sunday in order to ask questions to prevent their sufferings.”⁹ And so on.

Devī-devtā have three different ways to be present among villagers.

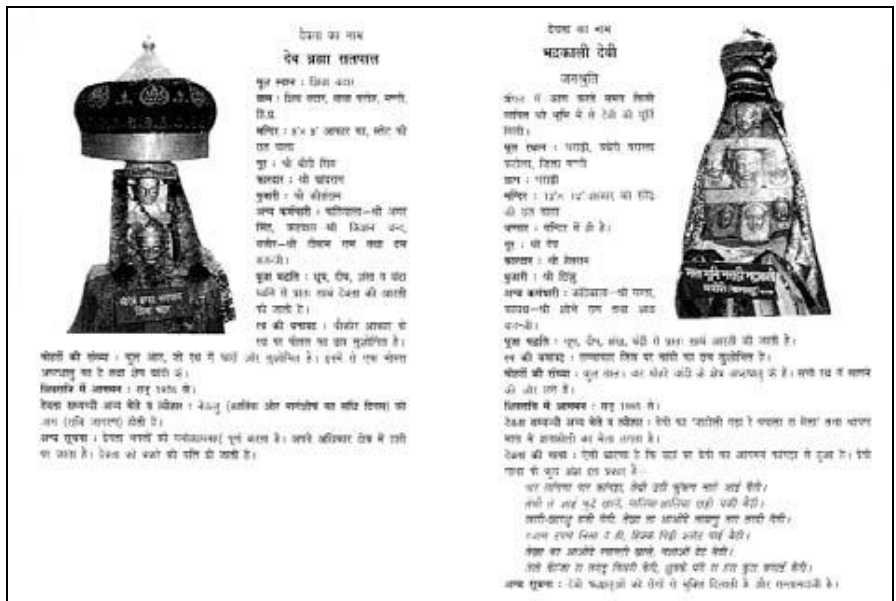


Figure 3.2. Some “identity cards” of village gods and goddesses published in the *Mandi dev milan*.

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Inside the temple, the deity is in the form of a *mūrti* (a statue, a stele, a metal face, or a *piṇḍā*).¹⁰ Although the *mūrti* can be one important element contributing to the fame of a temple, this representation is not the one that is closest to the villagers. In fact, in most temples villagers do not even have the right to go inside and have the *darśan* of the *mūrti* (the possibility to see – and to be seen by – the deity). Low-caste villagers do not enter the temple, and in many places women, even of high-caste status, will not enter the inner room where the *mūrti* is. Thus, apart from a small percentage of high-caste men, most villagers will never go in front of the *mūrti* and will never interact with it in a particular expression of devotion that privileges an individualistic and intimate interaction with the deity. Moreover, the *mūrti* is almost unknown to people who come from other villages. Outsiders will know the deity only through the medium and/or the palanquin that is taken out during village festivals.

Another way for a *devī-devtā* to be present among its devotees is to manifest itself in a medium, locally called *gur*. The *gur* is said to be the human receptacle of the deity through whom the deity communicates with the villagers. Séances are regularly held at the temple, where villagers ask the deity about their problems or about decisions that need to be taken at the village or individual level. The *gur* at the moment of possession, when he is the deity, can assume some iconic aspects. For instance, the *gur* of goddess Kālī may open his (“her”) mouth wide and pull out his (“her”) tongue, a clear sign of the divine incarnation: the spectators say, “This is Kālī!” or “Kālī has come!” and then perform some gestures of devotion. The kind of devotion this particular manifestation of the deity provokes is not exactly the same as the one shown during the *darśan* of the *mūrti*, however. This is due to the fact that the devotional attitude in front of the *gur* is mixed with the high expectations villagers have vis-à-vis the deity they consult: the gestures of devotion are associated here with a direct and lively dialogue, displaying contrasting and intense feelings that do not usually emerge in front of the statue. Besides, séances are public and often take the form of a general debate, people talking among themselves and at times addressing the deity.

A third way for village deities to be present is in the form of what is locally called *pālākī* (palanquin) or *rath* (literally “chariot,” but it is a palanquin). This is a wooden frame, with four legs for placing it on the ground and two long poles for carrying it on the shoulders. The frame supports metal faces, called *mohrā*, and various “decorative items” /p.90/ such as umbrellas, sceptres, brocaded silk and cotton cloths, jewellery, flowers, yak hairs, garlands, sometimes “ritual money,” and other “ornaments.” The words *pālākī* and *rath* refer not only to the frame but to the whole assemblage.

I will first analyze what I will call the “ritual identity” of such palanquins, an identity based on the way in which the various components of the representation – particularly the frame and the *mohrā* – are made and consecrated. I will then turn to what might be termed its “social identity,” which has to do with the choice and disposition of the various components that build up a distinctive visual individuality for each of the hundreds of *devī-devtā* of the region.

The Wooden Body of the Deity

The wooden frame is not just a support. It is, in itself, a receptacle of the particular power of the deity for which it has been constructed. The decision to build a *rath*, or to replace an old one, is not a decision that villagers take without consulting the deity itself through its medium, the *gur*; alternatively, the deity might express directly during a séance the wish to have a new *rath*. In both cases, the deity will be also consulted in order to decide all the procedure's details.¹¹

I will describe briefly the procedures of construction in order to show how, by the very fact that these procedures are said to be established and controlled by the deity itself, the divine power is already installed at this stage in the wooden frame, even before a subsequent Brahminic ritual of installation (*pratiṣṭhā*), commonly used in India to install divine power in images,¹² takes place.

The god or the goddess, through the *gur*, first has to indicate from where the wood has to be selected. He/she will then name the woodcutters and the person who will be the first to touch the trunk to be cut with his axe, name the carpenters who will work afterwards, indicate how many animals need to be sacrificed, fix the day on which the work has to start, decide the various timings of the operations, and so on.¹³

At the end of the consultation, the men selected to do the work will receive consecrated herbs from the temple and will be blessed by the *gur* with the deity's bell upon their shoulders. On a chosen day, the *gur* will incarnate the deity and, blindfolded with a bandage on his eyes, will run and touch a tree, showing it to be the selected one. The woodcutters, after purifying themselves with a bath in holy water, /p.91/ wearing a silk turban on their heads, will then proceed to cut the trunk. The pieces of wood will be tied and transported down to the temple for the second part of the work (Figure 3.3). The work in the temple may last many days, during which those working are not allowed to go back home; they will spend the night in the temple precincts and will eat only once a day, when the day's work

is over. During this entire period, any problem that might occur needs to be interpreted by the deity during specific consultations. Once the wood has been prepared, it will be buried in the earth somewhere near the temple, and will remain there for at least six months in order to become more “resistant.” When this period is over and the wood is eventually taken out, it has to be purified with cow dung and put inside the temple to await the final work.

The procedures followed for the construction of the frame are necessary to ensure a crucial characteristic of the *rath*: its capacity to be



Figure 3.3. The carpenters are preparing the wood for the palanquin in the presence of neighbouring *rath*-deities and deities’ musicians (Dungri).

animated. In particular, the wood chosen for the construction should be a specific wood, considered to be filled with the presence of *jognī*, powerful goddesses dwelling inside the trees.¹⁴ The importance of the /p.92/ *jognī* in animating the *rath* has been stressed by H. Diserens: “Hiḍimbā Devi’s devotees asked the *jognī* to give the new *rath* the power needed so that the deity may use it. The villagers’ anxiety of seeing the *rath* remaining inanimate or, on the contrary, running out of control due to a surcharge in energy, was real.”¹⁵

As soon as the tree is selected, the *jognī* living there have to be pacified for all the subsequent procedures of cutting and so on. When the palanquin construction is completed, the *jognīs*' power will be transformed into the specific deity's power. *Jognī* are supposed, in fact, to act as mediators between the greatest gods (like Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durga) and the village *devī-devtā*. They represent an indeterminate power (*śakti*) that, once transmitted to the *devī-devtā* of the different temples, will become personalized. This was explained to me by a priest in the following words:

The palanquin is like a *mūrti* because it is made in a special wood. This wood comes from the trees belonging to *jognī*, so that the *jognī*'s power becomes the power of a particular god. For instance, if we make the *rath* for [goddess] Śravaṇī, the *jognī* become Śravaṇī or whatever other god. Nevertheless, the power is given by the *jognī*, which receive it from the great gods and give it to the local *devī-devtā*.

The way in which a palanquin has been constructed is sometimes an argument for proving a special link between two different local deities, and consequently between two villages. For instance, the goddess Śravaṇī of Shuru village, through her medium, once asked for a new palanquin whose wood had to be taken from the same forest used for making the palanquin of her brother, Śandal Ṛṣi, of a nearby village. The two deities were already considered to be in a close relationship. According to a myth, Śravaṇī first stepped Śandal Ṛṣi's village before going to her actual village. For her new palanquin, the goddess also specified that it had to be made along with her brother's, during the same ritual and by the same people. Since the two deities now have their palanquins coming from the same forest, the relations between the two villages have become closer. If a dispute between them arises, the *gur* of the two deities immediately state angrily: "You can't separate us! We are brother and sister! We come out from the same tree!" alluding to the common origin of their palanquin wood. A *rath*'s ritual identity starts, therefore, at the moment of its construction, independently of later /p.93/ practices of consecration. This is confirmed by the fact

that even before the palanquin is fully decorated, when the frame is still empty, people will touch it with a sign of devotion and might make little offerings; incense is also burned in front of it¹⁶ (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4 The wooden frame of goddess Hiḍimbā's palanquin before "decoration" (Dungri).

When the frame has been made, it is ready to be prepared whenever the occasion arises to bring out the deity. This preparation is called *sajṇā*, which in Hindi means not only "to be adorned, embellished, beautified" but also "to be arranged" and "to be equipped." Outside of these occasions, the wooden frame is kept in the temple. It has an ambiguous status. It is not considered to be really a *mūrti*, since it has received no worship (even if it is kept just near the statue that the priest worships every day). Nevertheless, when it has to be decorated, it will be taken out of the temple with musical honours, to the sound of the drums. Once fully assembled, the *rath* will be considered to be a real *mūrti* and will receive a cult by a *pujārī* with the deity's bell and censer. After the worship, the palanquin will be carried by devotees on their shoulders so that it may manifest, by its movements, the deity's /p.94/ will: fully

decorated, the *rath* is not only an object of worship but also a means by which the deity will engage in a direct communication with its devotees, just as the deity's medium does.

The Multiple Faces of the Deity

On the frame of the palanquin is fixed a variable number of metal faces (*mohrā*, *mukh*). These faces can be of silver, bronze, or sometimes of an alloy of eight metals¹⁷ commonly used for making ritual objects (Figure 3.5). All the local deities that have a *rath* have many *mohrā* to fix on it.¹⁸ Some may be quite old. For instance, goddess Hiḍimbā, said to be “the founder” of the royal family, has a few *mohrā* that were donated by a king of the fifteenth century.¹⁹ New *mohrā* are regularly made, sometimes in order to add to the faces displayed on the palanquin, more often in order to renew those that have become old. A quite common practice in the region, at least today, is to melt down old *mohrā* to make new ones, although this is usually frowned upon. A goldsmith told me, for instance, that his uncle agreed to the demand of a temple administrator to melt down some *mohrā*, but died in the course of the same year, as did the administrator. This was interpreted by him as being caused by the anger of the temple deity for having melted down its old images.

In the construction of a new *rath*, the decision to make a new *mohrā* is either made by the deity itself through the medium or at least with the deity's consent. The deity will also decide the details of the procedure. In the past, each deity had its own traditional goldsmiths. They cultivated the land of the deity and in exchange had to fabricate and repair the deity's metal items. Nowadays, many goldsmiths have left their traditional occupation, and those who still pursue it are employed by different temples. Nevertheless,

Figure 3.5. Installation of *mohrā* in the goddess Hiḍimbā's palanquin (Dungri).



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the link of a deity with a particular goldsmith's family still exists. Many stories tell how during the fabrication or the repair of some deity's *mohrā*, the metals did not melt properly – an incident explained by the fact that the goldsmiths were not the deity's personal goldsmiths.

The procedure of fabrication of a *mohrā* is in itself a ritual. The goldsmiths and the main temple functionaries (*pujārī*, administrator, medium) have to sleep in the temple and can eat only once a day. Important phases are punctuated by temple drummers. Once the *mohrā* is finished, the deity is asked if it is satisfied. The *mohrā* is then brought to a place famous for its holy water. The Brahmin priest purifies the *mohrā* and performs the ceremony of *jīv denā*, "to give life" (or *prāṇ pratiṣṭhā*, "installation of breath") by anointing it with sacred substances and reciting mantras. At the end, the deity is asked again if the procedures have been done correctly. During the *jīv denā*, the name of the *mohrā*'s deity is invoked. The whole process, starting from the deity's demand for a new *mohrā* and ending with its acceptance of the *mohrā*, gives the *mohrā* its individuality. Even when the *mohrā* has not been requested by the

deity but has been offered by someone, only the final acceptance²⁰ will identify the *mohrā* as belonging to the deity.

The identity of a *mohrā* can be sometimes “discovered” a *posteriori*; in such a case, the *mohrā* is said to be a deity’s self-revelation. Stories associated with self-manifested *mohrā*²¹ are widespread all over the region. Usually the tale is that a cow, or a villager, or a palanquin “found” the *mohrā* buried in the earth. Immediately, someone started to tremble and to speak on behalf of the deity: “I am such and such deity! I want you to build a temple for me! I want to be honoured in such and such a way!”

The “discovery” of a *mohrā* can add new powers to the deity’s previous ones. For example, in Larakelo village the deity is Śiva. Among the many *mohrā* of his palanquin, people say that there is a special one, recently found, which has given the god the power to bring rain. In addition, another little *mohrā* was added some years ago, allowing the god now to perform more and more exorcisms. Until recently, Śiva Mahadeo was a pacific form of the deity and was not asked to expel malevolent spirits (*bhūt*). A few years ago, however, a *pujārī* found a *mohrā* and asked the temple administrator to put it on the palanquin. The medium started to tremble and said that the *mohrā* should be put on the palanquin whenever an exorcism was needed. Since that time, this *rath* has become famous locally for practising /p.96/ exorcisms. Such a practice has also increased the number of animal sacrifices performed, occasionally transforming Śiva from a peaceful into a violent deity.

A deity might commonly have on its palanquin along with its own *mohrā* one or two *mohrā* belonging to other deities. Gāyitrī devī of Jagatsukh village, for instance, has among her *mohrā* one of Dhvāṅgro Ṛṣi and one of goddess Kālī. Both are considered to be the recipients of the sacrifices people used to offer in front of the *rath*. For this occasion, the *mohrā* of the “pure” and vegetarian goddess Gāyitrī are covered by a cloth, marking her non-participation in the sacrifices.²² Similarly, in the palanquin of the meat-eating goddess Hiḍimbā, there is a little *mohrā* of Manu Ṛṣi, a deity considered to be particularly pure; devotees frequently offer sacrifices to the goddess, and in this case it is Manu Ṛṣi’s *mohrā* that is covered by a small piece of cloth.

Assembling the God

When the palanquin is not in active use, it is dismantled. The wooden structure is usually kept inside the temple. The metal faces, the jewellery, the cloths, and various “decorative” items are all kept in closed baskets, inside a locked treasure-house (Figure 3.6). For some deities, the warden performs an abbreviated rite of homage in front of the closed door every day, otherwise there is no direct worship. *Mohrā* are very rarely put in a shrine as *mūrti*. Their normal use is only to be



Figure 3.6. Baskets where the decoration is kept when the palanquin is not assembled.

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carried on the palanquin, in which they are elements – indeed, crucial ones – in a composite ritual representation. They receive worship only as parts of this assemblage, when all the pieces are put together. The deity then *exists* as a *rath* only when the wooden structure is completely adorned.

When the occasion comes to take the palanquin out of the temple, people ask the deity, through its medium, if this is its wish, and when to prepare the palanquin. On the day that has been fixed, people gather in front of the temple. All the necessary items are brought from the treasure-house in their baskets. In the *Gāyitrī*

temple at Jagatsukh village, a special man (*dod*) has the hereditary right to be the first to touch the baskets and to bring them to the temple. The wooden frame is taken out of the temple with a few beats of the drums. Assembling the components of the *rath* is done with extreme attention to all the details. If something is wrong, the deity will show its disagreement at the next consultation. To prepare the *rath* as well as to assist at the process is seen as an act of devotion. The assembling results in a gradual augmentation of the deity's presence and power. At the beginning of the process, the deity receives just a little incense in front of its wooden structure. As the assembling goes on, the deity's censer and bell will also be presented. Some elements in the assemblage are more marked by divine presence than others, as shown by the fact that they need to be installed on the wooden structure with a special rhythm of one of the deity's many drums, the *dhaunsī*.²³ These crucial parts of the deity are not only some special *mohrā* but also some jewellery or items of clothing. The end of the whole procedure is said to be the "accomplishment of the *devtā* in its full *śakti*." Only when the *rath* has been completed is it taken on the shoulders by the villagers (Figure 3.7). The bell is now rung and the censer waved with circular



Figure 3.7. The goddess Hidimbā's palanquin after it has been completed (Dungri).

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gestures by the priest. All the drums are played loudly and in a different, specific rhythm.

By directing the movements of its bearers, so it is said, the deity expresses its feelings and will. The movements of the palanquin are codes interpreted by devotees. If the *rath* is rolling on its sides, for instance, the deity manifests its happiness; running here and there can be seen as a sign of wrath. The *rath*'s movements can also be a reply to specific questions put by the villagers. Thus, through his *rath* (as well as his *gur*), the *devtā* is a social participant in the villagers' affairs; he is someone who lives there and with whom villagers regularly communicate and interact.²⁴

The *rath*-gods look and behave like individuals, each with its own specific personality. Villagers show them respect, but can also treat them as though they were children unable to control their passions and feelings. It is usual to see temple functionaries trying to calm down a deity whose palanquin's movements appear to them too wild. They touch the *rath* in an affectionate way, saying to stay calm and to "sit down" (the frame is put on the ground on its four legs) in its assigned place. Such a language of emotion also characterizes the relations between the different *rath*-gods, who regularly display their feelings towards each other. For instance, when Gatotkach's *rath* is meeting his mother's *rath*, he shows his excitement by jumping and by making circles around her, covering her with "gestures" of tenderness, lowering one side so as to touch her *rath*, demonstrating his desire not to leave her. Similarly, as Takṣak Nāg's *rath* was once leaving the *rath* of his sister, Gāyitrī Devī, whom he was to see again the next day at another festival, he suddenly made a U-turn and showed his decision to sit with his sister all night long and to go along with her to the festival the following morning.

The "*Rath*-Deities" as Social Actors

The most important occasions for preparing the god's *rath* are the various village festivals, when the deity has to be brought somewhere to meet other gods or when it has to receive

neighbouring gods as guests in his/her own village. This also is an opportunity to display the relationship that exists between different villages. Once, the *rath* of Phal Nāg of Prini village had to be decorated to go to the festival of Banara village, where the temple of his brother, Takṣak Nāg, is situated. People of both villages, who had been engaged in a dispute /p.99/ for a whole year, were avoiding each other, however. Every effort to reach a compromise had proved fruitless. Following established usage, the administrator of Phal Nāg temple nevertheless gave the order to prepare the god's *rath*, to bring it to the Banara festival. As soon as the men put the *rath* on their shoulders, the "god made a sudden and violent movement and turned back," so they said, "and faced again the treasury-house." The god was refusing to go to the festival. Banara villagers accused the villagers of Prini of having forced the *rath*'s movements (and the god's will), while the temple administrator exonerated the villagers of Prini, citing the wish clearly expressed by their god. Such moments of tension are occasions for contrasted local interpretations of a *rath*'s movements. As a *devtā* once put it through his medium, in a similar dispute about the movements made by a *rath*, "We came as *devtā* and you are treating us as if we were mere wooden puppets."

Having a *rath* provides the villagers a way to assert the existence and power of their own sovereign deity. This in turn provides an incentive for them to try to acquire more importance for their deity in the local pantheon. The process is well in evidence in the case of so called "new deities." At the origin of such new cults is usually the "discovery" of a *mohrā* and the subsequent possession of a medium: the deity declares his/her name and asks for regular worship in a temple. The consequences of such discoveries vary from case to case. The cult may remain private or it may become the cult of a local group, a caste, or a subcaste. It can even assume a larger dimension. This is what happened to the goddess Cāmundā, an instance of a "new deity." Her *mohrā* was "found" some years ago by a low-caste man in a village. The man built himself a shrine where he used to sit the whole day worshipping her, reading and reciting hymns and receiving people who wanted to ask the goddess personal questions. The shrine started to attract many devotees, increasing the goddess's popularity. After some years, the goddess

was able to get the complete equipment of the traditional village deities, including a palanquin with many *mohrā* and a personal group of musicians. Cāmundā started to participate in village festivals and now participates in the big royal festival for the whole district, the Daśerā, where all the *devī-devtā* of the region are invited and gather (175 came in October 2000), a mark of her progressive recognition.

At this annual festival, many disputes arise concerning rights of precedence, that is, to determine which deities have the right to be /p.100/ placed in the most important positions in the ritual scene. For instance, one of the most disputed positions every year is the right to walk on the right side of the royal deity, Raghunāth, during his chariot procession. Many other positions provide occasions for disputes among villagers. In the context of such rivalries, it is essential that the deities be marked and immediately recognizable, even from afar.

The Visibility of the Gods

We have seen that the procedure of construction as well as the Brahminic rituals confer on the palanquin a specific divine identity. It remains to be seen, however, how the various elements assembled in the palanquin work together to give to the “deity-*rath*” what we can call its social identity. This is what allows a deity to be recognized in a public context, to be differentiated from the many other gods or goddesses of the neighbouring villages, and to gain what people call the deity’s “renown.”

The shape of the frame is the first element of visual identification. During big festivals such as Daśerā, in which the *rath* of a great number of *devī-devtā* from different parts of the district gather, the overall shape is the first and most obvious element for recognizing the geographical origin of the deity: four-sided *rath* come from Sutelj region, one-sided *rath* belong to the Beas region (Figure 3.7). Although



Figure 3.8. On the right, a god in his basket (*karḍū*) carried by a man on his head (Kullu Daścrā).

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the frame is completely hidden under the many cloths and other things that are put over it, you can immediately make out its shape simply by the way the different items are disposed on it. A first sign of distinction is provided by the length of the poles enabling the structure to be carried on the bearers' shoulders – in palanquins coming from the Sutlej region, they are much longer and more flexible than in those coming from Beas. Another typical shape is what is called *karḍū* ("basket"), which, according to people, existed before the actual *rath*: *karḍū* have no poles and are carried on the head of a single man (Figure 3.8).

One would think that *mohrā* would constitute an easy way of identifying the corresponding deity. This is not the case, for many reasons. Old *mohrā* are sometimes iconographically well individualized, but they probably depicted the donor, generally a king,²⁵ and were thus never intended to be the "portrait" of the deity. *Mohrā* that are produced nowadays are, on the contrary, quite stereotyped. Nevertheless, villagers claim that *mohrā*, especially the oldest ones, represent specific traits of each particular deity. It is

claimed, for instance, that goddesses are without moustaches, and gods with moustaches. But even such a broad categorization does not work well, and the presence of a moustache is not a significant mark distinguishing gods and goddesses. Indeed, a goddess may have a



Figure 3.9. Three different *mohrā* in a *rath*, for a single deity (from M. Postel, A. Neven, and K. Mandodi, *Antiquities of Himachal* [Bombay: Franco-Indian Pharmaceutical Private Ltd., 1985]).

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moustache (Hiḍimbā, Figure 3.5), while a god may be without. Confronted with the fact that *mohrā* of the goddess Hiḍimbā had quite long moustaches, her *pujārī* improvised an ad hoc reply: I had just to look around and see for myself how many local women themselves have moustaches! Another explanation given was that the *devī* was showing herself in a violent form.

In fact, *mohrā* belonging to a single deity might differ from each other (Figure 3.9), although there will exist groups of two or three similar *mohrā*. Their features can be quite diverse and, in the same *rath*, there might be more resemblance between *mohrā* of two different deities than between those of the same one. Take, for instance, Gośāl Nāg's *rath*. This palanquin contains three different gods, each represented by three *mohrā*: Beas Ṛṣi at the top, Gautam

Ṛṣi in the middle, and Gośāl Nāg at the bottom. Two *mohrā* of Gośāl Nāg are alike, but the third looks more like one of the *mohrā* belonging to Gautam Ṛṣi; one *mohrā* of this god is similar to those of Beas (Figure 3.10)

Moreover, unlike to the shape of the frame, *mohrā* are not visible from afar. Even close up, they are difficult to sight as they are almost entirely covered by cloths and flowers. This suggests that the visual identification of the god or goddess by focusing on the traits of the *mohrā* pertains more to the level of discourse than to any real usage of the deity's metal faces. In fact, as Diserens points out, a *mohrā* never

Figure 3.10.
Palanquin of three
deities. At the top is
Beas Ṛṣi, in the
middle is Gautam
Ṛṣi, and at the
bottom is Gośāl
Nāg (Gośāl village;
photo by Hélène
Diserens, 1979).



“illustrates” the deity: it “materializes it only if it [the deity] declares that it has become “incorporated” [in the *mohrā*] and if it animates it with its presence.”²⁶

How, then, can villagers make out the difference between various *rath*? How can they immediately recognize a deity among many others? The priest of Hiḍimbā had this answer:

The difference is made, for instance, by decorating (*sajnā*) a palanquin with cloths; for some god the cloths hang down, some [other] people turn them in a twisted way. Some people tie the cloths of *devtā* [with a free end] covering [the knot], some put peacock’s feathers in the palanquin. Hiḍimbā is the only one to have all the cloths on the back tied to a single [bowlike] cloth. Moreover, by the form of the palanquin you can make out where the *devtā* is coming from: in Parol they have one-sided *rath*; in Saraj [*mohrā* are put] all around; in Rupi they have both. In Parol, the umbrella is only for *rath* of goddesses, gods have the *kalgi* [headband or diadem]. In Saraj, goddesses and gods can both have the umbrella, but gods have also hair, which goddesses do not have.

The way to distinguish a *rath* depends, then, not so much on the identification of the metal faces of the deity but rather on everything that the villagers call “decorations” (*saj*, *alamkāra*): cloths, jewellery, umbrellas, hair, flowers, and so on that are put on the palanquin and assume therefore the role of a code enabling the onlookers to identify immediately each and every deity.

Observation shows, for instance, first a distinction between gods and goddesses, located differently on the *rath* depending on its provenance. If the *rath* comes from the upper side of the Kullu valley, the difference will be in some of the silver items: goddesses have silver umbrellas fixed at the front and at the top of the palanquin, supported by silver cones (Figure 3.7); in this part of the valley, a god never has umbrellas but possesses instead silver

sceptres and, at the top, a band of silver or of silk, sometimes adorned with jewellery or with a peacock's feather (Figure 3.10). In palanquins coming from the lower part of the valley, the "gender code" is different but also relies on "decoration": both gods and goddesses have umbrellas, but goddesses wear a large silk cloth that entirely covers their back, whereas gods do not have this cloth.

Apart from this general gender categorization, other elements in the decoration are indicative of more individual or personal identities. Not all the deities have a strong visual characterization, however; in some **/p.104/** cases, only people belonging to a restricted area will be able to identify their own deities. In other words, the degree of "visibility" of a god or a goddess is not the same in all cases.

To anyone leafing through the books of repertoires of *devī-devtā* that have been published in the region, differences between palanquins of the same type are obvious. An important element in the characterization of different goddesses is the way the cloths are tied. In the upper valley, some *rath* of goddesses have a cloth that covers them partly and which is tied with a silver belt, whereas in others this cloth falls more freely on the sides or hangs completely on the back (Figure 3.11). The way flowers are arranged can be also specific. For some gods, a distinctive sign will be the way to arrange the hair: one will have long hair hanging down the back, another will have short hair all around the umbrella; some will have a headband, and so on (Figure 3.12). A god like Śiva Mahadeo is immediately recognizable by his specific pink diadem-like top supporting jewellery (Figure 3.13).

Such extreme variations in the decoration are apt to reveal the villagers' desire to make their own god stand out, while conforming to a few iconographical models.²⁷ This desire for ostentation at festivals was also noticed by Diack in his description of the Daśerā festival at the time of the British Empire: "The followers of each particular idol do their best to show to advantage, and every banner, trumpet and drum that is available is put into requisition."²⁸



Figure 3.11. Goddesses of the low valley, easily distinguishable from upper valley's deities with their cloths that fall freely on the sides (Kullu Daśerā).

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Figure 3.12. Gods with hairs hanging down the back (Kullu Daśerā).



Figure 3.13. Śiva Māhādeo, recognizable by his pink diadem-like top (Kullu Daśerā).

Conclusion

In contrast to a temple icon, which is the single support into which the ritual installs the deity's power, the god's presence in the *rath* seems more fragmented, distributed in different elements that have to be assembled every time the deity has to be taken out in the form of the palanquin. Some parts can be "surcharged" by a ritual process of consecration, but none has an autonomous existence as a separate object of worship. This applies even in the case of the frame and of the *mohrā*, whose procedures of fabrication and of consecration are the closest to those followed for temple icons. By contrast, as soon as the *rath* is adorned, all its parts are considered to complete each other and to contribute to the display of the deity's physical and "social" existence among the villagers. This is not without ambiguity, as /p.106/ is shown by the declarations of some villagers: in their deity's palanquin, only some *mohrā* are said to be really "true" and powerful, whereas others, newer, are just put on "for the show" or "for their own sake." This suggests that there is a hierarchy in the assemblage, and that some parts might be thought to be less

essential than others in the total composition. They are “decorative” in the sense of just being “embellishments.” What is striking is that this status of being merely “decorative” is applied to what, following a Western way of thinking, might easily have been thought to be central to the deity’s identity, its faces.

On the other hand, “decorations” that appear to be there only to make the deity more beautiful assume, in fact, a decisive part in the elaboration of the *rath*’s total power. It should be noticed in this respect that they are subjected to the same ritual treatments applied to the frame and the metal faces. Together with the *mohrā* they receive a daily homage at the treasure-house. Repairing or renewing the silver jewellery has to be done inside the courtyard of the temple, with the continuous presence of the temple functionaries, who fast during the day and regularly ask the deity for instructions. Each decorative item also receives the ritual mark of auspiciousness (*tīkā*) separately. Even the cloths of the god-palanquin need to be consecrated and accepted by the deity before they can be “worn.”

The *rath* appears therefore as an integrated whole in which the “decoration” is ritually constitutive of the deity’s identity and power.²⁹ This is underlined by a codified sentence that mediums say during séances whenever there is a need to emphasize the close relationship existing between two village deities (as in the case of Śāṇḍal Ṛṣi and Śravaṇī). The alliteration makes the declaration even more impressive:

ek dhup ek tapot ek pedu ek pālkī! [one incense, one censer, one decoration, one palanquin] We are one!

Thus, the meaning of “decoration” that emerges here seems to differ from the one we usually have in mind in English. After the pioneering work of A.K. Coomaraswamy in 1939,³⁰ the Western notion of ornamentation has been recently discussed in the field of figurative arts by J.-C. Bonne,³¹ a historian of Western medieval art, who pointed out the fact that the meaning and function of this notion have changed in the course of history. Taking as a starting point a modern definition from a dictionary of Arts and “Arts décos,” where ornamentation is /p.107/ “the accessory part of a composition which

could be taken out without affecting the principal subject,” the author showed how this definition did not fit the medieval functions of ornamentation, which were not only decorative but could appear “on the forefront, and even become the composition itself.”³² In a similar vein, O. Grabar reflected on the functions of ornamentation in Arabic iconography: “Decoration seems to complete an object, a wall or a person, by providing it with quality ... [and all the terms for decoration] imply effective completion and even transfer of meanings from one form to the other.”³³ The author compared the Arabic notion of decoration with the Sanskrit notion of *bhūṣati* (to adorn): “It too implies the successful completion of an act, of an object, or even of a state of mind or soul.” As he put it: “Something is clearly wrong with ... nearly all definitions of ornament found in manuals of art, as they simultaneously imply the secondary side of ornament and, almost as a result of that, its singular and exclusive attribute of beauty.”³⁴

The verb *sajnā* (to decorate) is used locally to indicate the process of preparing the *rath*. Being the very act that brings the god into existence, it definitely points to something more than the completion of the image, a conclusion that is in line with what was suggested by Bonne in the case of Western medieval art. This may not be limited to palanquins. Consider an important god in the royal pantheon of the former Kullu kingdom: Narsīngh, said to be the real owner of all the royal symbols. Even the throne of the god Raghunāth, to which the kingdom has been dedicated since the seventeenth century, belongs to Narsīngh. The representation of Narsīngh is peculiar. At the time of Raghunāth’s worship, the royal priest takes out a specific symbol, a *śālagrāma* (small ammonite fossil considered to be a symbol of the god Viṣṇu’s discus) from its container, and starts to “decorate” it. Using a special paintbrush, he draws on the surface of the *śālagrāma* a mouth, teeth, a moustache, and a nose. He adds readymade “eyes” and a crown, taken from another container. He then paints a little diagram on a small golden leaf, which becomes Narsīngh’s tongue. He ends the operation by putting a flower on the crown. The god now has a “figurative” face, ready to receive offerings and respect from his devotees (Figure 3.14). True, the *śālagrāma* is by itself powerful, but it is the so-called decoration that

precisely enables the god to exist in full form. Then, when the worship of Raghunāth is about to end, the priest removes the crown, the eyes, and the tongue of Narsīngh, puts them back in their container, washes the “makeup” from the *śālagrāma*, and

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Figure 3.14. The god Narsīngh in his form of undecorated *śālagrāma* (Kullu).

returns it to its own container until the next time.

Like Narsīngh, *rath*-gods may be said to exist only through the whole operation of “decoration,” at the time they meet each other and participate in the village social life.

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End Notes

- 1 “Nobles are grouped round the throne like an ornament and tell the one who takes his place thereupon just who he is.”
- 2 Gérard Colas, *Viṣṇu: Ses images et ses feux. Les métamorphoses du dieu chez le vaiṣṇānasa* (Paris: EFEO, 1996), 30; Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985), 51.
- 3 N.R. Bhatt, “Development of Temple Rituals in India,” in *Siva Temple and Temple Rituals*, ed. S.S. Janaki (Madras: Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute, 1988), 36 ; Colas, *Viṣṇu*, 295-96; Carl Gustav Diehl, *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India* (Lund, Sweden: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1956), 107-8; Jakie Assayag, *La colère de la déesse décapitée: Traditions, cultes et pouvoir dans le sud de l’Inde* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1992), 394-95; Christopher J. Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple* (1984; new ed., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 172-73; Paul B. Courtright, “On This Holy Day in My Humble Way: Aspects of Puja,” in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, ed. Joanne Punzo Waghorne and Norman Cutler (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1985), 48.
- 4 Eck, *Darśan*, 3. 5 G. Colas, “Le dévot, le prêtre et l’image vishnouite en Inde méridionale,” in *L’image divine: Culte et méditation dans l’hindouisme*, ed. A. Padoux (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1990), 110. This accords with what has been pointed out by Gell in his study of European and “ethnographic” art: “it is only in a very parochial (blinker) Western, post-Enlightenment point of view that the separation between the beautiful and the holy, between religious experience and aesthetic experience, arises.” Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 97.
- 6 The territorial criteria distinguishes the group of *devī-devtā* from other forms of gods honoured by villagers – for example, from the gods invoked by *purohit* during the rituals they perform for high-caste people, or from the gods invoked during exorcistic rituals.
- 7 See, for Mandi district, S. Vashist, *Mandi dev milan* (Shimla: Himachal kala sanskriti bhasha akadmi, 1997), and for Kullu district, S. Vashist, *Kullu: dev samagam* (Shimla: Himachal kala sanskriti bhasha akadmi, 1995).
- 8 Vashist, *Mandi dev milan*, 71.

- 9 Ibid., 64.
- 10 The word *piṇḍā* (lit. “ball”) refers usually in a ritual context to the little ball made of rice or flour that is offered to the manes. In the present context, the word indicates locally any aniconic representation of the deity

- 11 That the construction must follow ritual rules (dictated here by the deity itself) is also attested in ancient texts. The Vaikhānasa Āgama include a chapter on the ritual collection of the wood necessary for the construction of a temple and other ritual purposes: T. Goudrian, "Deities of the Tree-Cutting Ceremony in Vaikhānasa Āgama," *Brahmavidhyā: The Adyar Library Bulletin* 37 (1973): 75-86.
- 12 By contrast, compare Gérard Colas's description of the installation of power in the statue according to the Vaikhānasa vishnuite tradition: "The temple's image is the receptacle not only of the [divine] presence but also of the divine power. The installation of the divine power (*śakti*) in the image ... is done during the ritual called the "installation" (*pratiṣṭhā*) of the image": "L'instauration de la puissance divine dans l'image du temple en Inde du sud," in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 206 (1989): 134.
- 13 A *purohit* might be called upon too, in order to select three auspicious days from his astrological almanac, from which the deity, through the *gur*, will choose one.
- 14 H. Diserens, "Les *yogini* de la haute vallée du Kulu (Himachal Pradesh)," *Bulletin d'études indiennes* 9 (1991): 70.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 16 H. Diserens suggests that the *rath* is the very essence of the deity even when "unadorned" (Diserens, "Les *yogini*," 69).
- 17 Gold, silver, iron, tin, lead, mercury, copper, and zinc.
- 18 *Mohrā* are said to have been previously transported in baskets called *kardū*. Local people often ascribe to the seventeenth century the replacement of *kardū* by palanquins, at the time when King Jagat Singh introduced the Dashera festival. During this festival, all the village *devī-devtā* had to come to the king's capital to pay their homage to the king and to the royal divinity. Nowadays, almost all the *devī-devtā* have palanquins, and only a very few are figured by a *kardū*. Contrary to palanquins, carried by at least two men, the *kardū* is held on the head of a single man. See also Hélène Diserens, "Images et symboles des déesses de la haute vallée de Kullu," *Bulletin d'études indiennes* 13-14 (1995-96), 101.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 20 There are various means for ascertaining the deity's acceptance (*ibid.*, 104). Apart from the *mohrā* donated in the past by ancient rajas and /p.111/ proving in devotees' eyes the importance and ancient existence of their *devtā*, *mohrā* donated today can be bought from the market and offered to the *devtā* as a token of gratitude for a desire that has been fulfilled. This kind of *mohrā* does not usually need a consecration by a *purohit*, but only the deity's approbation. *Mohrā* of this kind are not considered as important as the old ones or as those made by traditional goldsmiths. For these *mohrā*, people say that they are just like "decoration," a way to show off. Before the acceptance by the deity to whom the *mohrā* is donated, *mohrā* bought from the market are likely to be used for any *devtā* as they are not marked by specific identification signs. A *mohrā* seller, asked who was the deity represented by a *mohrā*, replied, "Whomever you want."

- 21 Similar beliefs in the concretization of the deity in an image are widespread all over India. Ritual texts deal with the distinction between this kind of image and manmade ones (Colas, “L’instauration de la puissance divine”; Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, “Image animée, image vivante: L’image du culte hindou,” in *L’image divine: Culte et méditation dans l’Hindouisme*, ed. André Padoux [Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1990]). The discovery of a representation of a deity, even if not necessarily interpreted as a self-manifestation, is never without consequences at the cult level. In the town of Makarsa (Kullu District), a previous royal capital with many archeological temple ruins, the inhabitants recommend that visitors not accidentally turn over ancient stones with their feet while walking, lest they reveal divine representations, even fragments, because that would force them to build new temples (H. Diserens, pers. comm.)!
- 22 Usually the *mohrā* of other deities in a *rath* are smaller than those of the main deity. The deities they represent are seen in this context as assistants. They can, however, also be the main deities in another village, and therefore have their own *rath*.
- 23 The *doms* is the most important drum among the three or four kinds belonging to the deity. During a village festival, when the *rath* is taken out, the drummer playing the *doms*, the *domsi*, decides when the rhythm has to be changed according to the different phases of the ceremony. The *domsi* feels himself emotionally very close to the deity, and it is upon hearing the rhythm of the *doms* that the deity will enter the *gur*’s body.
- 24 Denis Vidal, *Le culte des divinités locales dans une région de l’Himachal Pradesh* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1988), 97; Daniela Berti, *La parole des dieux: Rituels de possession en Himalaya indien* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 2001), 56.
- 25 Diserens, “Images et symboles des déesses.”

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- 26 Ibid., 104.
- 27 These distinctions may have also political implications. The *rath* of Jamlu *devtā* of Pej, a village near the royal capital of Kullu, had been constructed by the will of Raja Bhagvan Singh, at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to tradition, the *rath*’s style should have been a one-sided *rath* corresponding to the upper valley style, but the raja ordered that it had to be constructed as a four-sided *rath*, similar to those of Saraj. This was because during Bhagvan Singh’s reign, and as a consequence of some political and economic changes, *rath* from Saraj were no longer coming to the annual festival of Dashera, when deities from all the ancient kingdom have to pay homage to the raja and to the royal deity. During the festival, *rath* from Saraj have to take their position on the right of the royal deity (whereas the upper valley’s *rath* stay on the left side). As no *devtā* from Saraj was present to be on the right, Bhagvan Singh gave this honour to an influential *devtā* of another area, but to do that he had to make its *rath* in Saraj’s style. Thus,

- Bhagvan Singh could ensure the alliance with all the devotees belonging to the god's area. That the *rath* style could have political implications had also been noticed by W.H. Emerson, a British administrator of the region, who reported a case in which people of one particular *devtā* had to ask the raja of Mandi for permission to change the structure of their *devī-devtā*'s *rath* (Emerson, *Mandi State Gazetteer* [Lahore: Government Printing, 1920], 63). Denis Vidal suggests that, in this case, this might have been a way to avoid a situation whereby a change in a *rath*'s style would mark a new alliance between villagers and one of the neighbouring princes – since the structures of different *rath* corresponded to different kingdoms (Vidal, *Le culte des divinités locales*, 234).
- 28 A.H. Diack, *Gazetteer of the Kangra District. Parts II to IV: Kulu, Lahul and Spiti* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1897), 43.
 - 29 The emphasis on ornamentation as “location” of the sacred is underlined also by Joanne P. Waghorne, *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 254.
 - 30 In this article, the author showed how most of the words denoting “ornamentation” or “decoration,” used in a modern sense of “something of adventitious and luxurious, added to utilities but not essential to their efficacy,” originally implied a completion or fulfilment of the artifact or other object in question”: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Ornament,” *Arts Bulletin* 21 (1939): 86.
 - 31 Jean-Claude Bonne, “De l'ornemental dans l'art médiéval (VIIe-XIIe siècle): Le modèle insulaire,” in *L'image: Fonctions et usages des images* [p.113] dans *l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Schmitt, Cahiers du Léopard d'or 5, (Paris: Le Léopard d'or, 1996).
 - 32 Ibid., 208.
 - 33 Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25-26.
 - 34 Ibid., 25. Gell also refuses to attribute a mere aesthetic function to decoration. He notices that “most non-modernist, non-puritan civilizations value decorativeness and allot it a specific role in the mediation of social life, the creation of attachment between persons and things”: *Art and Agency*, 83.

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