Ritual Clowns and Laughter in the Religions of the Nepalese Himalayas: The Symbolic Language of Transgressive Sacrality

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Abstract: This research explores the comical performances that are staged in the Nepal Himalayas on certain dates of the year fixed by the religious calendar. On these occasions jesters and tricksters turn the ritual performance into a joyful and laughable event and become the very heart of the rituals. The study focuses on the two most closely associated central figures of Indo-Nepalese Hindu culture: Brahmans (and world-renouncing ascetics) and kings. These key characters, who stand at the top of the caste hierarchy, are duly mocked and lampooned for their supposed faults: they are false, greedy, liars, gluttons. Their pranks include disguising as transvestites, illicit behaviour, and scatological gestures. I argue that these farcical events and rituals of inversion display the dark side of religion and express in a theatrical way enduring conflicts between the positive and the negative forces of the universe or between the material plane and transcendental entities that are believed to rule the world. The upside-down elements (*mundus inversus*) are clearly expressed in these sketches. However, the disorder and confusion exhibited during them remain within the boundaries of social norms.

Keywords: inversion rituals, trangressivity, religion, clowns, Brahmans, kings, Nepal

Résumé : La présente recherche traite des représentations comiques qui sont mises en scène dans l'Himalaya népalais à certaines dates du calendrier religieux lunaire. Durant ces mascarades, des bouffons et autres farceurs transforment le rituel en un événement joyeux et drolatique. L'étude est centrée sur deux figures centrales (souvent associées) de la culture hindoue Indo-Népalaise : le brahmane (et l'ascète renonçant) et le roi. Ces deux personnages, qui se situent au plus haut de la hiérarchie sociale, sont moqués et tournés en dérision. Ils sont présentés comme des gloutons, des êtres faux et avides, des menteurs. Les farces en question donnent ainsi une image inversée du monde (*mundus inversus*). Elles s'accompagnent de gestes scatologiques, de travestissements et de comportements illicites. D'après moi, ces mascarades et rituels d'inversion dévoilent le côté obscur de la religion et expriment d'une manière théâtrale les conflits entre forces négatives et positives de l'univers, ainsi qu'entre les plans matériels et les entités transcendantales qui gouvernent le monde. La confusion et le désordre restent cependant dans les limites des normes sociales en vigueur.

Mots clés : rituels d'inversion, transgressivité, religion, clowns, Brahmanes, rois, Népal

Introduction

One of the most striking trends that can be observed over the last decades in the study of religion and more specifically in the field of the anthropology of religion is the increasing focus on secular matters. Attention has progressively shifted from the specific repertoire of the sacred – its original language, its polarities, its objectives – to the interferences of secular matters in the religious realm, and more broadly in the politics of religion. Today a large number of anthropologists and sociologists try to show how the structure of religion can be reduced to a structure of power, how it is manipulated, and how it serves to legitimate prominent persons. This new paradigm is based on a dualistic understanding of society – religion being set to one side, politics to the other – and on a clear demarcation between both sides. It can be seen as the outcome of Marx's, Foucault's, and Bourdieu's work, all of which stresses the importance of power, class conflicts, and domination processes (of rulers, gender, etcetera) in the whole range of human sciences. According to these intellectuals, despite differences from one author to another, the "superstructure" – the ideology of society, its imagination, and its transcendental values – is determined by more basic forces coming from below, from the foundation of society: its material infrastructure and praxis (social action). It has become difficult to abandon the methodological fetish of this superposed vertical view of culture and society. More generally, post-structuralist studies have laid much more emphasis on analysing social processes than symbols. The main aim has been to unmask legitimations, misconceptions of power, and "symbolic violence" inherent in the functioning of any social system. In other words, the study of the use of religion to acquire political gains has progressively dethroned the study of the symbolic for itself and by itself, as was stressed in the works of the founders of anthropology, for instance Emile Durkheim (1991 [1912]).

This instrumentalist and somewhat functionalist move has produced significant results and has helped to clarify the dialectics between the secular and the religious in a number of domains. The socio-political function of religious forms is so commonplace throughout the globe that it cannot be ignored. I myself have published a number of articles that adopt these lines of thought, especially in connection with the use of Hinduism by Shah and Rana rulers in unifying Nepal or of indigenous religion by aboriginal groups in the Nepalese Himalayas in asserting their ethnic identity (Toffin 2013, 2016). There is no doubt that creeds, religious symbols, and ceremonies may serve in many cases to attract voters or to sustain political parties, or may be diverted from their altruist and spiritual aims toward more prosaic ends. They can be oriented in a pragmatic way and be utilised as an effective instrument in politics. For instance, in a number of countries, political leaders utilise religious gatherings to disseminate their slogans and ideas. The mixing of religion and politics therefore needs to be investigated over and over by anthropologists. However, such a limited analytic approach tends to reduce religious phenomena to a mere instrument in the hands of some manipulative groups rather than exploring their meaning in terms of faith and conviction to their ritual actors/believers. It has furthermore concealed many other questions pertaining to the study of religious matters, especially their specific symbolic language and semiotics. This dualistic paradigm can indeed be suspected of being largely Westernised, and therefore ethnocentric, and of applying explications and intellectual schemes typical of our modernised, secularised, post-industrialised globalised worlds to cultures and societies that are ruled according to different principles. This is particularly the case in communities where rituals are still part of daily life and where social relations are still organised around or through religious ideas. As expressed by the anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1973, 1984), in these "traditional," non-modern societies, religion still plays both the role of infrastructure and superstructure. It encompasses simultaneously the social and the ideological.

The present article is consonant with these theoretical propositions. It focuses on the clownish sketches performed during religious events in a large part of Nepal. Generally speaking, the religious ceremonies celebrated by Nepalese populations, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Hindu-Buddhist, or purely tribal, are characterised by seriousness and gravity. The presence of priests and the need to perform in a prescribed order a series of long complex rituals that include a number of ingredients and offerings require great care and a minimum degree of solemnity. While the technicalities of these rituals do not preclude sporadic jokes among the performers, and the consumption of alcohol or beer may add a hint of euphoria, the dominant mood is one of seriousness. However, on some occasions, clowns, jesters and tricksters take part in the proceedings and turn the ritual performance into a joyful, laughable, more often than not transgressive if not violent event. The higher-ranking positions within the society (priests and rulers) are momentarily satirised and loudly lambasted. In these cases, ludic aspects no longer constitute a minor or secondary element in the liturgy. They are the very core of the rituals.

How are we to interpret these performances? These somewhat chaotic, disruptive events are not staged merely for fun and entertainment. Indeed, they cannot be compared to simple safety valves that serve at times to release internal social tensions. They carry a symbolic meaning that is crucial to the understanding of religious systems and their internal dynamic conflicting poles. I argue in this essay that by and large, such farcical events and rituals of inversion, which are regularly held on certain fixed dates in the Nepali annual calendar, display the dark side of religion and express in a theatrical way enduring conflicts between the positive and the negative forces of the universe or between the material plane and the transcendental entities that are believed to rule the world. A critical moment of the year is chosen to enact them – for instance, the passage of one season to another, or the celebration of the New Year. These ironic parodies therefore not only convey a vision of social life turned upside down, a *mundus inversus*, inverting hierarchies, breaking down conventions, and switching what is usually regarded as low for what is ranked as high, just as carnival is usually understood by anthropologists. They also emphasise some basic predicaments in human existence: the polarities of life versus death, benevolent versus malevolent, and male versus female, as well as recreational versus destructive powers.

My purpose here is (1) to contribute, on the basis of Nepalese materials, to an inclusive repertory of ritual clown performances in religious contexts and to their semiotics, mainly in terms of symbolic transgressiveness, a concept that is sometimes translated in terms of ritual or liturgical inversion; (2) to explore the interaction between play and conflicting social realities by focusing on the context of these sketches and the status of their actors/participants; and (3) to investigate a particular symbolic ludic language without excluding the possible incidence of secular ends behind the religious structure. In truth, all religions are involved in politics, but at the same time they deal with matters beyond the purely secular realm.

The following questions will be addressed: How are we to analyse these processes of inversion and the transgression of bodily barriers? How are they crystallised in some figures, especially Brahmanical and kingly characters? Do they pertain entirely to the ludic sphere, and on what sort of symbolic grammar are they based? Under what conditions do they become political issues, challenging the social order and its established hierarchies, and a related question: When do farcical performances start to become scandalous and become objects of prosecution by the state or religious authorities? Finally, how is society inscribed in such carnivalesque events? Using specific ethnographical examples, I will address these questions in regard to Nepali society, whether "tribal" (indigenous) or based on Hindu castes. My investigations and analysis may contribute to the understanding of religious patterns in the Himalayas and throw some light on current debates in the field of the anthropology of religion.

It is important to clarify one further point from the very beginning: I do not reject the role of diachrony, yet the Nepalese ludic performances that will be dealt with hereafter are rarely documented historically, and history cannot be invented when data from the past are absent. Moreover, in regard to these celebrations, structural affinities beyond diachronic aspects cannot be denied.

The Language of Symbolic Transgression

There are further theoretical aspects to be discussed before presenting any ethnographic material. It is particularly important to highlight the transgressive and reverse dimension of these performances and the circumstances in which the norms of a given society are lifted, debunked or turned upside down (under certain conditions and in a limited time frame). I am interested here in dissonance and disharmony, in internal social or religious conflicts that are entrenched in a number of rituals and deities. I argue that such anti-structure features are a substantial element of the encompassing religious system, whether "traditional" or "modern." To take just one example related to the Indian sphere, the work by Indologist Wendy Doninger (2009, 2014) on Shiva and the heterodox Tantric tradition, which focuses on impurities, low castes, marginalised groups, and sex, is not an insult to the Hindu religion but a tribute to its complexity. This darker side of religious representations and practices is often hidden or considered to be too crude to mention. It is nevertheless crucial and has its own specific repertoire and characters.

Still in South Asia, these weird and ludicrous elements have already been documented and underlined in a number of publications authored not only by anthropologists/ethnographers (Obeyesekere and Obeyesekere 1976, for instance) but also by a wide array of Indologists/Sanskritists (Hiltebeitel 1989; O' Flaherty 2009; Shulman 1985) who, in stark contrast to more classical scholars (Dumont 1970; Kane 1930–62; Lingat 1967), do not restrict themselves to canonical texts but consider religion as primarily located in the human beings who practise it and consequently also address folk traditions and popular mythology. In fact, classical Hindu myths and rituals abound with transgressive features, which are a far cry from the laws enacted in *Dharmashāstra* texts. Bhairava, the terrifying form of Shiva, a key element in the popular religion of Nepalese populations, is the archetype of the god of transgression; he is the one who cuts off Brahma's fifth head (Chalier-Visuvalingam 1989, 157–229). Likewise, heterodox Shaivaite sects (Kāpālika, Aghori) indulge in transgressive actions and specialise in reversing the standards of purity: some use the left (impure) hand instead of the right (pure) hand during ritual eating processes, and they let their hair or fingernails fall into their food, etcetera. Furthermore, the members of these sects live near cremation grounds outside the village or city itself. Their immorality (human sacrifice, reference to Brahmanicide, inversion of caste duties) isolates them and places them outside conventional society. One example concerning the Pāshupata sect is given below.

The perspective developed here is therefore not totally ensconced in fieldwork that an ethnographer may undertake in direct contact with local people.[1] My approach bridges the division between the "little" and the "great" tradition. The boundaries between the two fields – folk practices and canonical texts – are in fact highly porous and must be viewed as operating in a dynamic, interactive manner. I propose a more global anthropological approach based both on popular ceremonies and on religious texts. How are we to understand, for instance, the full significance of popular Indra-related rituals among Nepali populations, especially Newars, without having some knowledge of classical Hindu myths about this deity? This is unimaginable. What at first appear to be elements of folk religion (the comic and clownish features of Indra, for example) turn out on closer examination to be elements of wider textual Hindu conceptions. In Nepal, just as in India, popular religion and religious texts have undergone intense mutual interaction over the centuries, mainly through the activities of Brahman priests. The result is a deep hybridity combining rural areas and cities, and scriptural and oral elements to the extent that people are unconcerned by these levels of religion and cannot distinguish between them.

In my opinion, the differentiation made in the 1940s and the early 1950s by Georges Bataille – the French

literary and philosophical author highly committed to avant-garde literary and artistic circles of the period – between two forms of sacredness, the "right sacred" and its reverse, or "left sacred," is one of the most convincing attempts to address these phenomena of hybridity (Bataille 1949, 1988–2001). Long before Victor Turner's (1969) dual opposite concepts of "structure" and "communitas" (or anti-structure), which are well known in the anthropological discourse, Bataille showed that the left and right sacred pair is an essential component of ritual performances and key to social cohesion. Both aspects of the sacred are needed to hold together society. They have to be considered together. Bataille's distinction obviously derives from the Durkheimian view of the sacred as based on a binary opposition between two poles: on the one hand, the pure, beneficent powers and forces that maintain physical and moral order, life, and health, and, on the other hand, those that are impure and evil and lead to disorder, sacrilege, disease and death (Durkheim 1991 [1912], 681–682) – a double meaning already present in the Latin term *sacer*, from which the word "sacred" is derived. In the Hindu examples given above (Shiva, Indra), the left sacred is not dissociated from the right sacred.

However, Bataille went a step further than Durkheim in the analysis of the "left sacred," and in what can be called an "anthropology of transgression," he took an interest in the extreme aspects of the sacred: those related to infractions, offences, destruction, orgiastic violence, crime, and transgressive eroticism. In these cases, ritual performances turn repulsion into attraction and break the boundaries of the self. For Bataille, the sacred has the force to violate taboos and to destroy normative daily rules. He went into much greater depth in these fields than Durkheim (1991 [1912]) and Mauss (1950), and he theorised this notion in a persuasive, dynamic manner, rightly stressing the relevance of transgression and deconsecration in his analysis of religious performances. In his work on Aztec ceremonies, for instance, he emphasised the role of laughter – transgressive, desacralising laughter – and queried: "Is the social structural order not based on laughter?" (Bataille 1930, 234). Sacred clowns and ceremonial comics clearly have to be analysed along these lines: they cross barriers and challenge social norms in a creative manner. Like Durkheim and Turner, Bataille interpreted these reversal anti-structure periods as the periodic rejuvenation of the socio-cosmic order. Every year moral order must be created anew from the violent chaos that preexists it. This regenerative paradigm is more consonant with religions based on a multitude of simultaneously coexisting divine poles than with more monolithic ones where irruptive sacred forces are to a greater extent repressed or concealed.

According to this perspective, the absolute dichotomy proposed long ago by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966, 46–47) in *The Savage Mind* between play and ritual no longer makes any sense. For the master of structuralism, the game involves a *disjunction* between players occupying an initially equal position. Inversely, the ritual would entail *conjunction*; it would create a union (or a communion) between individuals or different groups. Playfulness (which includes laughter and the comic) would generate differences, whereas a ritual would create equality. This opposition works in some religions (medieval Christianity, for instance) where laughter is banned on liturgical occasions. Yet it is defective in many other religious occurrences, where laughter and playfulness are an integral part of ceremonies. As this paper shows, within a large part of highland Asia, from Siberia and Tibet to Nepal, as well as in India, laughter and ludic elements are present in rituals as well as, in a broader sense, the cultural heritage. Indeed, they are even essential in a number of ceremonies. Buffooneries are not associated with any expressed religious beliefs by the concerned people (indigenous exegesis), but at an interpretative level they are symbols for more than just fun and play.

I will restrict the scope here to the two most closely associated (according to Hindu texts, they are said to be "married") central socio-cultural figures of Indo-Nepalese Hindu culture: Brahmans (and world-renouncing ascetics) and kings.

Brahmans and Ascetics

We now come to the ethnographic part of this essay which analyses the materials in a non-instrumental manner. As this study is a tentative synthesis of investigations that have already been published elsewhere with extensive data (Toffin 2014, 2018; Toffin and Shakya, 2011), I will lay emphasis here on interpretation and restrict my arguments to a limited number of examples related to some Nepali Hindu castes and ethnic groups, mainly the Newars, Tamangs and Gurungs, that I know better than others. More ethnographic data on this subject concerning other groups in Nepal would be welcome, even eagerly awaited, to confirm our views.

The human figures that are commonly lampooned in Nepalese masquerades and popular satirical sketches are Brahmans. For instance, the oral epics of Western Nepal, which are sung in an old Nepali dialect, are replete with mischievous, greedy and lubricious Brahman buffoons (Bordes 2005). I myself have watched in various Newar villages of the Kathmandu Valley Brahman buffooneries performed during local annual festivals devoted to Hindu and Buddhist village deities. Priests were represented as

drunkards, stumbling about, addicted to sex, unable to remember the necessary mantras to perform marriage rituals. At first sight, such parodic features seem odd in the cultural system and are somewhat blasphemous. Yet, as shown above, to deride and turn all of a sudden the highest persons in the hierarchy into the lowest ranking and to represent them as clowns are some of the characteristics of reverse sacrality. Such a comic theme is also quite frequent among Tibeto-Burman-language-speaking tribes living in high mountain areas (Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars, for instance): these communities never miss an opportunity to belittle Hindu Brahmans during their festivals, even though some of them call upon Brahman priests to perform their life-cycle ceremonies.

Despite their high status in terms of sanctity, the Hindu ascetics *yogī*, *jugī*, *bābājī* and *sannyāsī* are ridiculed in the same way throughout Nepal. During masquerades and festivals, renouncers are depicted as persons obsessed by sex, money and material belongings, that is, the exact reversal of their supposed religious state and expected behaviour. They deceive peasants and strive to take possession of their property. On other festive occasions, reference to renunciation is merely used to increase the merriment of the event. Among Newar settlers in the Nepalese hills, dancers incarnating the demonic *lākhay* (from the Sanskrit *rākshasa*) in the streets during monsoon festivals, for instance, are often accompanied by clowns disguised as ascetics. These pranksters carry *datura*, a type of grass widely known in South Asia for its toxicity and frequently used by renouncers, especially Aghori ascetics, who live near cremation pyres alongside rivers. Children from the same Newar group, disguised as ascetics, carrying alms bowls, wearing *rudrāksha* (grains of *Ealaeocarpus augustifolius*) necklaces around their necks, and dressed in saffron-coloured clothes – the colour of asceticism – take part in processions organised by bereaved families and circumambulate old medieval cities during the monsoon Sāpāru pageant, "the festival of the cows." Disguised as cows, they join the children of grieving families because the doors of paradise are exceptionally left slightly open to these sacred animals during this festival. With their horns, they succeed in opening wide the doors of heaven.

In fact, the figure of the ascetic with his hair knotted on the top of his head or long thick hair hanging down over his shoulders, living alone far from his parents and family, has caught the imagination of all Nepalese populations. In rituals, this stereotypical image applies to a number of characters called *jogī*, all of whom are clowns but sometimes with features that are not totally consistent with asceticism. Pirrko Moisala (1991, 341) describes semi-religious, semi-profane Gurung performances, called *soraha*, during which particularly interesting comic interludes, *jogī laba*, are performed. In these scenes, a villager disguised as a *jogī* wears a wooden mask and plays several characters: an astrologist, a fisherman and a blacksmith. I observed more or less similar impromptu plays among the Tamangs of the upper Ankhu Khola Valley (Dhading District), who speak a language related to Gurung. During winter festivities, *mane shyaba*, young men, their faces smeared with black soot, their bodies covered in feathers, run after young girls while making obscene gestures and suggestive comments. One of the young men flicks mud at the audience (Toffin 1987, 54). All these plays create an atmosphere of hilarity among the spectators.

It must be said that this type of transgressive sacrality is embedded in the Hindu tradition itself, at least among some radical renouncers and ascetics. In former times members of the Pāshupata Shaivite sect, for instance, had to worship Rudra in an unconventional manner: accompanied by loud laughter, songs, dance and meaningless sounds. They practised an unorthodox yoga, pretending to be asleep when awake, staggering as if their feet were deformed, and performing lewd gestures when encountering women and improper actions (that is, actions that blur the distinction between pure and impure), as well as speaking in a nonsensical manner, constantly repeating and contradicting themselves (Chalier-Visuvalingam 1989, 428). With all these extremist, asocial manners, Pāshupati ascetics in fact behaved like ridiculous clowns.

Among the Thakalis of Thak Khola, who live at a higher altitude than the two aforementioned groups, youngsters dress up as *yogī* to take part in the plays organised during the annual Phala festival (August–September). Their bodies are smeared with ashes, and their faces bear the traditional marks of Hindu ascetics (Vinding 1992, 312). They hold penis-shaped pieces of wood and explain to each other, laughing loudly, how to insert them into a woman's vagina. Spectators are invited to touch the fake phallus and to give their advice on how to fully penetrate women. These sketches are called *yogī langba* in the local language, which means "to play *yogī*." The clowns then bless each house in the village by turning around the dwelling's central pillar three times. In return for this act, *yogī* receive alcohol and food from the inhabitants. Clownery is therefore not dissociated from religious deeds and performances.

Yogī also play a role during the theatrical performances staged by Rajbamsi tribal communities in far eastern Tarai, and further east, in lowland Assam. This annual folk theatre is inspired by the *Ramayana* epic (Rouveure 2017). Most of the epic heroes are played

onstage by clowns dressed as *yogī*, who sometimes distort the canonical text. During the drama, *yogī* act as buffoons and mock the main characters of the play. Clowns also appear as *sannyāsī*, wearing orange-coloured clothes, tying their hair in a bun on the tops of their heads, and carrying a bag with their travelling items and a pair of tongs for cooking food over a fire wherever they go. These clowns do not wear masks; their faces are simply covered in makeup, and they sometimes whiten their faces with wheat flower.

Brahman and ascetic clowns are not specific to the Himalayas. They are a pervasive and conspicuous feature of a number of comic Indian theatres, both folk and classical. Just think of the *vidūshaka*, the buffoon in classical Sanskrit plays, who notably always belongs to the Brahman caste. This character is represented as a hunchback, deformed and cowardly. His main purpose in life seems to be to eat and to mock kings for their amorous fancies and other extravagancies. Classical Indian culture therefore includes a central satirical tradition of lampooning individuals of a superior rank in the social and religious hierarchy before a royal or popular audience. It is a well-known fact that these parodic schemes satirising priests and those in the highest social positions were found in medieval Europe mostly during the winter carnival period.

This proximity between the Brahman and the buffoon has persisted over the ages throughout the Indian subcontinent. It has survived today in many regions, for instance in Kerala. In this South Indian state, old local *kūttiyattam* classical theatre lends a central place to clowns with red turbans on their heads and large circular earrings. The faces of these humourists are decorated with white marks, and their moustaches are tapered at the ends. These characters wear *dhoti* (a long loincloth worn by men) and the twice-born thread, thus indicating their Brahmanical status. They express themselves in Prakrit, a common language, and explain to the audience the corruption that reigns over the world and about people's madness. To provoke even more laugher, they sometimes use a fake phallus and adopt scatological poses. This ludic *topos* contradicts the respect that is due to Brahmans on normal occasions.

In addition, in the course of some ceremonies, mainly funerals, Nepalese tribal religions also stage ritual battles between local or lama Buddhist priests and scary jesters gesticulating in all directions. Among the Gurungs living on the southern slopes of the Annapurna range, these mock fights are all about the salvation of a dead person's soul. Jesters try to capture this soul, which is represented by an effigy of the dead person, and to prevent it from travelling further toward the divine country of death and consequently being transformed into a benevolent ancestor. Tribal priests (*klihbri, klevri*) always take on a defensive stance and try to accompany the deceased toward their eternal resting place in heaven (Toffin 2018, 128–130). Clowns wear frightening masks, their heads wrapped in wild plants, and they hold a fake penis in their hands, brandishing it aggressively in front of the priests. They run jerkily around *klihbri*, often taking up indecent poses. There is a stark contrast between the tribal priests embodying customs, rules and regulations and the clowns, who bear more affinities with evil spirits and malevolent beings. The first group dances in a harmonious and regular manner to the rhythm of cymbals and drums; the heads of the pious dancers are adorned with a crown bearing the image of the five Buddhas. The members of the second group gesticulate wildly. This harmless battle explicitly refers to the opposition of gravity versus hilarity, and a latent conflict between the forces of order and those of disorder and chaos.

Interestingly enough, among Gurungs, clowns/jesters are impersonated by the bereaved families' sons-in-law, that is, a category of relatives who are in an inferior debt position with regard to wife-givers. Among these Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes practising cousin marriage, wife-takers are under the obligation to serve wife-givers and to perform a series of menial tasks for their benefit. The ritual battles between the two groups are therefore anchored in an asymmetrical system of services rendered and counter-services, as well as in a specific marriage exchange system. Brigitte Steinmann (1987, 250–252) has reported similar ritual battles among eastern Tamangs on the occasion of second funerals (*dge-ba*, *gewa*). All in all, these carnivalesque pantomimes reveal tensions between the different levels of the sacred; they express an enduring polarity between the right sacred and the left sacred, as Bataille (1949, 75–80) conceptualised it.

Kings and Clowns

In his brilliant *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*, David Shulman (1985) fully documents the deep affinity between these two figures, the sovereign and the jester, in South India. An analysis of South Indian myths and epic tales clearly reveals strong similarities between the two characters and unveils a very different image of dharmic kingship – the keystone of the socio-religious order – described in legal Indian texts about religion and regal affairs. This inverted image is characterised by disorders and paradoxes, negative features, foolish actions and the transgression of hierarchies. Interestingly enough, self-parody is integral to the two mutually dependent roles of Brahmans

and kings. As noted above, in courtly literature, the *vidūshaka* clown must by definition belong to the Brahman caste. In fact, the comic tone of local tales from the Chola period (ninth to thirteenth century CE) presents a reversed image of sovereignty. During the medieval Chola period, kings frequently became "mad," miming the alluring madness of the gods.

More generally, Shulman's analysis blurs the boundaries between clear-cut identities, and he questions several paradigmatic topics of Indology. In South India as in Nepal – the two countries mirror each other in these respects – the king is portrayed in mythological and religious texts as the humblest servant of the gods; royal endowment for temples and Brahmans therefore became one of the hallmarks of his ritual activity. The extraordinary number of temples that were built in the Kathmandu Valley and date from the medieval period is the direct outcome of this rule. Besides, South Indians and Nepalese kings generally had little coercive power; they were often weak, in a position that contrasts starkly with the glorious, grandiose epithets applied to them in inscriptions. Far from sustaining the kingdom, they threatened the political stability of their realm on numerous occasions through their unbridled, careless behaviour. They seemed committed to their own downfall and to being exiled. "The king is burdened by the evil consequences of his violent role" (Shulman 1985, 30). He is soiled by sin and pollution. His never-ending visits to temples throughout the year and his arduous pilgrimages to distant shrines reflect this very sinful condition and this burden of sorrow. Sometimes sovereigns had no other solution but to abdicate and to retire to the forest.

In the present section, I would like to document the ambiguous clownish aspects of kingship in Nepal's cultural tradition by focusing on a semi-religious theatre-*cum*-dance performance called *Kārtik Nāc* in Nepali and *Kāttī pyākhā* in Newari. It is acted out every year in the autumn over nine consecutive nights in front of the former Royal Palace in the Newar city of Lalitpur in the Kathmandu Valley (Toffin and Shakya 2011). The program is divided into two parts. The first part consists of three evenings and centres on a series of comic sketches that are staged in turn over successive years and are performed by three actors called *bāthah*, a word that means "wily" or "cunning," along with subsidiary characters. The second part lasts five days and consists of sacred dances accompanied by music played by costumed characters who are incarnations of various gods and goddesses. It focuses on Vaishnava deities, mainly Krishna, Varaha and Narasimha. The dancers and actors belong to a multi-caste socio-religious organisation comprising about 40 members. Rajopadhyaya Brahman priests and members of the Hindu Shrestha caste, one of the largest Newar castes, specialised mainly in shopkeeping and trade, head this group. The historical origins of these performances date back to the seventeenth century: they were founded by the Newar kings of Laliptur.

Here I will limit my analysis to the first three evenings and their main actors, the *bāthah*. These characters come from heaven, so it is said; they travel down to earth to observe the comic portrayal of humankind. In fact, they are totally amoral: they spend their time duping each other and playing tricks on the persons they meet. The play's storyline is a patchwork of successive deceitful actions, full of unexpected twists and surprises in a vein recalling the picaresque Spanish novels of the sixteenth and seventeen centuries. *Bāthah* are remarkable for their treachery and perfidy. They come across not only as cunning but also as foolish. One story, significantly entitled *Mahāmurkha* ("The Great Stupid One") is enacted simply to determine who is the silliest of the three.

The scatological or, to be more precise, lusty element is prominent in the plots.[2] *Bāthah* are driven by sexual urges and their desire for tasty dishes. They are gluttons and can swallow impressive amounts of food. In all these respects they belong to the large family of tricksters, figures that are well represented in the Himalayas. Farces that are dialogued in the local Newari language are watched by a number of spectators; although they are performed merely to entertain and make people laugh, their sacred religious background also has to be taken into account. For instance, *bāthah* pay homage to the gods before each play and perform a liturgical dance at regular intervals onstage to the rhythm of sacred music. At the end of the play, they bow to each other, their hands on their foreheads. In addition, they interact on a number of occasions with divine dancers who perform during the second part of the program, mainly as witnesses. Any other contact with the sacred sphere is detailed below.

Each *bāthah* incarnates one of the three royal cities that formerly ruled over the Kathmandu Valley in the medieval age: Kathmandu, Lalitpur (Patan) and Bhaktapur. The plays frequently allude to the recurrent rivalries between these three "little kingdoms," conflicts that in ancient times fuelled intestine feuds and shifting alliances between the capitals. The tricksters' masks are decorated with large moustaches and are of a different colour for each capital: light blue for Kathmandu, pink for Bhaktapur, and brown for Lalitpur. The one for Laliptur (*Yele bhātah* in Newari) is said to be made originally from human skin and contains tiger hair; it is imbued with supernatural powers and kept as a precious

sacred object by the head of the dance troupe, who is a Shrestha by caste and who, in the former times, had ties with royalty. Its "savage" aspects have some connection with the wilderness, which is currently associated with kingship. One feature is of great import to us here: these *bāthah* are often regarded as close cousins and as the former rulers of their respective capitals. They are therefore kingly tricksters. In addition, each *bāthah* symbolises a prominent deity in the Hindu pantheon: the Kathmandu trickster represents Brahma, the Bhaktapur trickster Vishnu, and the Lalitpur trickster Shiva. They are all sacred clowns.

The subversive burlesque performances of this triad of tricksters are of broader apotropaic significance. As in many other Himalayan masquerades (Dollfus and Krauskopff 2014, 179), they aim to ward off evil spirits from the community. They guarantee order and prosperity for human beings. The performers and their gurus often make plain their target when commenting on the rituals. Indeed, this apotropaic purpose also concerns the dance-*cum*-theatre performance itself. The tricksters perform their farcical stories at the beginning of the full *Kārtik* dance program to drive malevolent spirits and demons away from the stage. In this manner they prepare for the liturgical dances in the second part of the program and they contribute to the efficacy of these ritual performances. In this respect, there is a close parallel to classical Sanskrit theatre, in which the *vidūshaka* buffoon acts during the preliminary *pūrvaranga*, a cluster of rites related to the consecration of the stage that are performed before the beginning of the play itself (Kuiper 1979, 122). In both cases, clowns, jesters and buffoons are totally integrated in the performance and play a crucial role in its success.

These Nepalese tricksters are also reminiscent of the *vidūshaka*, the debunking Indian jester or clown and a crucial figure in Sanskrit drama, in their close association with kings. In classical India just as in contemporary Nepal, clowns and kings are fully identified with one another. There is a marked similarity between their physical attributes. And they share common features.[3] Kings appear in local Nepalese chronicles, *vāmshāvalī*, as foolish persons, subject to their overly human passions and dependent on the gods' will. Likewise, in the ballads and epics still sung today in far western Nepal, kings are liberally satirised: they are mocked for their excesses, their blustering and boastful attitudes (Bordes 2005). Their only concern is the spicy food they are served. Furthermore, they exercise their power by disguising themselves and cheating people. What's more, they are frequently demonised. The iconic persona of the king, his idealised image, is totally transgressed. Very far are we from the idyllic righteous king, brave on the battlefield and equanimous in his royal court. Here the king is the paragon of criminality.

This image of a powerless, mischievous king can be associated with the various Nepalese folk representations of the god Indra. Among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Indra, the king of heaven and of the gods, and the prototype of Hindu kingship, is depicted as a thieving deity who disguises himself to rob plants from a garden in the Kathmandu Valley (to offer these flowers to his mother) and who is caught red-handed by local peasants (Toffin 1992). Indra is subsequently thrown into jail for ten days and is exposed to the public in the streets of the old Kathmandu city, his arms stretched out as he is pilloried. As in India, the Nepalese Indra is commonly described as a royal buffoon, his transvestite guise leading him into pitiable situations. He is portrayed as a tragicomic victim. A number of elements of the Indra Jātrā festival, which is celebrated every year in August–September at a time fixed by the lunar calendar, concur with this antithetical feature. In South India, Indra is sometimes even depicted as a clumsy ogre or as being possessed by a hysterical demon (Shulman 1985, 295).

The hidden semantics of kingship are thus hardly consistent with the divine, eminent, glorious status of Hindu kingship. In the above-mentioned tales, kings clearly betray their ideal of defending dharmic norms and equity and of providing their subjects with wealth. In the numerous myths about him, Indra is portrayed as continuously expiating his "crimes" against social norms and Brahmans. He is the archetype of the antinomian hero and god. Moreover, Indra (and kings) is associated with death. The Indra Jātrā festival in Kathmandu city and in other Newar settlements in the Kathmandu Valley is connected with ancestor worship and funeral rituals. Death ceremonies are one of the main components of this festival. Interestingly enough, such data correspond to the authentic picture of the Malla medieval period and the empiric situation of sovereignty as revealed by historic documents. Some Newar Malla kings are known for their lustre, piety and artistic achievements, but many others are very far from embodying Indra as the cosmic pillar that holds the heavens above the earth; they are better known for their extravagances and for leading their kingdoms to disaster. Because of internal dissent and family conflicts, Malla sovereigns did not in fact wield much power. In the local chronicles, regal abdication was not rare.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it may be concluded that in Nepal, as in many other regions of the world where

religious symbols and ceremonies are still central to society, laughter, comedies and burlesque performances cannot be dissociated from festivals, rituals and ceremonies. Clowns perform freely and more or less spontaneously before or during more solemn parts of these events, sometimes in conjunction with conventional priests. Hence, in this Himalayan country, just like anywhere else, gravity and hilarity represent two antithetical poles, the obverse and the reverse sides of the sacred. It is clear that in these circumstances pranksters, jesters and tricksters belong to the religious/symbolic sphere.[4] Minimising uncertainties is not the priority of such ludic performances. On the contrary, masquerades and liturgical inversions belong to the realm of paradox and ambiguities. Yet religious motivations, such as warding off evil spirits and forces of death, still prevail.

Game here is not totally dissociated from ritual actions, though jesters behave without attributing any special religious meaning to their buffooneries and do not consciously act in a ritualised manner (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Ritual clowns just play with category boundaries (for example, beyond animal and human realms) and human stereotypes. They deflate the ego of power of high-status persons. From a broader perspective, celebrants, priests and clowns represent together the two opposite faces of the same symbolic expressive action. They are all extremely codified and transcendentally infused. They convey unconventional attitudes and deliver a message within the community about the continual, unavoidable confrontation between essentially wild, bestial, untamed actions and enterprises dictated by religious goals, as well as between life and death. As suggested by Graeber and Sahlins (2017, 2), "human societies are hierarchically encompassed in a cosmic polity populated by beings of human attributes and metahuman powers who govern the people's fate." An awareness of this assumption is essential to fully understanding ritual play.

In the series of ethnographic examples of clowns in rituals discussed in this article, these characters are associated willy-nilly with demons, kings, Brahmans, ascetics or other figures, both human and non-human. They are basically ambiguous. To take just one example, they sometimes represent demons, even though they are also said to drive away demons. Shulman (1985, 301) rightly argues: clowns "enshrine ambiguity as an epistemological principle."

Is this cultural pattern new? Has it emerged in conjunction with the country's recent transformations: the fall of the monarchy and its replacement by a republican system, the increasingly blurred distinction between village and city, or the development of egalitarian ideas among the population? The answer is no. My personal observations (from 1970 onwards) and the available historical data concur to defend the idea that these laughable features already existed in the Rana period (1846–1951) and Shah panchayat regime (1960–90), and probably long before, though some minor changes may have occurred. As a matter of fact, despite profound transformations over the last decades, Nepalese society, especially small-scale rural communities (but also, in some cases, the neighbourhoods of old cities dominated by religion), are still partly ruled by preindustrial, premodern sociological schemes. The comic plays analysed in this paper have not even been affected by the recent indigenous *janajātī-ādivāsī* (first inhabitants) rights movement (very active in Nepal since the 1990s) and its fight against upper Hindu castes accused of maintaining indigenous ethnic groups in a subservient state, of depriving them of power, and of perpetuating exclusionary practices. These plays pertain to the *longue durée* (long-term history), a concept developed by the French historian Fernand Braudel (1949, xiii) some decades ago, and they belong to the old premodern symbolic order and express much more archetypal, enduring tropes.

As Figure 1 – which summarises the main oppositions between sacred jesters and canonical priests – shows, the upside-down nature of these comical events cannot be contested. Nepalese ritual clowns typify the inversion of conventional status and the reversal of the normal order. They lampoon and satirise the highest-ranking human figures in the socio-religious hierarchy and the representatives of higher moral values (Brahmans, ascetics, kings). Although belonging to the religious sphere, they propose a desacralised image of the world. Moreover, they cause confusion regarding their gender. Clowns are often transvestites: men dressed as women exhibiting huge breasts or behaving in an obscene manner with a fake phallus. They represent forces that are normally forbidden or repressed. Among certain populations (Tamangs, Gurungs, Newars), ritual clowns embody the wild, non-tamed elements, and their costumes are made of forest plants. In many cases their masquerades prove to be a chaotic explosion of hidden energy. They incarnate anti-structure elements and transcend the boundaries between the natural and supernatural (Handelman 1981, 330). Their repertoire violates routinely accepted precepts and can be described as transgressive.

However, contrary to what one may think, the disorder and confusion displayed during these shows remain within the boundaries of social norms. The clowns/jesters are more often than not personified by low-caste people. In the same way, demons and evil spirits are frequently

Sacred clowns, jesters	Canonical (non-ecstatic) priests
disorder	order
transgression	submission
uncontrolled actions	enterprises dictated by religious goals
confusion over sex	sexual boundaries
confusion between animals and humans	animals and humans separate from each other
confusion about status	enforced status
death (occasionally), but also fertility	life and regeneration
erratic behaviour	self-control
ludic	non-ludic
low-status people	high-status people

Figure 1: Symbolic and social oppositions between sacred clowns and canonical (non-ecstatic) priests: a summary

represented by "untouchable" groups during festive ceremonies. As far as indigenous groups (who live for the most part beyond the pale of orthodox Hinduism) are concerned, these performers often belong to the group of sons-in-law, wife-takers, who practise a system of reciprocal matrimonial exchange (cross-cousin marriage) and are in an inferior situation compared to their in-laws. The social hierarchy therefore remains intact and is not really challenged. This is no doubt the reason why these clowns are not persecuted by the political authorities. They do not cause a scandal or represent a danger to the social order. As a matter of fact, no religious council exists in Hindu Nepal to condemn such temporary transgressions. The situation in this respect is quite different from medieval Europe, where the Catholic Church could condemn "pagan rituals" and often ban them, especially toward the end of the Middle Ages (Koopmans 2013). Although addressing religious matters, Nepalese pranks never take a scandalous turn.[5]

An obvious deduction that can be drawn from the above discussion is that the symbolic language under scrutiny is not specific to Nepal but is common to a number of different cultural contexts throughout the world.[6] In all cases, these ludic rituals are focused both on breaking social norms and on expressing basic religious polarities (for example, death versus life, wild versus tamed). They do not dissociate play from ritual concerns. For the most part, they differ from each other by the degree of transgressivity achieved and the content of the religious language.

To conclude, two last aspects may be stressed. First, these comic characters repel sorrow and death. For example, the legendary origins of the carnivalesque Gāī Jātrā (festival of the cow), which is still performed today in the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley, are attributed to a Malla king's desire to alleviate his queen's sorrow after the death of their son (Toffin 2014, 109). The rules of the game prevail, and the ability of carnival to overcome death is enforced. Yet clowns cannot be isolated from a broader religious and even cosmological background: they embody revitalisation forces and life-giving energies. That is the reason why more often than not masquerades are performed at seasonal changes in the agricultural cycle and in sudden moments of cosmological crisis. They can be associated with death, as we have said above, but they are also regularly linked with rituals of fertility and regeneration; they restore a lost balance and prefigure a new future. In other words, ritual clowns convey ideas of instability, unpredictability and innovation. They are related with consecutive phases of destruction and construction.

Second, these situational ritual performances bear close affinities to theatre. They are presented and organised as plays that are put on for villagers or city dwellers (and sometimes also for gods). They are mainly acted out to entertain and amuse people, to provoke laughter and to provide a source of aesthetic pleasure. But on these occasions, society itself is also part of the representation, affirming its values and its lines of tension. More specifically, the playful and creative elements that are exhibited in a clownish manner are balanced against other, more rigid and formalised, elements. This explains why these scenes often represent in a highly dramatic fashion conflicts between gods and demons, the forces

of order against the forces of chaos. Furthermore, these unceremonial plays are organised in a narrative way, with a plot and actors, and in most cases they narrate the triumph of good over evil after a period of confusion and disorder. They clearly belong to the spirit of carnival and its various manifestations. Like actors in a theatrical drama, Nepalese ritual clowns provide the spectator with fiction and dreamlike moments.

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Notes

1 On a different subject, Gloria Raheja (1988), an anthropologist, has disclosed the hidden, dark side of the gift, which can undermine the status of the Brahmin if he accepts it and lower his position in the hierarchy. The degraded category of Brahmin temple priests in India and Nepal (because they accept gifts from sinners) bears witness to this viewpoint.

2 Although a written form is supposed to have existed a long time ago and was then lost, these sketches belong to the oral tradition. Since 1980, they have been increasingly published in colloquial Newari in the form of booklets.

3 However, a marked difference must be noticed: we laugh *at* the kings, but we laugh *with* the clown (Shulman 1985, 296).

4 Compare also Makarius (1970) and Handelman (1981).

5 Yet as a rule, political satires in the Newari language were allowed only over a short period of time (eight days) in the Kathmandu Valley, during the rainy season. Compare Toffin (2014, 118–125).

6 On the carnival as a transgressive event involving social uprising in a number of different societies and cultures, see, for instance, Le Roy Ladurie (1979) and Gauthard (2014).

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