Possession, Communication and Power in Himachal Pradesh (North India)

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Possession, Communication and Power in India
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The conventional term 'possession' has been widely used by anthropologists working in India to give the idea that a being (a god, a spirit, a ghost, a hero) is supposed to act in or through a person. The form that this 'presence' can take may vary largely according to the regional, social and ritual context. The vernacular terms or expressions may point to the idea of an arrival of a being in the body of a person, or to that of an influence, or of being 'seen' or 'caught', or of making this being 'play' or 'dance'. In some cases, the being is thought to make the person say something, or behave in a certain way or it is supposed to just make something happen to them or to their family – an event, a disease, an accident, a dispute.

A first point that has to be cleared up is that however widespread the idea of possession is in India, it is not conceived in the same way by everyone, not even by those living in the same village or within the same family. Ethnographic descriptions often tend to neglect that even in places where possession rituals are very institutionalized and celebrated at village level, not everybody necessarily feels committed to them. Some people may, in principle, accept the idea of 'possession', but they may be critical of a particular form in which possession is supposed to occur. In the region of Himachal Pradesh where I worked, criticism towards possession was often linked to ideas regarding power, competence and efficacy. For instance, Brahman practitioners, who are experts in the recitation of mantras and in performing oblations in the fire, often denigrate temple mediums and say that the latter's way of trembling and speaking as a god 'is just a drama'. This does not mean that they themselves do not sometimes explain the problem of a client who consults them as being due to the 'presence' of a being (of a ghost or of a planet). However, they may think that the only way of getting rid of this presence is by calling upon the knowledge of Sanskrit verbal formulas and of Brahmanic expertise. Similarly, the so-called Tantric specialist, who also recites (often vernacular) mantras may look down on temple mediums, yet he may at the same time also refer to a 'possession logic' when he claims, as happens in some regions, that a god is sitting on his tongue (Thompson 1979) or on his back (Gaborieau 1969)

But the veracity of the 'other's presence' may also be challenged by people who are completely committed to possession rituals. As I will show in greater detail later in this article, in the region where I did fieldwork, people who carry the village god's palanquin during local festivals are sometimes accused of 'dictating' the movements of the palanquin - which are supposed to be made by the god's own will- to present their own decisions as coming from the god. This kind of allegation is not new. A Settlement Officer from the nineteenth century referred to an order enacted in presence of an assembly of village elders that banished a local god's palanquin and attendants from an entire district in order to prevent the god's attendants from extorting monetary offerings from people in the name of the god and from threatening them with the god's displeasure if they refused to give in to their demands (Emerson, nd: 14). In modern secular institutions, such as in courts of law, the idea

of forcing someone to do something in the name of a 'god's displeasure' is considered to be a penal offence and courts do sometimes have to deal with such cases[1].

These critical attitudes towards possession need to be emphasized in order to avoid the risk of reifying and homogenizing people's discourses about possession into *one* 'indigenous' point of view which would highlight a local 'ontological perspective'. Although the concepts related to the idea of possession are dependent on the specific notion of body, of consciousness and on other cultural representations (Tarabout in this volume), they correspond to just one of people's many contrasting points of view.

A second point that needs to be stressed is that possession may take multiple forms and meanings in India, which explains why anthropologists have focused on one particular aspect or another of these practices. In some cases, possession appears to be a more or less codified form of expression involving a very intimate and personal experience, linked to individual suffering, solitude, inhibition, whereas in other contexts it may merely be ceremonial; or, on the contrary, it may assume/imply a more public dimension and be used by people as a way of exercising social or political power.

In this article I base my observations on ethnographic material that was collected in different villages in Himachal Pradesh between the years 1995 and 2000. Although I followed up different kind of ritual activities during my fieldwork (Berti 2001), I have limited myself to the one linked to the cult of village deities which, due to their institutional nature, helps to show how possession in this region involves the 'conjoining aspects of publicity and intimacy' (Lambeck, in this volume). In the first part of this paper I focus on temple consultations that deal with village or domestic issues, particularly in cases where the person who consults the deity through the medium is supposed to be under the influence of a '*bhut*' (ghost) who is considered to have a negative effect on the person's life. The interactions that take place during these ritual consultations are essentially aimed at verbalizing the scenario in which the *bhut* makes its attack. I will analyse the major role played by the medium in this verbalization process. In the second part of the paper I deal with consultations that concern collective issues; where a deity is supposed to enter into not only men but also objects. This type of deity's presence may appear both as a counter-power to the medium's voice and as a way for villagers to take part alongside their gods in local or state politics.

Interacting with the 'other'

Possession has often been interpreted in anthropological works as being associated with the way the people studied perceive the 'other' and with how they cope with and relate to this alterity (Nabokov 2000, Crapanzano 1977) The 'other' which is enacted during possession may either be culturally familiar, such as saints or the Devil in a Catholic context (Talamonti 1998), or it may be the result of an external, more or less violent, cultural encounter. (Masquelier 2001, Stoller 1995).

In India, although in multi-confessional contexts 'trans-religious possession' may occur - a Hindu may be possessed by a Muslim *jinn* or by a Christian figure (Tarabout 1999), in most cases the 'Other' that is embodied during the consultation comes from the same religious milieu as the person possessed.

However, even within a same ritual event, possession may take various forms and produce different reactions -from being accepted as a normal, 'ordinary' event- to provoking a reaction of surprise or despair.

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[1] Hari Chand Khimta vs Karam Chand And Anr. Himachal Pradesh High Court 14 April, 1983.

From the point of view of those who take part in possession rituals, what makes the difference between these contrasting reactions depends on the identity of the being who is supposed to manifest itself – whether it is considered to be a *devta* (god) or *devi* (goddess) or a *bhut* (ghost). However, apart from the often relative value of this opposition in India (in the sense that what some people define as a *bhut* may be considered by others to be a *devta*), the question we may ask ourselves is how those who take part in the same ritual event end up relating to the 'other' they are supposedly dealing with as if it were a *devta* or a *bhut*. I will give three short examples here of the different types of behaviour that this relationship may produce, even though many other intermediate and ambiguous situations may also arise.

The institutional and ritually controlled context in which people are directly confronted with possession occurs during the so-called *deopuchna* (questioning the god), which are ritual consultations held at the temple of the village deity. *Deopuchna* may be organized either on the request of one person or of family members who wish to submit a personal problem, or on the request of those in charge of village affairs to discuss a subject of public concern. At the beginning of *deopuchna*, the medium of a particular village deity, after donning special clothing, sits near the temple entrance and, using specific ritual techniques, he invites the deity to enter into him. At the time of *deopuchna*, both the deity's entry into the medium and its exit are a well-delimited moment ritually defined by a beginning and an end through specific 'signs' that may vary slightly from one medium to another: a sudden trembling of the medium's shoulder, some incomprehensible words, the playing of a bell - to quote just some examples.

Consultation at the temple of the goddess Shravani, Shuru 1995

An additional mark of this codified behaviour which is shared by various mediums in the region is the slow fall of the cap, releasing the medium's long locks of hair. Once the cap falls from his head and until the end of the séance (marked by other codified techniques), the 'I' pronounced by the medium no longer designates his person but the deity - *devta* (god) or *devi* (goddess). Similarly, those who have come for the consultation start to address the deity in turn. They may use the terms *Bhagvati* (Goddess), *Maharaja* (king), or *Malik* (owner) or, for a goddess, *Mata* (mother) which all refer to the multiple roles a village deity plays among the people living in its area. Interactions take place in the local dialect. Even though the medium may mark the shift from the 'I medium' to the 'I god/goddess' by slightly changing his tone of voice or by using some ritual formulas, those who address the deity use a very colloquial language. They treat the *deity* as a member of their family, sometimes in protest against what the deity has said about their problem, and sometimes even harshly reproaching it for not helping them.

Here is a short extrait of a ritual interaction which occured in 1994 between some men from Banara village and the goddess of Dungri village, called Hadimba. The goddess had been brought to Banara with her palanquin along with some men from her temple, including the medium, a rather fat, rustic-looking man who belonged to a allegedly low-status caste. Worried owing to a long period of drought, the villagers wanted to consult the goddess to ask her to give them rain. The goddess told them that there would be no rain until they solved a long-standing conflict between a neighbouring village and themselves. Due to this conflict, the two villages no longer celebrated their common festival during which the deities of the two villages met. In order to settle this conflict, every time the deities were asked to give rain or sunshine, the villagers were told that they could not obtain what they wanted without first making a compromise

> Men: *Mata*, tell us what you want us to do.
> Goddess Hadimba: I want to come to your place with my incense and incense holder. In the month of August I want to perform a yag [oblation of offerings in the fire] there.
> Woman: Oh Maharaj! We did what you asked us! Why are you angry with us?
> Goddess Hadimba : You did wrong! You did wrong!
> Men : We didn't do anything wrong! Give them [the other] the punishment!
> Goddess Hadimba: You have separated two brother gods. We [the gods] will send them our *vahan* (here animal assistant god). I can arrange a compromise (*phesla*) [between the two villages]! I can arrange a compromise but you must be sorry.
> Men : We tried to invite them to the festival.
> Goddess Hadimba,loudly, to the people from Banara: It is not your fault. You have to come to my place on my birthday and feel sorry. (In a feminine voice) I have come with all my power. I have given the kingdom to the king.
> Men: They said that they would bring him [the god's] but they didn't. They are very proud.
> Goddess Hadimba: What you did is bad! Before I leave this place something will happen to them.

As this short passage shows, the interactions between those engaged in *deopuchna* and the *devta* or *devi* enacted by the medium are nothing strange and people behave very normally.

In fact, the *deopuchna* held at the village temple is a highly institutionalized ritual context and it is common to almost all village temples in the region. Village deities are considered to have control over natural resources within a delimited territory. Their cult is regularly carried out by different temple employees: the priest, the medium, the administrator and the temple musicians. Some deities are also owners of land rights which were granted by the king and which have been officially recognised, first of all by the British administration and then by the post-colonial state. Given the institutional and official setting, the temple medium is 'duty-bound' to act out the deity. In fact, once a person has been publicly recognized as the medium of a particular deity he has 'to enact' the deity each time he is requested to do so.[2]

Similarly, consulting the deity through the temple medium is also part of socially expected behaviour which is in some cases even independent of how close the person is to the particular deity he is addressing.[3] In fact, in some cases, the person attending the *deopuchna* may come from somewhere else and may know nothing about the identity of the deity he is

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[2] For example, in addition to *deopuchna*, another moment when this enactment takes place is during the village festival when the medium has to perform *deukhel*, the play/dance of the deity.

[3] This does not mean to say that everybody in the village consults the medium as some people have nothing at all to do with these cults.

addressing. What makes him assume that the medium is embodying a *devta* is both the institutional setting within which *deopuchna* is organized (at the temple, in the presence of the temple priest or of other village members) and the familiar style and techniques used by the medium. In other words, in *deopuchna*, the relationship between the participant and the *devta* is based less on a personal evaluation of the identity of the 'being' with whom he is interacting than on what Houseman (2006) has called the 'well-defined pragmatic conditions' of the ritual performance. As Houseman noted, this is not to say that participants perform ritual actions 'in an unthinking fashion' (2006:421). In fact, while participants in *deopuchna* may take it 'for granted' that the 'other' who is speaking through the medium is well and truly the temple *devta* (and not for example a *bhut*), they may be constantly wondering whether it is really the *devta* who is speaking through the medium or whether it is the medium who is speaking on his own behalf. In fact, the idea that the medium, at the time of a consultation, receives a *prabhav* (influence/presence) of the deity is always presented by people as being an intermittent process, where the deity's presence may come and go in the space of few seconds. The idea that the deity's presence is not marked by continuity but comes and goes conveys the manifestation of 'possession' with an attitude of uncertainty and doubt on the part of the audience. Is the deity speaking or is the medium speaking on his own? Indeed During a *deopuchna*, the possibility that people doubt what the medium/deity[4] tells them is fully acknowledged and the ritual proceedings include specific techniques to express and dispel the doubt in the person's mind. (Berti 2001, 2015)

Within the same institutionalized context of a technically-controlled manifestation of the temple *devta*, other beings may occasionally 'show themselves'. . During *deopuchna* it sometimes happens that someone in the audience suddenly begins to tremble for a few seconds – which is understood in this context as the presence in him of another being. He may just tremble or even say some words. If this only lasts for a few moments people may become a little puzzled without worrying too much. The *pujari* (temple priest) or some other person may reassure them that 'this is the assistant deity' or, if the person who trembles comes from another place he may say that 'this is his own deity'. These episodic forms of possession are not produced by ritual techniques and they appear to be less controlled compared to the case of the temple's medium. Although people may remain uncertain about the identity of the 'being', this kind of episode does not appear to particularly disrupt the course of the consultation.

By contrast, the manifestation of another presence during *deopuchna* is sometimes perceived as coming from a *bhut* and provokes a very suprised and scared reaction among participants. The 'sign' of this presence may already have appeared outside any ritual context and be the very reason that brought the person or his family members to consult the temple deity.

Those who have brought the person to the temple may indeed suspect that the sign in question is produced by the presence of a *bhut* and therefore they ask the deity to reveal the *bhut*'s identity. Some of these *bhut* are considered to be at the service of a *tanagi* (tantric specialist) or of witches (*dahini*) and to be 'sent' to a person to cause them trouble. Other kinds of *bhut*-like beings are said to live in the locality, somewhere in the landscape and to act on their own.

During the ritual consultation, the *devta,* supposedly acting through the the medium has to force the '*bhut*' to reveal himself and to leave. In the next session I will show how the bhut's presence is verbalized during the ritual.

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[4] Here we enter an area of linguistic fluidity for the anthropological description. If we use the term 'medium' we adopt an analytical point of view; if we use the word "deity" we take the point of view of those who consult, though we omit the fact that the people themselves may think that it is the medium who is speaking, not the deity. Here I will used the word deity or medium dependin on the point of view I wish to stress.

Narrative constructions

Contrary to the role played by the medium in expressing the being who speaks through him, the identity of the *bhut* as well as the whole scenario of the bhut attack is usually defined not by the one who is supposed to be under the *bhut*'s control, but by the medium/deity, partly as a result of the interactions that take place during the consultation. This differs from other regions of India, like the one observed by Nabokov in Tamil Nadu, where the spirit of death (*pey*) that possesses the victim, ends up revealing some biographical details and personal names. In the region concerned here, the *bhut's* identity remains rather anonmyous throughout the ritual and it is never personified with biographical details. Although the medium addresses the *bhut* by asking it to reveal its identity, the only biographical information that emerges is a general name provided by the medium (such as 'a one-faced *bhut'* or 'five-faced *bhut'*). By contrast, the main question the *bhut* is asked to reply concerns not so much the *bhut* but the person who has sent it and the reasons why it has been sent. In fact, the *bhut* itself is not considered to be an 'agent' in the full sense of the term, since it is supposed to be under someone else's control - a *dahini* or a *tanagi*.

Let us take for example the case of Banita, a woman who, at the time of my fieldwork in 1994, had recently married and who was having problems with her husband and in-laws. She was brought to the temple of Goddess Shravani by her relatives who suspected her of having a *bhut*. During *deopuchna,* the goddess revealed that a witch from her native village had sent her a *bhut*, 'hiding it' in some gifts that had been given to her at the time of her wedding. It also emerged through ritual interactions that the witch was a woman associated with the family and who wanted to harm Banita's family in order to inherit their land. At the consultation, the goddess said that she (her medium) had to go to the in-laws' house, take out the objects and offer a sacrifice to the *bhut*. At the time of the final consultation, Banita, who had not said anything during the previous consultations, started crying, swaying and then fell down, totally still, without pronouncing a single word.

This kind of behaviour is called '*behos'* and is very codified, especially in cases concerning young married women. The use of the term 'trance' would not be appropriate however. The local idea of *behos*, in fact, does not at all refer to an internal transformation process, which is the meaning the term carries in Western languages: instead it is linked (*ou* on the contrary it is linked) to the idea of the presence of an entity in the person's body. According to this logic, the state of *behos* is considered to be the result of this presence, not as a psychological process *per se* (Berti and Tarabout 2010).

Banita becomes *behos* during the consultation (*deopuchna*). Kullu district 1995

As soon as the *deopuchna* started, the medium got up, took the young woman by the hair and pulled her up. He first began to openly question the *bhut*:

Goddess Shravani: Who sent you? Why have you come here? Tell us who sent you! I'll reduce you to ashes! I have all forms? [*rup*]! Tell me your name! What did she [the witch] tell you?

Banita/*bhut*, crying very loudly: Eat her [Banita] and come back!

Goddess Shravani: And then what? What did she say to you?

Banita/*bhut*, still in tears: That everyone there [in the in-laws' family] must take sides against her [Banita].

Goddess Shravani, still pulling Banita's hair: Tell us more! Tell us some more! So she told you that as well? That you shouldn't be happy? (He addresses the audience) She [the witch] also told him [the *bhut*] that she [Banita] shouldn't be allowed to stay at her parents-in-laws' house.

Then questions were put to the *bhut* where the replies were suggested in the questions:

(To the *bhut*:) Did she [the witch] say that you should ensure that the family gets no peace and quiet? She also told you that, didn't she? And didn't she also tell you that she [Banita] should be accused of that? And that she should be pressurised into a divorce?[5] So, do you want to leave or not? Tell us! Didn't she also tell you that you should do wrong here?

The medium (the goddess) forces Banita (the *bhut*) to reveal the witch's purpose.
Kullu district, 1995

In Banita's case, the theory of a *bhut* as well as the particular way in which it revealed its presence during the consultation, though made explicit by the 'deity', was accepted by the girl who, on showing signs of *behos*, followed the scenario for such occasions.

In other cases, however, the idea of a *bhut* attack is imposed even when the victim does not show signs of possession. During my stay in the village of Jagatsukh in 1994, for example, a very young woman, also recently married and encountering problems with her husband, was brought to the temple. The 'goddess' said that an act of witchcraft had been performed, but the woman remained calm, not showing any particular sign. Her 'silence' was interpreted as a strategy of the *bhut* to hide itself. The 'goddess' then passed the chains round her neck and stared into her eyes while he waited for her to do something. They stayed like that for about five minutes, neither of them saying or doing anything. The audience, which was silent at first, started commenting on the *bhut*'s stubbornness and provoking it. In the end, the 'goddess' decided to make the girl scream and cry by pulling her hair violently and shaking

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[5] Here the "goddess" means that, because of Banita's behaviour, her parents-in-law would have ended up persuading their son to get divorced.

her about, while asking the *bhut* who allegedly possessed her to reveal its identity. The 'bhut' again remained quiet. However, the fact that the girl cried and shouted was interpreted as a sign that the *bhut* was starting to show itself, and therefore could be defeated. The possession 'crises' that occur during these séances are thus stimulated and provoked by the medium even when the person gives no sign of being possessed.[6]

Although the medium plays a major role in the construction of the ritual and sociological scenario of the *bhut* attack, the interactions that take place during the consultation may sometimes produce contrasting narratives, some of which publicly emerge during consultations, while others remain more private or at an implicit level. The production of multiple narratives for the ritual are often the direct outcome of the specific kind of language used by the medium during the consultation, which is often allusive, inexplicit and sometimes even likely to be misunderstood by the audience.[7]

This is what happened in another case I followed during my fieldwork in 1994.. It s about a man called Lalchand, who was from a Brahman caste and who lived in his in-laws' village with his wife. This was somewhat exceptional since, in India, it is usually the wife who lives with her in-laws. In fact, he was from another rather poor district so they preferred to live in the wife's village as she had some land. One day, Lalchand's wife, Sushma, went running to the medium's house asking him to come to the temple for an urgent consultation. In fact her husband, who was a rather calm and pleasant person, had started yelling savagely, showing his teeth. At the temple, Lalchand looked normal and waited for the consultation to begin. As soon as the medium started to ring the temple bell to invoke the deity, the man, kneeling, his arms outstretched and clenching his fingers like claws, bared his teeth and started growling at the medium in an aggressive manner. People reacted to these signs very differently. While relatives showed their despair, those outside the family circle and even the temple's priest were first surprised, then they tried not to laugh. The scene was in fact almost grotesque. Those attending the ritual did not understand what was happening to the man, and whether to be astonished by his behaviour or whether to laugh at his outburst. They said, 'What a strange thing is happening to our village!' or 'What is that?' The way the *bhut* manifested itself seemed bizarre as nobody had ever experienced a similar situation before.

The 'goddess' started jumping up and down very quickly, thrashing about with the chains. These gestures are defined by the people as *khel karna,* 'playing'. Here the expression 'to play' means that the deity is manifesting its power in order to make the *bhut* do the same and to reveal its identity. But the *bhut* only yelled and made short aggressive gestures. Those taking part in the ritual then started to provoke the *bhut* and asked it to give the name of the person who had sent it. The *bhut* did not want to talk. Here are some passages from the consultation:

> (Lalchand/*bhut*, yelling)
> His brother-in-law: Look how the bhut has come! With a mouth like a cave!
> Goddess, to the *bhut*: Speak! Say your name!
> (Lalchand/*bhut*, yelling)
> Goddess, to the audience: What shall I do? Shall I reveal it [the name of the one who sent it],
>   or shall I remove it discreetly?

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[6] As for Catholic exorcism, Talamonti remarks that possession by the devil is not only ritualised but is also produced by exorcism itself: "Exorcism thus appears to be like the symbolic device for inducing the ritual possession crisis and its effectiveness depends on the success of learning the role that the subject is supposed to represent" (Talamonti, 1998, p. 260).
[7] The elusiveness of the medium's language allows the medium to interpret people's problems by a process of approximations and adjustments based on the audience's reaction to the deity's words.

Lalchand's yelling showing his possession by the *bhut* (Shuru, 1995)

Lalchand yelled repeatedly, whilst people started to discuss how to reply to the question asked by the deity. Some were of the opinion that the name of the person responsible should not be revealed, while others thought that if that was the case, they should not have come to consult the deity.

> Goddess: I will remove it discreetly!
> Lalchand's wife: Yes ! Do that! We don't want to have any other problems.
> (Lalchand/*bhut* yells desperately)
> Goddess: He (the *bhut*) has said 'I don't want to reveal myself!'
> Brother-in-law: Let him leave then! [to the *bhut*] Go away then! We won't say who sent you!
> Motilal's wife: Yes, anyway we know who [the witch] is. (to the deity): Attack her and send it
>   back [the bhut] to the place where it comes from.

The 'goddess' asked the pujari to lock the man inside the temple and the man was ordered to remain there for some days. Consultations for this case went on for several days during which the goddess, using a special way of speaking, revealed that a 'five-mouthed *bhut* (*panchmukh*)' had been sent by a witch and that the witch was in fact the man's wife. This was recounted in such an allusive way that the relatives continued to believe that the deity was talking about someone else: as we have seen in the consultation they kept saying 'anyway we know who sent you'.

Once the *deopuchna* was over, the medium explained the situation to me more explicitly: he told me that the man's wife used to have extra-marital relationships and that she was responsible for the man's trouble with the *bhut*. He also told me that though the goddess had alluded many times during the consultation to the fact that she was the witch, the woman and her relatives did not seem to understand what the deity said and they continued to have their own idea about who had sent the *bhut*. During the consultation, this kind of misunderstanding was not completely settled in order to avoid a public scandal. In fact, if the wife had been explicitly accused, the situation would have been very embarrassing for the man and it would have been shameful for him to continue to live with his wife in her family home.

During a conversation Lalchand described to me how he had experienced his possession. He did not make any reference to his wife's behavior and he seemed to be completely convinced that he had a *bhut*. He said 'The power did not attack me every time but only from time to time and for a few seconds. Then I felt as if an electric current passed through my stomach and I felt the need to do something. Then I had these yelling fits and made strange sounds. But -he said- I didn't know why I yelled.' He told me that during his stay at the temple, two men from another village came and asked him where the mad man was

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that they had been hearing about from other villagers and, he told me, 'I said, «It's me!» Then they told me: but you're not mad! You look like a good guy! And I said «No, the bhut can make me mad, it is very powerful, it has five mouths and it suddenly enters my body»'. He also told me that since the beginning of these outbursts people had given him a lot of attention but that 'as soon as I started yelling they hit me with chains or shoes, because they wanted to hit the bhut; I didn't feel anything as long as the bhut's power was within me; but once the bhut had gone away and they carried on hitting me I couldn't say anything anyway (I couldn't protest) because otherwise they would have left me alone.' So for him, the *bhut* was the cause of his suffering but also what made him receive so much attention. He was aware of this fact and that was why he had ended up accepting this physical aggression even when the *bhut* was no longer there.

What we find here and in many other cases I have observed, is that in the ritual version produced during the consultation, through interactions between the deity and the audience, reference is occasionally made to another possible version (and interpretation) which is not explicitly revealed in public or which is revealed in an indirect way. This may be compared to what Nuckolls describes about divination practices among the Jalari, a caste of fishermen in South India. In his analysis of the way in which the explanatory process of a case is built, Nuckolls shows the existence of what he calls a ''sub-text''' which underlies ritual interactions and which sometimes '''can be transparent in divinatory discourse.' (Nuckolls 1991: 73). In Nuckolls's example, reference to such a sub-text is made by means of an allusive langage which avoids a full explanation. And the effect the consultation seeks to produce is only achieved when a version of the events that has been constructed and negotiated during the ritual emerges, after being voluntarily created by the participants themselves in order to be surimposed on the sub-text.

Obviously not all consultations involve such diversity in their versions. While, in certain cases, ritual dialogues are very emotive and the understanding of them proves very complex, in other cases they do not even get off to a proper start —the person consulting remains silent, they do not react, they feel embarassed. In such cases, regular attendees of these consultations say that the person 'lacks experience'. This expression fully conveys the fact that consulting a village deity is not simply a matter of asking questions: the person consulting or his/her family must know how to react, how to formulate questions, how to insist in order to obtain a reply. They must enter into a different register of communication and, sometimes, they must reply in a ritualized (or codified) way to what the god says.

Gods' public roles

The presence of contrasted versions of the problem submitted to consultation frequently occurs in cases dealing with collective issues, especially those involving several villages, where different mediums are consulted.

However, on these large-scale public occasions, the source of the deity's authority is more fragmented than in cases of private consultations since deities are supposed to express their will not only through their human mediums but also through their mobile images, which are called *rath* - wooden palanquins decorated with metal faces and other items. The palanquin's structure is somehow anthropomorphized - the *rath* has 'hair', wears jewellery and clothes. The parts making up the *rath* are only assembled when the god (whose image is also permanently housed in the temple) has to be taken somewhere -to a festival or as part of a procession -otherwise they are kept 'inanimate' in a basket. Once the structure has been prepared and the *rath* is carried by villagers, the *rath* comes alive: it 'moves', 'walks', and interacts with people and with other gods. Men from the village take turns to carry these

palanquins on their shoulders; the palanquins are supposed to move or 'behave' according to the deity's will. *Raths* are supposed to be endowed with intentionality and with the capacity to move and to interact amongst themselves and with people. Although the god-*rath* is said to be the same god who lives in the temple, the personality of the god particularly emerges through the *rath*. These 'gods-*rath*' are treated like living being whose individuality is recognizable by villagers thanks to the different decorative elements of the god: the specific form of the *rath*, the main colour of the clothes, the jewellery, etc. They are also like living puppets that people have to take care of and play with. When the *rath* is carried to the sound of music, the god may also 'dance', 'play', 'run a race with another *rath'*, it may encounter his/her loved one: his father or mother; a brother may encounter his sister or his friend). There is an actual coded set of emotions which may indicate how a god-*rath* feels at a specific moment: is he angry, or happy, does he want to ask the villagers something? A *rath* may also be asked to give his opinion about something or to give a reply: there is a coded language which has to be interpreted by people according to the social context. The god's intention may be clarified through the god's official medium, though it may happen that the god expresses something different through the medium and through the palanquin.

Villagers bringing their deities' palanquins to the festival

The *rath*'s eloquent movements not only function in a way similar to medium's words as a way of communication; they also provide the deity with 'social visibility' and with the possibility to assert or to increase the deity's 'prestige' This especially occurs on the occasion of major public festivals that are celebrated at the district capital where a number of deities, with the *rath*, mediums and villagers gather together with ritual and political representatives. During these festivals, privileges are distributed among these palanquins, and villagers vie for an honorific place for their god.
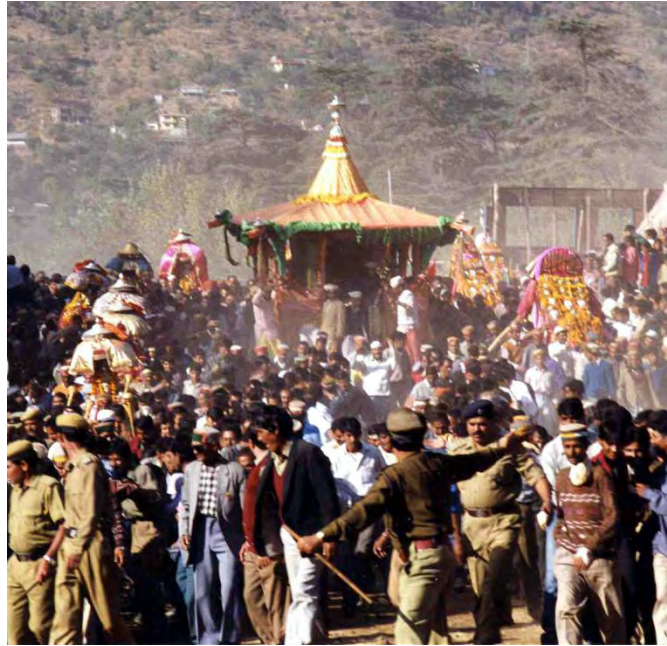
Chariot's procession during Dashera, Kullu 2001

For villagers, the honorific positions and roles held by these palanquin-gods during a festival are crucial since they visualize and make public their gods' importance in the local pantheon and in the regional history - showing the close relationship the deities maintained in the past with former kings and at present with local political leaders.[8] Some honours are the unquestionable prerogative of specific deities; others are the object of virulent competition and protests. Clashes between different groups of villagers over issues regarding honorific positions were reported in local stories and are still extremely common in the region today. These clashes are expressed and provoked through the *rath* whose movements may become very violent: they may rush into the crowd making it difficult for the police to stop them. These clashes are often meant to provoke a public scandal as many leading authorities attend the festivals (elected representatives, ministers, governors, judges), and the event is closely covered by the press.

In one case, for example, a clash made the following newspaper headline: 'With deities at war, can devotees be far behind at Rath Yatra (chariot's procession)?' (*The Indian Express,* Chandigarh, October 29th, 2001).

Not only may a *rath* upset the social order but also, and even consequently, they may get into trouble with the police authorities. In one of these clashes two deities were even banned and put under "house arrest"[9] -which made the headlines: 'Deities under house arrest for Kullu Dashera, finale' (*Thaindian news*, Oct18th, 2008).[10]

In newspaper articles, as in village discussions, the gods are regarded as the reason for these clashes. However, it regularly happens that those who carry the god-*rath* on their shoulders are accused of intentionally directing the *rath*'s movement and of forcing the god to

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[8] These honours are related to royalty and mark the importance of the deity in the past. This comes with many honours and privileges: of entering the throne hall, of exchanging gifts with the king and his family, of accompanying the king during his daily procession, and so on.

[9] Here the term "house arrest" means that the deities -that is their *rath*- are in fact "banned" from the procession by the local administration. The practice of banning a village god was also attested to during the colonial period (Emerson, *manuscript*, p. 11-14). Today this procedure is carried out in accordance with article 144 of "Law and Order" or the Indian Penal Code:

[10]   *http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/deities-under-house-arrest-for-kullu-dussehra-finale_100106476.html*

act according to their will.[11] The idea that is the bearers, not the deity, who move the *rath* brings to mind what happens in the case of medium consultations, even though these accusations here have more resonance due to the collective nature of the issue as well as to the media coverage. The media in fact seems ready to play along with the ambiguity over who is really upsetting public order - whether it be the gods or their human followers.

On the occasion of public festivals, not only may village tensions or competitions be expressed. Gods may also play a role in publicly expressing a disagreement with the political authorities on matters related to politics and governance. The role that village deities played in the past as the interlocutors of the royal family (Berti 2009) persists in modern times.

One example which is still pending at the High court, mainly opposes the promoters of a hydroelectric project (the Water Mill company) and the devotees of a goddess living just next to the site selected by the company, that is near a huge waterfall which is in fact considered to be inhabited by the goddess Mata Jogni. When the project was announced, people started to consult the goddess via her medium, and other neighboring gods, and all the gods expressed their disapproval of the project. The protests continued and a consultation of all the gods (*jagti puch,* lit. universal consultation) was organized, which once made the headlines 'Appeal against hydel power project to be taken to deities parliament.' (*The Times of India*, 31 August 2011)

Another example is a very well-known case concerning the construction of a ski resort funded by the Ford America Company in Parvati Valley and which prompted a protest by all the deities of the valley. In 2006 a number of meetings took place with all the gods' mediums from the district and they unanimously criticized the project. The descendent of the royal family, who is a politician but who still plays a ritual role as a king, also organized a collective consultation of all the deities (a *jagti puch*) (*The Tribune*, 2006) A writ petition against Ford was eventually filed at the High Court and after battling for many years the project was finally abandoned The case made the headlines: 'Hindu Ford battle against Kullu gods' (*The Economic Times*, 26 January 2006) or 'Hindu gods turn down plan for a Himalayan ski resort' (*The Telegraph*, 21 February 2006) ;

In some of these cases the god's contestation against the government policy can even be brought before a court of law. In fact, due to their role as 'legal persons' (Anoussamy 1979 et Sontheimer 1964), these deities can even become the main petitioner in a court case.[12] Although in their rulings, judges of more secular attitudes may sometimes clarify that the notion of god having a juristic personality is a 'mere creation of law'[13] the fact that the deity is officially presented in the file as being the main petitioner maintains the ambiguity, as in the newspaper articles quoted above- about who the real agent of this contestation is - the god or their supporters.

Conclusive Remarks

From the point of view of local people, medium consultations and *rath*-gods are part of the same idea: that a god may be present in a body (human or man-made) and express through it

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[11] In these cases the god's medium may be called upon to speak on behalf of the god-*rath* (the medium is supposed to speak on behalf of the same god as the god-*rath*), but he may say something different from what is indicated by the *rath*'s movements.
[12] "Devta Shring Rishi ji (and others) vs State of Himachal Pradesh (and others), Himachal Pradesh Hiagh Court, 2011. On this topic see Sontheimer 1964 and Davis 2010.
[13] M.L. Hanumantha Rao vs Sri Sai Babaon, Madras High Court, 1972.

its feelings and will. Paradoxically, through *rath*, more so than through mediums, deity appears as person-like, provided with individuality and subjectivity, of feelings and emotions. The fact that objects may be considered as one of the possible forms of a deity's living presence shows how possession does not necessarily involve the idea of 'displacement of the self' (Cohen 2003) or, even less so, of a psychological transformation. Even where a displacement of identity is supposed to have taken place, like as the case of the temple medium, we have seen how the shift from the medium to the god, which is always presented as an intermittent process, is completely controlled throughout ritual procedures. Similarly, in the case of a *bhut* attack, although the shift of identity from the person to a *bhut* appears as less controlled by the subject, it frequently follows a ritual script which is also, at the time of consultation, eventually mastered by the medium.

The different possession contexts presented here are thus arenas where various processes of communication are at work. They are contexts for the verbalization and explanation of tensions and conflicts even though, in some cases, these explanations are codified in conventional scenarios which make them socially and culturally acceptable. They are also symbolic settings within which it is possible to manifest, by non-verbal behaviour, personal feelings/emotions (suffering, rage, fear or emotional discomfort). At the time of a consultation, the interpretations given by the medium provide elements for a preliminary explanation of certain events from which people start to build a certain version of the facts. By a gradual process of adjustment between alternative narratives and the decisions taken by the medium, the ritual leads to redefining relationships, to attributing responsibilities, to reinterpreting the past and to accomplishing reparatory acts. Finally, we have seen how a possession framework is also a context for public action within which power relationships between groups of villagers may be played out and where state decisions may occasionally be challenged.

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