Ritual Kinship among Hindu Pilgrimage Priests of Allahabad

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Abstract: The primary objective of this article is to clarify the elements that contribute to the formation of the identity of the pilgrimage priests of Prayāga (Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India). This identity is constructed by the self-perception of the priests, the perception of this group by others, the various functions and directives at the core of the group's professional activities, and the types of relationships the priests share with other social groups. I will discuss endogamy, the exclusivity of the profession, and commensalism and rites of passage, as well as certain elements specific to the *prayāgavāla* that unite them with the pilgrims. This article concludes that these pilgrimage priests form a relatively homogeneous and distinct social group whose identity is still deeply rooted in a traditional Hindu structure.

Keywords: cast, pilgrimage, India, priest, kumbha mela, Allahabad, Hinduism

Résumé : L'objectif premier de notre article est de cerner l'identité des prêtres de pèlerinage de Prayāga (Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, Inde). Cette identité est construite par la perception qu'entretiennent ces prêtres d'eux-mêmes, la perception de cette collectivité par autrui, les différentes fonctions et prescriptions déterminant leurs activités professionnelles, et les rapports qu'ils entretiennent avec les autres groupes sociaux. Nous discuterons de l'endogamie, de l'exclusivité de la profession, du commensalisme, des rites de perfectionnement ainsi que de certains éléments spécifiques au mode de vie des *prayāgavāla* qui unissent ces derniers aux pèlerins. Le présent article nous mènera à la conclusion que ces prêtres de pèlerinage constituent un groupe social relativement homogène et distinct dont l'identité est toujours fortement ancrée dans un schème traditionnel hindou.

Mots-clés : caste, pèlerinage, Inde, kumbha mela, Allahabad, Hindouisme

Contextualisation of the Study

The city of Prayāga, known as Allahabad, is located at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā rivers. According to orthodox Hinduism, a third river – the Sarasvatī – also flows through this site; its current is invisible because it is underground. This location, whose significance is elevated by a myriad of myths and legends, is host both to the *Kumbhamelā* ("fair of the urn") every 12 years and to the smaller annual pilgrimage known as the *Māghamelā* ("fair of the month of *māgha*," a solar-lunar month that overlaps January and February).[1] These two massive fairs bring together different types of participants: the pilgrimage priests (*tīrthapurohita*), lay pilgrims come to tread on sacred ground, the ascetics (*sādhu*) and the "worldly managers" (administrators, politicians, civil architects, police officers and army officials). During the periods of pilgrimage, these priests' principal function is to receive the pilgrims (*tīrthayātrī*) who have come to visit the site. They manage temporary campsites (*śivira*) erected in the bed of the River Gaṅgā and in this way accommodate between 400 and 1,400 pilgrims per campsite.

Several works deal with Hindu pilgrimage and describe, in a summary fashion, the role of the priests at these sacred sites;[2] the greater objective of these texts is to present a particular pilgrimage rather than to explain the role of each participant. L.P. Vidyarthi and his "disciple" D.K. Samanta analyse the function of the various participants working at specific pilgrimage sites – Gaya, Benares and Ujjain. A short article by P. Amado (1975) describes the significance of the pilgrimage priests of Haridwar for the pilgrims heading to one of the four important religious destinations of the Himalayas: Yamunotri, Gaṅgotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Other authors, such as Gold (1998) and Lochtefeld (2010), focus on the pragmatic, functional and, for the latter, mercantile dimension of pilgrimage and of the dynamic that unites pilgrims and priests. The most substantial study of the pilgrimage priests of Allahabad is that of Anita

Caplan (1982), undertaken in the context of her doctoral research during the Māghamelā.[3] Caplan demonstrates that the pilgrimage priests, because of their function, have managed to forge a real network of communications between their clients – the pilgrims – and the different pilgrimage sites across the Indian territory. During her fieldwork, Caplan questioned several pilgrimage priests to gain a global vision of the scale of their networks.

The primary objective of this article is to encompass the identity of the pilgrimage priests (tīrthapurohita) of Prayāga, also known as the *prayāgavāla*. This identity is constructed by the self-perception of the pilgrimage priests, the perception of this group by others, the various functions and directives at the core of the priests' professional activities, and the types of relationships they share with other social groups.[4] I must highlight here the fact that no identity is fixed, be it personal or collective. All identity is in constant transformation and renegotiates itself continually depending on one's contact with others. Furthermore, when speaking of collective identity, a fixed framework is imposed on a collective that is composed of multiple individuals and, as such, is non-monolithic. Keeping in mind these two caveats, this article will conclude that these pilgrimage priests constitute a relatively homogenous and distinct social group whose identity is still deeply rooted in a traditional Hindu structure, which nonetheless does not exclude the use of modern gadgets related to telecommunications. I will thus discuss the notion of endogamy, the exclusivity of the profession, commensalism and rites of passage – factors that govern and punctuate the lives of the majority of orthodox individuals belonging to the first three Hindu classes (*dvija*). Certain elements specific to the lifestyle of the prayāgavāla – such as their place of residence, certain linguistic characteristics particular to the group, their *bahī/kathā* (register of donations), the donations and the transgenerational link that unites the priests to the pilgrims – will also be analysed.

The majority of information presented in this article comes from research undertaken from January to February 2000, during the Māghamelā, and from January to February 2001, during the Kumbhamelā. At the time of our first field study, we resided alone for the entire pilgrimage period – one lunar month – at a campsite (śivira) of pilgrims run by a family of prayāgavāla, which was erected at the confluence of three streams, in the dried-up river bed. Nearly 550 individuals resided at this campsite. Observation and informal discussion with pilgrims and the priest and his family were my primary sources of information. During the Kumbhamelā of 2001, however, our methodology was more structured.[5] We formed a research team composed of nine Canadian assistants and the same number of Indian assistants.[6] Throughout the month we resided at the śivira, we conducted more than 120 in-depth interviews with the pilgrims at the campsite; each of these was directed by two assistants, one Canadian and one Indian, with the Indian assistant being primarily responsible for translating the Awadhi Hindi (local dialect of Uttar Pradesh) into English. The interviews were undertaken daily (except on the most auspicious bathing days, when our schedule was turned upside down)[7] between 9:00 and 11:30 a.m., the period after the pilgrims had finished their morning duties, and before they sat down to eat their only meal of the day.[8] The rest of the day was dedicated to observation within the śivira. The information gathered during the Kumbhamelā of 2001 contains precious information concerning the pilgrims' perception of pilgrimage priests and, more significantly, data about the pilgrims themselves. The data include purely demographic and sociological facts, explanations of personal motivations to attend the fair, and information about individual family histories and the gatherings that took place before the Māgha and the Kumbhamelā. Four interviews were also conducted with several male members of the pilgrimage priest's family: the main priest (Paṇḍajī, 44 years old), his father (Pitā, 69 years old), his oldest uncle (Cācā, 72 years old) and his older brother (Bhaī, 48 years old) (see Figure 1).[9] I returned to the site, alone this time, for a few days at the very end of the 2006 Māghamelā and again for about ten days during the 2007 Half-Kumbhamelā, and was able to gather further information and clarify certain doubts. The information presented in this article comes mostly, though not exclusively, from the four interviews with pilgrimage priests, as well as from the observations made during my various expeditions to the field.

The prayāgavāla perceive themselves as the sons of the goddess Gaṅgā (the *Gaṅgāputra*).[10] They give themselves this title because *Gaṅgāmātā* (Mother Gaṅgā) is the primary source of their income. However, not just anyone can become a prayāgavāla. For an individual to become a pilgrimage priest, he must be born in the prayāgavāla caste (*jāti*), one of the castes of the *brāhmaṇa* class (*varṇa*).[11] This dual belonging to caste and class is particularly significant because the prayāgavāla must preserve the purity connected to their divine status, and they must make a clear distinction between their own caste – direct descendants of the goddess Gaṅgā – and the other castes of human origin. The close connection between the prayāgavāla and the goddess highlights the importance of maintaining ritual purity by a very rigid orthodoxy. This orthodoxy manifests

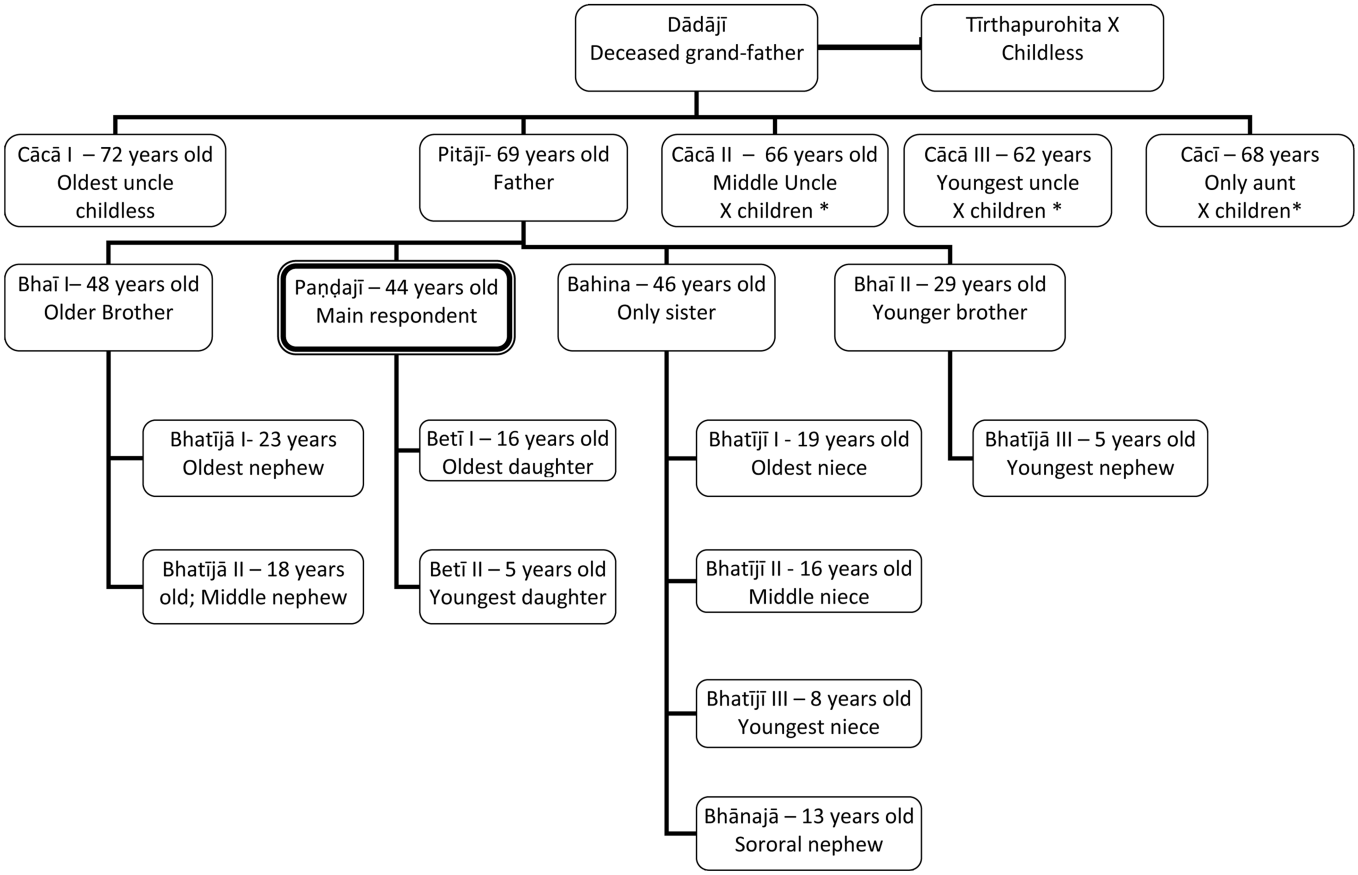

Figure 1: Paṇḍajī's extended family
Note: The family links indicated in this chart are based around our main respondent, Paṇḍajī. Ages are from the year 2007.
*The exact number of descendants of these two uncles and this aunt matter little, because none of these descendants have any impact on the dynamics of Paṇḍajī's śivira.

itself in the strict observance of three general constraints connected to jāti: 1) endogamy, 2) the exclusivity of the profession, and 3) commensalism.

Endogamy, Exclusivity of the Profession, and Commensalism

Concerning endogamy, the prayāgavāla traditionally must find spouses for their children in the same socio-religious environment. Thus, they must also come from a family of prayāgavāla but from a different *gotra* to avoid excessive consanguinity.[12] In the past few years, however, the prayāgavāla have had to expand the selection of potential husbands/wives to other castes of pilgrimage priests from neighbouring regions. This change is probably the direct result of the decrease in the numbers of prayāgavāla, a situation that prompts transgression of the traditional directives of endogamy by expanding the selection to the entire tīrthapurohita community in the area: the families of pilgrimage priests living in Benares, Vindhyachal, Chitrakot, Ayodhya, Naimisharanya and other sacred sites surrounding Allahabad. In Paṇḍajī's extended family (see Figure 1), however, the spouses are not only all from tīrthapurohita families, but they are also all prayāgavāla from the same old neighbourhood in Allahabad, Kītgañj.

In all the jāti, the profession is officially passed down from father to son. This rule is generally followed in the families of pilgrimage priests, be they prayāgavāla, *gayāvāla* or otherwise. However, certain flexibility is introduced into the system of transmission by the notion of *āpaddharma*: the rules imposed on the individual are relaxed during "periods of distress," and when it is impossible to follow the guidelines established by tradition, one can do otherwise.[13] For example, let us more closely examine the transmission of the duty of managing the campsite where our research took place (see Figure 1).[14] In the 1950s, Paṇḍajī's uncle Dādājī developed a very close friendship with an older, heirless priest from a different family of prāyāgavāla, who shall be referred to here as Tīrthapurohita X. When he passed,

Dādājī inherited the responsibility of managing Tīrthapurohita X's śivira.[15] The relatively humble śivira that Dādājī inherited from his own father was thus greatly expanded. Following the death of Dādājī, the śivira was divided into three parts, because of disputes between Paṇḍajī's uncles. The first of these smaller campsites is managed by both Cācā I and Pitājī, the second by Cācā II, and the third by Cācā III. Dādājī's only daughter, Cācī, was married, and at the time had already been living for several years with the extended family of her husband who was also the manager of a family śivira. During our research into the śivira in 2000, Paṇḍajī was the priest in charge; Cācā I and Pitājī, while in attendance throughout the *melā*, occupied only a peripheral position in the campsite, despite the high degree of respect pilgrims showed them. They were present, however, to give help and advice to Paṇḍajī. Curiously, Bhaī I, who should have inherited the management of the śivira, played no important part whatsoever.[16] During our last visit to the site, in January 2007, Paṇḍajī still occupied the central role at the śivira, and Cācā I and Pitājī were hardly ever around, both residing in their homes in the city of Allahabad. During this melā, Bhatījā II was present at the śivira for the entire pilgrimage period and played an important role in ritual activity: he was the main tīrthapurohita receiving the daily donations from pilgrims, and he participated actively in the more elaborate rituals, such as the *godāna* and *seyyadāna* (see the section on *dāna*). Bhatījā II is currently finishing up his Vedic schooling in a traditional school (*gurukula*) of Kītgañj, while his older brother has received no training in this field and was hardly ever present on the site during the melās of past years. Bhatījā II therefore appears as the appointed successor of Paṇḍajī, who has no official heir because he has no sons. When questioned on this topic, Paṇḍajī, Pitājī and Cācā I all claimed that the career choices of Bhaī I's two children were the result of their personalities and tendencies. However, just like his father, Bhatījā I exercises no professional activity, be it related to the activities of the śivira or not; an explanation for this particular situation could not be found. In January 2007, the only son of Paṇḍajī's sister, a young boy of 13 years who is referred to as Bhānajā, accomplished various ritual tasks at Paṇḍajī's campsite. This observation leads us to believe that he is receiving professional training from Paṇḍajī's family and will quite possibly assume ritual responsibilities at this śivira, even though he is officially connected to the family of the husband of Paṇḍajī's sister. It is our opinion that this "derivation" from the norm is possible in part because Bhānajā has several older cousins on his father's side who will take over these roles in his family of origin; on the other hand, it ensures a relatively fluid continuity in the transmission of the professional function in Paṇḍajī's family. Upon close examination of Figure 1, it can be observed that the only official successor after Bhatījā II is, for the moment, Bhatījā III. A period of 13 years separates the two of them, a divide that could be very problematic if none of the three Bhatījās produce a male descendant, or if an unfortunate accident were to happen to one of them. This brief section on the transmission of roles in Paṇḍajī's śivira reveals, on the one hand, the contemporary changes that the four stages of life (*āśrāma*) set out in the *dharmasūtra* of Gautama and Baudhāyana and later Hindu literature (Olivelle 1993) are being subjected to. On the other hand, the obvious flexibility in the interpretation of the rules governing caste and class exposes the omnipresence of the notion of āpaddharma.

Outside the pilgrimage season of the Māgha and Kumbhamelā, nothing prevents the tīrthapurohita from engaging in other professional functions. Because the period of professional activity of the prayāgavāla is concentrated in the month of māgha, the rest of the year is relatively free for them to engage in activities not connected to their roles as priests. For example, during the other months of the year, Paṇḍajī also works at a hospital in the mornings and at a printing house in the afternoons. This diversification of activities for prayāgavāla is ever more present today because of the gradual dismantling of traditional structures in contemporary India. This makes it is more and more difficult to fully support the entire family's needs with just the revenue earned through the function of pilgrimage priest: it is thus imperative to develop other sources of income.

For everyone belonging to the top three classes, the rules of commensalism imply that food must be prepared by members of their own or a superior class. Though this practice is disappearing in modern India, traditional India – which remains the immediate world of the contemporary prayāgavāla – still considers it very important. This rule is all the more restrictive for the prayāgavāla, because they are brāhmaṇa, and as Gaṅgāputra, they consider themselves at the very top of the social scale. In their eyes, there is, in fact, no group superior to their own. This perception is, of course, not shared by the other groups of brāhmaṇa in Prayāga, and even less by the townsfolk of Allahabad, comfortable in a modernity they like to think of as distant from traditional structures. However, the pilgrims residing at the śivira, who are primarily of rural origin, all maintain the vision that the pilgrimage priests are Gaṅgāputra. Because of the hierarchal superiority they attribute to themselves, these

pilgrimage priests can consume only food prepared by other prayāgavāla. In addition, several food taboos further restrict their diet: they must be vegetarian; they cannot drink alcohol; and various foods like garlic and onion, which are considered aphrodisiacs, are totally banned. Other food practices can also be observed. For example, many prayāgavāla consume *bhaṅg*, an infusion of marijuana, on a daily basis. Though this practice is not mandatory, it is widespread among the tīrthapurohita and is socially accepted as a means to communicate with the sacred realm.[17]

Rites of Passage

The members of the first three classes, especially the brāhmaṇa, must perform several rites of passage (*saṃskāra*) throughout the courses of their lives.[18] Although the strict observation of these ritual directives is rarer and rarer in contemporary India, the life cycle of an orthodox *brāhamaṇa* is inevitably punctuated by these different rites of passage that begin at conception and continue until death; these rites therefore contribute to reinforcing the identity of the prayāgavāla. Depending on the Sanskrit text, the number of saṃskāra differs, but those listed below are all followed to the letter by the prayāgavāla:

- *Garbhādhāna*, the rite for conception
- *Puṃsavana*, the rite for obtaining a male child
- *Sīmantonnayana*, the parting of the hair of the wife
- *Jātakarman*, the rite of birth
- *Nāmakaraṇa*, the naming ceremony
- *Niṣkramaṇa*, the rite for the first outing of the child from the family home
- *Annaprāśana*, the first consumption of solid food (that is, the rite of weaning)
- *Cūḍākaraṇa*, tonsure, the rite of the first haircut
- *Upanayana*, initiation ritual, the reception of the sacred thread
- *Keśānta*, tonsure
- *Samāvartana*, the student's return to the family home
- *Vivāha*, marriage
- *Antyeṣţi*, funeral rite, cremation
- *Śrāddha and sapiṇḍīkaraṇa*, postfunerary rites.

Initiation, marriage and cremation are considered to be the most important saṃskāra; they are also the most developed. The initiation ritual is the moment when an individual abandons childhood and becomes an adult. It is at this moment that he becomes an active member of his class and therefore socially responsible for his duties (*dharma*). This ritual inaugurates the first stage in the Hindu life cycle (*āśrama*); the young man thus passes from the undefined stage of childhood to that of student (*brahmacarya*). He must from then on learn an art or profession under the direction of a master (*guru*). The prayāgavāla do not necessarily have to leave the family home to join a traditional school (gurukula) where the art of his vocation is taught; the father, uncles or older brothers may take care of the training themselves. Once initiated, the individual can also begin officiating at certain ceremonies such as, for the prayāgavāla, receiving the donations (*dāna*) of pilgrims. During the 2001 Kumbhamelā, the young brother of Paṇḍajī regularly received morning donations without being able to officiate during the more complex ceremonies that take place during special events. It is only after marriage that the *brahmacārin* begins his second stage of life, as householder (*gṛhastha*).[19] During this period, he must fully exercise the profession for which he is responsible. When we visited the melā site in 2006, the young brother had passed to the stage of gṛhastha, and he had had a child. His professional responsibility at the campsite was thus complete; the ritual tasks were entirely shared between the three brothers, even though Paṇḍajī, the oldest, remained the master of the place. In January 2007, the son of Paṇḍajī's older brother, who was then only 17 years old and not yet married – not yet a gṛhastha – received the morning donations, as did his youngest uncle in 2001.

As highlighted by Kapani (1993, 87–88), almost all rites of passage have particular purposes: purification and propitiation, the establishment and sanctification of relations, and the continuity of generations. These functions help reinforce the feeling of belonging to a particular "caste." In this way, the prayāgavāla view themselves as pure, protected, and united by sacred ties, and they believe the unique character of their group has existed for many generations.

Residential Patterns

As well as the three rules of endogamy, exclusivity of the profession, commensalism and the rites of passage, there are several other elements that contribute to the auto-identification of the "caste" of the prayāgavāla. First, let us mention their place of residence. During the month of māgha, all the active prayāgavāla reside on the grounds of the fair at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā rivers. This sacred site is constructed on the outskirts of the city limits of Allahabad in the dried-up riverbed of the Gaṅgā and along the banks of the two streams. The tīrthapurohita would not be able live there year round because the flood waters of the monsoon would submerge them under more than 15 metres of water. Their primary residence is in specific

neighbourhoods situated outside the melā grounds. Depending on the family, they live in either Kītgañj, the length of the Yamunā; Dārāgañj, the length of the Gaṅgā; Malviyanāgar; Gaṅgāpār (Jhuni, on the east bank of the Gaṅgā); or Yamunāpār (on the western bank of the Yamunā). This residential structure contributes to the feeling of belonging socially to a distinct group. These neighbourhoods represent the oldest parts of Allahabad; they are areas where the traditional relational networks between the members of different professions are still present, and where the infrastructure differs greatly from that of "Civil Lines," a far more modern section of the city.

Dialect

In his study of Gaya, Vidyarthi (1978, 54) notes that the pilgrimage priests of Gaya use a particular dialect, which distinguishes itself from the local language by the terms it uses as formal greetings. As it is unique to the group, this dialect therefore strengthens the group's identity. In the course of our research, we noticed that Paṇḍajī subverted the usual norms of address: while a lay person generally uses the term *mahārāja* (great king) when engaging with an ascetic or a particularly important priest, Paṇḍajī also used this title when speaking to the pilgrims at his śivira, thus reversing the norms of address linked to social hierarchy. When asked about this practice, Paṇḍajī simply responded that it was a fun way of interacting.[20] Fun, maybe, but the pilgrim is also an important source of income for the prayāgavāla and is therefore worthy of distinction – hence the use of this honorary title. The secret aspect of the pilgrimage priests' language referred to by Gonda seems exclusively limited to numbers, however.[21] The prayāgavāla can therefore discuss the sums given by the different pilgrims among themselves without the latter knowing the exact amounts in question. This secret communication code is also used in their register of donations (*bahī*, *kathā*). Thus, according to the four participants I interviewed, if these registers fall into the wrong hands, these trespassers will not be able to understand the amounts that are written therein.

Dāna

The donation ritual crucial to the pilgrims during the melās (Māgha or Kumbha) contributes to the identity of the prayāgavāla. During these fairs, the prayāgavāla manage a śivira that accommodates several hundred pilgrims. These are not just ordinary pilgrims (tīrthayātrī); they are *kalpavāsin*.[22] What distinguishes the kalpavāsin from simple pilgrims are the five vows they take in front of the prayāgavāla when they arrive at the site, as well as their completion of this month-long pilgrimage for 12 consecutive years.[23] One of these five vows – the ritual donation to the prayāgavāla – is implicated in constructing the pilgrimage priests' identity, because in giving to the priest, the pilgrims reinforce the image he has constructed of himself as a Gaṅgāputra. Indeed, an offering to the prayāgavāla is given great value by the kalpavāsin, who see in the beneficiary of this gift a direct descendant of the goddess Gaṅgā. All the kalpavāsin give a daily donation to the priest in charge of their śivira. This offering, called a *godāna* (gift of a cow) represents what is traditionally the brāhmaṇa's due, the salary of the officiator of Vedic ritual. These days, the cow is usually replaced by a portion of non-perishable foods (rice, legumes, flour, vegetables) roughly equivalent to a meal and a few rupees.[24] Each tent (composed by members of an extended family) must perform this daily offering between the period of the morning dip in the Gaṅgā and that of the recitation of the *Rāmacaritamānasa*. Every morning, therefore, a queue of pilgrims parades by the priest, set up under his *gadhi* – a little semi-open tent with only one partition situated in the very heart of the śivira – to give him his due. During these exchanges, the prayāgavāla, armed with the *kuśa* herb (a crucial element in Vedic ritual), receives offerings while reciting Vedic *mantras*, then gives the foodstuffs to one of his acolytes in charge of storing them. Over the course of the month, each prayāgavāla accumulates enough dried goods to support the yearly dietary needs of his extended family. The śivira are generally composed of 250 to 450 tents; ours was made up of approximately 420 tents during the Māghamelā and more than 700 during the Kumbha and Half-Kumbhamelā. We observed that one representative of each tent carried out this daily offering of a plate of food; by a rapid calculation, one deduces that nearly twelve thousand meals are thus accumulated by the prayāgavāla over the course of 28 days.

Sons of Gaṅgā and Their Privileges

As confirmed in all our interviews with pilgrims, during the offering, the kalpavāsin sees the prayāgavāla as the son of Gaṅgā. The daily donation thus underscores the deep respect, if not devotion, that the kalpavāsin feels toward the prayāgavāla. The high esteem that the kalpavāsin projects on the latter thus furthers the image the priest has of himself; it also confirms the special standing that he holds in this socio-religious Hindu microsystem. One must highlight the fact that because he participates in pilgrimage in a committed manner, the kalpavāsin is particularly devout; the image he has

of the priest is that of a Gaṅgāputra and is thus very positive.[25]

Moreover, the identity of the prayāgavāla is enhanced by the belief that in 1583, the Mughal emperor Akbar personally granted the exclusive right of receiving pilgrims' donations at the site to the prayāgavāla. According to this oral legend, told to us by three of the priests interviewed, the Mughals were unable to establish the foundations of the Allahabad fort because of the flood waters of Gaṅgā and Yamunā during the monsoon. Akbar was then told that the only way to resolve this problem was to sacrifice a brāhmaṇa at the site. A local prayāgavāla apparently offered himself as a sacrificial victim, demanding, in exchange, that the emperor grant his descendants the exclusive right to collect pilgrims' donations at the site. This right – supposedly made official in a *firmān* from the Mughal court of Allahabad in 1593, which we were unable to locate – grants a privileged economic status to the pilgrimage priests: they become the sole beneficiaries of numerous ritual gifts from pilgrims, even though in theory, and according to several Puranic and Shastric ordinances, a brāhmaṇa cannot receive donations at a pilgrimage site.[26] It is interesting to note here the structure of an origin myth, in which worldly power – ironically, in this case, a Muslim emperor – legitimises Hindu practices considered questionable and/or impure and non-orthodox by some.[27]

Bahī: The Pilgrim Registry

Another important characteristic of the tīrthapurohita resides in the symbolism constituted by the registers of donations – *bahī* – that have been transmitted from father to son for generations and that principally serve to note the donations given or promised by each pilgrim. Indeed, during the melā, which always takes place in winter, the great majority of pilgrims pledge to donate certain quantities of food once the harvest is completed later in the year; the prayāgavāla writes down these promises in his register. In May or June, before the monsoon, the prayāgavāla goes from village to village to gather the goods and amounts pledged earlier. In addition to collecting debts, this is also the ideal occasion to announce the next fair: the prayāgavāla encourages the villagers to undertake the pilgrimage to Prayāga during the next month of māgha and, unsurprisingly, to reside in his śivira. Paṇḍajī, however, told us that he could not undertake this yearly journey because of his other professional responsibilities; therefore, other members of his family, or a delegate working closely with him during the melā, visited the pilgrim villages on his behalf. The prayāgavāla also uses this journey as an opportunity to visit certain pilgrims who have become like members of his family.

According to Paṇḍajī, the bahī also serve another purpose. Because the numbers of people present at a melā create a favourable environment for crime, pilgrims entrust their money and valuables to the prayāgavāla on their arrival at the śivira. The priest registers the amounts and objects in question in his bahī and then stores them in a safe place. Thus, he also assumes the role of guardian and "banker": throughout the melā, he gives pilgrims the amounts they request and deducts them from their account. At the end of the month, the accounts are closed. When a pilgrim has withdrawn more than he deposited, his balance will be negative; in this case, the pilgrim reimburses this amount after the harvest. It is quite common for a prayāgavāla to lend considerable sums to a pilgrim.[28] This echoes the trust that exists between the pilgrims and their prayāgavāla.

Because they act as official sources confirming the *vaṃśa* (lineage) of the pilgrims, these bahī of donations constitute an important element in fortifying the feeling of belonging to a distinct group. Each family of pilgrims "belongs" to a family of prayāgavāla. When a pilgrim decides to take the vow of *kalpavāsa* – the vow to live a full month at the site of the melā – he must reside in the campsite (śivira) that corresponds to him – that is, the same śivira where his parents, grandparents and/or ancestors established their campsites in the past. Because the bahī contain the names of all the pilgrims that have frequented the campsites over countless generations, they also confirm the "belonging" of the pilgrim to a particular śivira. Furthermore, these genealogical documents represent useful sources when one wishes to trace the accurate ancestral lineage of a family; this information is crucial to the postfunerary rituals known as the *śrāddha*.[29] Moreover, because these rituals are generally performed on the banks of sacred rivers, the execution of each is frequently the responsibility of the tīrthapurohita.[30] Outside the month of māgha, the tīrthapurohita of Prayāga receive regular visits from kalpavāsin wishing to carry out śrāddha rites for their immediate parents and ancestors. Thus, on the one hand, these bahī contribute to the identity of the kalpavāsin by placing them in a geneological continuity; they also, on the other hand, contribute to that of the pilgrimage priests themselves, making them the keepers of these precious registers that confer a transgenerational legitimacy to their ritual function.

Belonging to a particular campsite is transmitted from father to son, but in the case where one's forefathers did not frequent a specific śivira, belonging can also be determined according to the geographical origin

of the pilgrim. In this way, each śivira serves a region of India; each prayāgavāla therefore needs to speak the language of that region in order to communicate with the pilgrims he hosts. The bahī are thus crucial in the development of the prayāgavāla identity in that they justify the ancestral responsibility of these brāhmaṇa toward groups of specific pilgrims; the *jajmānī* system that I shall address shortly plays a key role.

The *Prayāgavālasabhā*

The *prayāgavālasabhā* ("the assembly of prayāgavāla") is a formal governing body that manages the entire prayāgavāla community. Registered with the government in 1860, this sort of "syndicate" fulfills four distinct functions, each of which strengthens the identity of the prayāgavāla. The first function is to annually distribute the space allocated to each priest's family to set up their campsite on the melā grounds. The general administration of the melā determines the space that the prayāgavālasabhā must then subdivide into campsites for its members. The melā takes place in the dried-up riverbeds of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā, and the limits of the territory vary from year to year, depending on the retreat of the waters. The prayāgavālasabhā must therefore annually delineate the specific area on which each priest's family will establish their śivira. The second function of this assembly consists in resolving disputes between member families. In this way, the prayāgavālasabhā resembles the village *pañcāyat*, defined by Dumont (1966, 217) as "any meeting to the ends of justice and arbitration, no matter the scope … in short, a customary tribunal in a very general sense." Thus, if a conflict emerges within a family of prayāgavāla regarding the succession of rights related to the management of the śivira, it is up to the prayāgavālasabhā to decide on the outcome. The third distinct function is to uphold certain ethical standards so as to preserve the reputation of the members and the organisation. Here, a parallel can be drawn with the caste pañcāyat, whose competence extends "to any matter in which the men of the caste consider that the interests and reputation of the caste require action against a member of the caste" (Hutton 1949, 89). The final function of this organisation is to protect the exclusive right each member family has to serve a specific geographical region. The entire Indian subcontinent is divided into regions, and each family of pilgrimage priests possesses the hereditary right to host pilgrims coming from a certain region; this regional specialisation allows the prayāgavāla – as is the case for the priests at Haridwar (Amado 1975, 962) and Gaya (Vidyarthi 1978, 71) – to serve the pilgrims in their native tongue.[31] The four functions fulfilled by the prayāgavālasabhā further the construction of the identity of the pilgrimage priest of Prayāga, because they best demonstrate the specificity of the group.

Transgenerational Continuity in Service Exchanges

Just as the links between the tīrthapurohita are for the most part determined by the prayāgavālasabhā, the relationships between the pilgrimage priests and the kalpavāsin are also regulated by a particular structure, and, as expected, this structure promotes the identity of the prayāgavāla. This is the system of *jajmānī*, which determines the relationships and the exchange of services between the different castes – a key system in the dynamics of rural India. The origin of the term *jajmānī* dates back to Vedic times. In Sanskrit, the term *yajamāna* is a designation for the individual who requests the undertaking of a sacrifice from a brāhmaṇa; he accepts the costs and reaps the benefits. However, as Louis Dumont (1966, 130) noted, the contemporary system of jajmānī is much broader – it "articulates the division of labour by the means of hereditary personal relationships: for every special task each family has, at its disposal, a family of specialists." Dumont adds that the concept of jajmānī is no longer limited to the ritual sphere as it was in ancient times, but rather it comprises all types of services, such as those of barbers or potters. Nevertheless, according to Commander (1983, 294), the *purohita-jajmān* link is that which remains most visible in contemporary northern India. This is the case in the contemporary function of the pilgrimage priests, who offer diverse services to their kalpavāsin, referred to as *jajmān* (a derivation of the Sanskrit term *yajamāna*). Both Dumont (1966, 130–131) and Rao (1977, 296) propose a kind of taxonomy derived from the nature of the services exchanged. These different classifications can be simplified by dividing them into two main categories: 1) the interactions with a ritual or religious dimension and 2) the interactions that involve an exchange of services, goods and food staples. The function of tīrthapurohita clearly overlaps these two categories. On the one hand, the prayāgavāla perform the rituals needed by the kalpavāsin (notably, the reception of the *dāna*, which is similar to *dakṣinā*, the ritual fees); on the other, he offers important worldly services: a place at the campsite, tents, access to electricity and water, firewood, security and so on. The payment given for the priest's worldly services and the dāna are separate, and the nuance is distinctly recorded in the register of donations.

As mentioned earlier, the families of pilgrims always use the same family of pilgrimage priests to fulfill the services that they require. It is, however, crucial to

highlight the personal aspect of this relationship in the context of pilgrimage to Prayāga. Indeed, because of the jajmānī system, the same families of pilgrims and priests share a campsite for the entire month of māgha and have done so for generations. Close ties develop between these families: the children of the pilgrims and the priests interact; later, they themselves become adult pilgrims and priests and, eventually, accompany their own children in the execution of their respective duties. An intimacy that goes beyond the simple exchange of services thus develops between these families. The bahī, the registers of donations, bear witness to this; from a more human perspective, the memory of each individual preserves the memories of months of māgha spent in the same śivira with the same families. The jajmānī system ensures transgenerational continuity between the families of kalpavāsin and a particular family of prayāgavāla; this constant reinforces the identity of both groups.

Conclusion

The identity and the self-perception of prayāgavāla are supported by a great many factors. On the one hand, there are the factors applicable to the entire brāhmaṇa class – the class of the prayāgavāla – namely endogamy, commensalism, the hereditary transmission of the profession, and the strict observance of rites of passage (saṃskāra). On the other hand, several factors specific to the prayāgavāla have also been presented. Included in this category are the divine status that is bestowed upon the prayāgavāla as sons of Gaṅgā; their exclusive right to receive the donations given for ritual services; the residential structure of the members of the group; the coded language that is used; the register of donations (bahī/kathā); the inherent notion of lineage (vaṃśa); the prayāgavālasabhā; and, finally, the transgenerational continuity that unites the families of priests and those of the pilgrims they host. These various factors suggest that the prayāgavāla constitute a community that is closed in on itself and is conscious of purity. Paradoxically, the most important factor that contributes to the self-identity of the prayāgavāla resides in the way they relate to members of other castes and other classes: their relationship with their kalpavāsin. The prayāgavāla community thus needs to interact and regularly come into contact with the other social group. This relationship is, in fact, at the very heart of the development and preservation of the pilgrimage priests of Prayāga's identity. Because the roles and functions are not as set as one might think, it is important to emphasise that this identity is not inflexible: it constitutes a reality in constant flux – in perpetual becoming – in which the individual and the group must negotiate, often unconsciously, the perception they have of themselves. As the magnitude of the Māghamelā and the Kumbhamelā constantly increases, it will be interesting to see what becomes of these pilgrimage priests and their pilgrims, as well as the various perceptions of each group, in the decades to come, as the needs and expectations of both these groups evolve in new directions.

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Notes

1 The Māghamelā gathers nearly 5 million pilgrims each year; the 2001 Kumbhamelā is said to have hosted between 20 and 30 million visitors on the key bathing days (9, 14, and 24 January 2001) and between 60 and 70 million over the course of the month (*Canadian Press* 2001; *Le Devoir* 2001; *National Post* 2001; *Times of India* 2001). It is important to stress that the Māghamelā is a very ancient pilgrimage, probably dating back to the seventh century BCE (Bonazzoli 1975), but the pilgrimage every 12 years, specifically named the Kumbhamelā, may be a far more recent invention, possibly originating later than 1857, superimposed on the existing yearly pilgrimage of the month of māgha (MacLean 2003).

2 I refer specifically to the works of D.P. Dubey (2001) and S. Rai (1993).

3 Caplan's dissertation is summarised in her essay titled "The Role of Pilgrimage Priests in Perpetuating Spatial Organization within Hinduism" (Caplan 1997).

4 Even though the perception the pilgrims project on the pilgrimage priests has a direct impact on the self-identity of the latter, the detailed analysis of this dimension shall be left for a later study. Here, I will mainly though not exclusively, concentrate on the functions and obligations of the tīrthapurohita as they were observed during our various visits to the site.

5 Because the fair of 2001 was much bigger than that of the previous year, the population density in the śivira was very different: nearly 1,050 pilgrims resided there for the entire month (the kalpavāsin), not counting the many visitors that stayed for only a few days.

6 All the Canadian assistants were, at the time, students in graduate programs at the University of Montreal, Concordia University, or the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM). The Indian assistants were all doctoral candidates under the supervision of Professor Vijoy S. Sahay of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of the University of Allahabad.

7 The Māghamelā of Allahabad and the Kumbhamelā of Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik could be referred to as "bathing fairs" because the religious practice central to these pilgrimages is the immersion into the sacred waters of the stream that flows past these gathering places. During these fairs, the astrologers, ascetic communities (*akhārā*), and groups of pilgrimage priests set precise moments during which the bathing is said to be most

auspicious: these are called the *śahisnāna*, the royal baths, during which the ascetics bathe first, after which the pilgrims bathe. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of people will try to bathe throughout these precious moments. On the subject of ritual immersion in a sacred stream, see Amado (1975).

8 The Allahabad pilgrim who has made the vow to stay in a śivira for an entire lunar month during the Māgha or Kumbhamelā is locally called a *kalpavāsin*. The word literally means "he who resides during a *kalpa*." As remarked to me by A. Couture in a personal communication, the term "seems to have the meaning of 'he who resides [or settles] in a directive or rule.'" However, the meaning attributed to the term by pilgrims is unclear. For the great majority of pilgrims themselves, and for the tīrthapurohita in charge of managing our campsite, the kalpavāsin is an individual who has vowed to remain on the site during an entire lunar cycle and, also, who has pledged to respect very specific daily vows (*saṃkalpa*) – namely, to take a bath in the Ganges, give an offering to the pilgrimage priest and execute a *pūjā* and partial recitation of the *Rāmacaritamānasa*.

9 The profession of priest is exclusively masculine. Except for the two women in charge of food preparation, all the female members of the family stayed in their permanent residence in Kītgañj, one of the old traditional neighbourhoods of Allahabad that borders the Yamunā.

10 Caplan (1982, 167) stipulates that the title "son of Gaṅgā" is specific to the tīrthapurohita of Varanasi. However, the information I collected during my research, concerning the pilgrimage priests of Prayāga as much as their pilgrims, contradicts this statement.

11 The four Vedic classes (*varṇa*) still present in contemporary India are the *brāhmaṇa* (the priests), the *ksatriya* (the rulers and soldiers), the *vaiśya* (the farmers and merchants) and the *śūdra*, who must serve the first three classes (*dvija*). However, also noted is another social taxonomy, the *jāti*, which classifies social groups based on the professions transmitted from father to son. The varṇa of the brāhmaṇa, for example, is divided into multiple jāti: among these can be found the *karmakandin* (or *yājñika*; those in charge of performing Vedic rituals), the *pūjāri* (temple priests), the *ghātia* (priests responsible for rituals taking place by the *ghāts* that border the sacred stream), the tīrthapurohita (priests primarily charged with taking care of the material and spiritual needs of pilgrims at a pilgrimage site [*tīrtha*]), and many others. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and they often overlap. Although the tīrthapurohita of Prayāga are known specifically as prayāgavāla, the pilgrims usually call them *paṇḍa*, a generic term that designates all brāhmaṇa with a ritual function.

12 The literal meaning of the term *gotra* is "herd of cows." Every brāhmaṇa traces his ancestral origins back to one of seven or eight sages who founded the lineage of the gotras; class is thus subdivided into several ancestral lineages. While classes (varṇa) and castes (jāti) are regulated by endogamy, the gotras follow exogamy.

13 The majority of pilgrims who resided in the campsite studied were of the brāhmaṇa class but were occupied as farmers in the villages of Uttar Pradesh from which they originated – villages all situated in the district of Pratapgarh. Three of them recounted how their ancestor (usually a temple priest) had to become a farmer to support the needs of his family; these stories refer more to family mythology than historical fact and present an example of the use of the āpaddharma clause.

14 The names of the individuals in the chart have been substituted for terms that designate the type of relationship they have with Paṇḍajī so as to preserve the anonymity of our subjects.

15 This heritage is in fact the transmission of the right to receive the pilgrims traditionally and formally associated with a particular śivira, pilgrims technically referred to by two designations that each reveal a characteristic specific to their status: *kalpavāsin* and *jajmāna*.

16 In his daily life outside the context of the melā, Bhaī I likewise fulfills no professional function; this supposes a certain dysfunction in the individual.

17 The use of hallucinogenic and psychotropic substances is not limited to the tīrthapurohita. Several ascetic Hindu groups consume marijuana, hashish, datura and/or opiates for religious reasons. On the subject of the role of this usage, see Hulin (1993).

18 For an in-depth discussion of the Hindu saṃskāra, see Kapani (1993, 53–165), Staal (1990) and Saindon (2000, 93–102).

19 Orthodox Hinduism accepts eight forms of marriage, the *gāndharva* and *brahma* types being two forms (on this topic, see Renou 1960, 50). The first refers to a union between a boy and a girl who mutually choose each other for love; this form is rare and reserved to the second class, the *ksatriya*. The second type, considered to be the most pure, is the union arranged by parents. The prayāgavāla, a very orthodox group whose concern for purity is deeply engrained, observe only the *brahma* type of marriage and strictly respect the criteria of endogamy, concerning class and caste, and exogamy, concerning gotra. However, before a marriage is finalised, the parents ensure the mutual consent of the future spouses.

20 Turner (1990 [1969]) would explain this reversal in the forms of address as a result of the liminal experience in which "the subaltern reaches the highest level" (100) or as a consequence of "the spontaneity, the immediacy and the 'existence' [that highlight] one of the ways in which the communitas opposes [or reverses] structure" (112). However, no levelling of the social hierarchy, a key component of Turner's theory, was observed outside this particular occurrence.

21 The notion of a secret language known only to the tīrthapurohita is probably linked to the belief in their divine nature – that is, at least, what tradition preaches. According to J. Gonda, the "gods love secrets and are enemies of direct (intelligible) presentation. This assertion implies that the gods like to use a vocabulary between themselves that is unintelligible to most men. They want to keep secret the names of important beings and objects" (quoted in Malamoud 1989, 244, n. 8). Malamoud (1989, 246) highlights the love of the priests – the brāhmaṇa – for the occult.

22 Among all the sites of Indian pilgrimage, only Allahabad hosts kalpavāsin; none of the other three sites of the

Kumbhamelā – Haridwar, Ujjain or Nasik – is characterised by this sort of pilgrim attendance.

23 These five vows (*vrāta*) are 1) to reside at the site the entire month of māgha; 2) to observe the bathing ritual (*snāna*) in the water of the Gaṅgā every morning; 3) to offer a daily donation (*dāna*) to the pilgrimage priest, son of Gaṅgā; 4) to perform a daily *pūjā*, which includes a recitation of the Hindi version of the *Rāmayāna*, the *Rāmacaritamānasa*; and 5) to eat no meat, onions or garlic and take only one full meal a day over the course of the entire month.

24 Anita Caplan (1997) highlights that one of the pilgrims she interviewed claimed to have offered a baby elephant. She specifies, however, that such donations are not common and that the godāna is symbolically represented by far more modest amounts: "Large gifts such as cows and elephants are not generally given; most donations are only a few rupees, with the minimum gift being 1.25 rupees … Most donations are still called *godān*, although the term *dāna* is also used to refer to payment" (221). Nonetheless, each year, as notably observed during the Kumbha and Half-Kumbhamelā, a few pilgrim families literally carry out this godāna by offering the priest a heifer in a highly ritualised ceremony.

25 It is interesting to note that several of our student collaborators from the University of Allahabad belonged to the brāhmaṇa class, though they were not pilgrimage priests, nor were they destined to any traditional function. The image these students had of the prayāgavāla depicted them as exploiters using the gullible beliefs of the pilgrims for their own personal gain. They saw themselves as liberated from this universe of meanings and "primitive and pre-modern" beliefs, to quote the phrasing of one of them. This perspective of our Indian teammates introduced an additional challenge to our research in 2001, because this judgment tainted not only their image of the prāyāgavāla but also that of the kalpavāsin, as one of the students said, "those poor farmers still controlled by naïve religious beliefs."

26 See, for example, *Matsyapurāṇa* (1917) 105/15.

27 Deliège (1994) explains the role and use of similar origin myths to justify certain rights and practices of castes that are particularly low in the social hierarchy.

28 Amado (1975, 965) also noticed this practice in the priests of Haridwar.

29 On this subject, see Saindon (2000).

30 The four sites that host the Kumbhamelā are also recognised as ideal places to perform postfunerary rites. The tīrthapurohita of each of these four sites are in possession of such bahī (on the use of these in Haridwar, see Amado 1975). It is interesting to highlight the fact that Mormons seem to recognise the genealogical rigour of these documents. In January of 2003, we met three Mormons in Nasik; they were asking for authorisation from Satish Shukla (the chief pilgrimage priest of Rāmakunda) to digitalise their bahī, so as to ensure the safeguard of the Hindu genealogy of the region.

31 According to Vidyarthi (1979, 118), on the other hand, it would seem the pilgrimage priests of Benares can serve multiple linguistic regions.

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