Illicit devotion

Priests for a day, snake charmers for a lifetime

Maria Angelillo

The Kalbeliya caste is closely and, in many ways, associated with the snake, specifically the cobra. The social, economic, cultural, and religious profile of the caste, also known by the names Sapera and Nath, is defined, in part or whole, by its relationship with the cobra. Although other forms of employment have greatly replaced the traditional profession of snake charmers associated with the caste, the connection with the snake remains strong. Even in its new configuration as a caste of musicians and dancers, the community has retained its connection to the cobra, which is present in many aspects of Kalbeliyas' artistic performance. Moreover, although Indian law has made snake charming illegal, the traditional profession of snake charmers is still part of the caste's economic strategies and socio-cultural profile. Generally associated with mendicancy, snake charmers' profession also involves ritual skills, which are typically required at the *Nāg-pañcamī* (Snake's Fifth) festival, a minor festival celebrated throughout North India on the fifth day of the light half of the Hindu month Sāvan (Śrāvaña). In this paper, after discussing the role of the cobra in defining the past and present socio-cultural profile of the caste, I will attempt to outline the role of the Kalbeliyas in *Nāg-pañcamī* celebration in Rajasthan.

Keywords: Kalbeliyas; *Nāg-pañcamī*; cobra; snake charmers.

1. Introduction[1]

In the present paper, I wish to consider some aspects of the relationship between the members of a North Indian caste and a non-human animal species to show to what extent such a relationship affects the human community's social, economic, and cultural profile. By examining an interspecies

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relationship, I will argue that the human community's identity is embedded in the processes of being affected by and responding to the non-human animal.

Although I am aware of its analytical limitations and its unsuitability to serve properly the demands of social analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), I am using the term identity to refer to what human animals are in social terms. As Clinton Sanders explains, "when one has identity, he is situated, that is, cast in the shape of a social object by acknowledgment of his participation or membership in social relations" (Sanders 2003: 409). Identities, far from being fixed and steady, arise and take shape in specific situations, making sense of social actors and their interactions. Through the word identity, I will refer to social actors' roles, statuses, and group memberships as results of social interactions. Identity will be considered both what establishes and the results of social interactions: it is the ever-changing configuration social connections are based on and result in. Through the case study, it will be argued that non-human animals materially affect human animals' lives and discursively construct their social and cultural identities.

Interspecies relationship fuels cultural practices and social transformation. Several studies (Wolch 1996; Wolch and Emel 1998; Shepard 1996; Hamilton and Taylor 2013; Govindrajan 2018) have shown that non-human animals materially affect the lives of human animals and discursively construct human animals' social and cultural identities. Accordingly, I argue that the human community's social identity depends on its relationship with a non-human animal species: its distinctiveness as a group and collectivity depends on its connection to the non-human animal species.

The human community derives from its relationship with the non-human animal species economic support, professional placement, definition of its function within society, social status, but, above all, its community nature, the element on which being and belonging to a community is based. In my opinion, awareness and a sense of belonging to a community, despite changing historical and social circumstances and the group's response to the changing socio-cultural context, are influenced by the relationship with non-human animal species.

The group is defined as a collective by its relationship with the non-human animal. This relationship, however, has changed over time, linking human and non-human animals for different reasons and purposes. I will state that the most recent form of the relationship is mimetic and based on human imitation of some of the features of the non-human animal.

The humans and animals involved in the interspecies relationship that will be investigated in the following pages are the members of the Kalbeliya caste and the snakes, respectively.

Before addressing the key issues of this contribution, it is necessary to point out that the observations and assertions in this essay are based upon my interaction with the Kalbeliya community

living in a camp on the outskirts of the holy town of Pushkar (Ajmer district, Rajasthan). Consulting studies (Dutt 2004; Robertson 2002; Gold and Gold 1984; Ranwa 2021) relating to the Kalbeliya caste but conducted mainly with communities from the Jaipur and Jodhpur districts, I noticed that the Pushkar community's features are not comparable to either the Kalbeliya living in the urban centres of Rajasthan or the Kalbeliya settled in the villages of the region. As has been explained elsewhere (Angelillo 2018), the Pushkar community is deeply influenced by the socio-religious characteristics and economic profile of the holy town of Pushkar. Some of the features of the Pushkar community that are not shared in full by either the urban Kalbeliyas or the rural ones are: the economic dependence on foreign tourists, the almost total lack of literacy even among the youngest members of the community, the increasing, both male and female, abuse of alcohol, and the location in a camp without running water and electricity separate from both Pushkar and the nearest village of Ganaheda.

I conducted the research primarily through overt participant observation during repeated stays of between two and six months on an annual basis in situ from 2007 to 2014. Several aspects of the community's socio-cultural profile and present-day status were investigated over time, and the content of this contribution is a product of the research methodology adopted. I used participant observation in an open-ended manner to explore and examine research questions that emerged with investigation rather than preconceived hypotheses. The issue I refer to in the following pages emerged thanks to the new questions and directions the participant observation generated. Overt participant observation was supplemented by unstructured interviews, guiding ordinarily occurring conversations toward topics of interest. I consciously chose never to resort to the help of translators and interpreters, and I preferred to communicate directly with the community members using the languages they know, first Hindī, which I already knew from my early fieldwork periods, Mārvāṛī and the so-called *gupt bhāṣā*, spoken and known exclusively by the members of the caste, which I learnt later. Key informants were of utmost importance, both as guides for me in the role of participant observer and as means of vouching for my legitimacy within the setting, providing an insider's stamp of approval.

2. The human animals: Kalbeliyas

Even if the Kalbeliyas are said to be the original settlers of Delhi and its neighbourhood, today they are mainly concentrated in the north-western Indian state of Rajasthan. Due in part to their past nomadic lifestyle, Kalbeliya communities are scattered all over Rajasthan, but the largest communities are found in Pali, Ajmer, Chittorgarh, and Udaipur districts.

Kalbeliyas' social and cultural profile is the outcome of multiple affiliations and ways they have externally been perceived, recognized, and named by the different social actors with whom they interact. According to a process known as accretive, the Kalbeliyas have retained multiple identities, between which they can switch as circumstances or context require. Teresa Morgan invokes the notion of code-switching to illuminate this phenomenon (Horrell 2018: 8).

Taking shape in and through temporally and spatially situated relationships, Kalbeliyas' social and cultural features can be traced to their several names, ethnonyms, exonyms, and endonyms. According to the Rājasthānī system of multiple naming (Bharucha 2003: 57), the Kalbeliyas are labelled and identified by different caste names, each of them suggests not only the role and the status played in and accorded by the local society but it also evokes the several points of view the group can be looked through and understood by. The Kalbeliyas are also known as Saperas, Naths, Jogis, and Gypsies.

The Kalbeliyas, claiming descent from Kanipāv, one of the nine Nāths, the semi-divine masters of the practice of haṭha-yoga that inspired the *nātha-yogin* movement, are considered a caste of householder Nāths.

As such, the male members of the caste place the word Nāth immediately after their name, using it as a surname. Kanipāv (also spelt Kāniphā, Kānipā or Kānhapā), besides being listed as one of the renowned Nine *Nāth*s, is one of the foremost masters of the Kānphaṭā ("split-eared") *jogī*s and, as Briggs has noted (1938: 69), there is a tradition that traces the origins of the *vāmmārg* to Kanipāv, in turn disciple of Jālandhar Nāth, who was himself one of the original Nāths. According to Briggs, while Jālandharipā was confined in the well at Ujjain, from which he was finally rescued through the help of Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth, his disciple Kānipā occupied his teacher's place as *mahant*. He afterwards founded a panth and from this line came Gopicand who is considered a disciple both of Kānipā and Jālandharipā (Briggs 1938: 69).

It is not unlikely that the Kalbeliyas have preserved several traditions and customs connected with their Tantric lineage (Sila Khan 2000: 288). Many social and cultural characteristics of the caste descend from its belonging to the Nātha *sampradāya*: its funerary rites and burial practices (Gold and Grodzins Gold 1984: 119, 121-122), its relationship with the supernatural world, its therapeutic expertise, the traditional roles and functions played by its members within Rājasthānī society as snake charmers, *devătā*s, singers and composers and ritual specialists warding off hail and pestilence. Besides placing them within the complex, articulated, stratified Hindu world, their belonging to the Nāth *sampradāya* explains their long and deep relationship with the cobra, whom they are regarded as the priest (Bharucha 2003: 53).

The Kalbeliyas believe their traditional craft of snake-charming derives precisely from a curse they received from their guru, Kanipāv Nāth. The versions of the story that merited Kanipāv Nāth and his disciples confinement outside the village space differ in some points, but they converge in arguing how Kanipāv Nāth, unlike Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth, was immune to the effects of snake venom. In one version, told by Bheelnath (Kalbeliya *ḍerā*, Ganaheda, September 2024), Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth issued a challenge as to who could drink a bowl of snake venom. Kanipāv Nāth, without any hesitation, drank it all, while Gorakhnāth and Matsyendranāth hesitated to gobble up. In another version of the story (Sarvannath, Kalbeliya *ḍerā*, Ganaheda, September 2024), it was Kanipāv Nāth's imprudent offering of a bowl of poison, as the only good he possessed, to Gorakhnāth, Matsyendranāth, and the other *Nāth*s that caused Gorakhnāth's irate reaction. Whatever it was that triggered Gorakhnāth's anger, the result was that by accusing Kanipāv Nāth of eating and drinking anything and of wanting other Nāths to die, the Kalbeliya guru was doomed to keep far from human society. The Kalbeliyas inherited from their guru both the ability to handle poisonous snakes, particularly the cobra, and to make a living out of it, and the confinement in the space of the so-called *jaṅgal*. According to the caste's members, the word *kālbeliya* suggests dominion over poisonous snakes and the fear of death, *kāl* glossing as death. The word *sañperā*, rarely used by Kalbeliyas to refer to themselves, denotes all over India snake handlers.

The word *jaṅgal*, as it is commonly used in Rajasthan, describes any place devoid of anthropic activity, untouched by human presence, and "any area that is not included in fixed and permanent settlements of villages or towns" (Rao 2003: 187). The term designates a space defined by socio-cultural rather than ecological characteristics. A *jaṅgal* is defined as any territory that lies outside any inhabited centre and is neither permanently nor occasionally characterised by the presence of human settlements. The term has undergone a long evolutionary history in the course of which it has been endowed with markedly different and even opposing connotations and meanings. As Zimmerman (1999) has explained, the positive connotation of the Sanskrit word *jāṅgala* has completely disappeared in the Hindi word *jaṅgal*, which, besides being burdened with negative valences, alludes to an environment with opposite characteristics to that designated by the Sanskrit word *jāṅgala*. While, in ancient India, "all the values of civilization lay on the side of the jungle" (Zimmerman 1999: 18) and the *jāṅgala* incorporated land that was cultivated, healthy, and open to Aryan colonization, today, the *jaṅgal* is characterized by the distance, physical and ideological, from the village, the precipitate of purity and civilization. The space referred to as *jaṅgal*, in addition to harbouring those who are not of society, harbours those who are not of this life: the *jaṅgal* is thought to be the abode of spirits, *bhūt*, and *jinn* (Dove 1992: 239). Originally inhabitants of the *jaṅgal*, the Kalbeliyas are still considered to be able to

deal with and tame the primordial powers hills, deserts, jungles, forests, and wilderness are believed to be full of (Deliège 1992: 170, Deliège 1993: 535).

As *jaṅgal* residents, the Kalbeliyas are conceived as people of disorder who can tame the disorder and the primordial powers that threaten villagers, making them disorganized, unlucky, confused, enraged, and impoverished. Kalbeliyas-Naths are considered able to rule the disorder and deal with it without succumbing to its forces. The Kalbeliyas are therefore likened to hyphens "who live on the fringes of society and act as intermediaries between the human world and the wilderness that surrounds it" (Deliège 1993: 535).

Since space not only reflects the social universe, representing its structures and the logics that govern its functioning, but also determines its form and content, the contiguity with the environment of the *jaṅgal* has, in my opinion, largely contributed to the low social status accorded to Kalbeliya caste. On the other hand, "the concept of pollution attaches not only to groups and individuals but also to places" (Béteille 1965: 20), and the permeability between different dimensions of manifestation is such that the impurity of individuals penetrates spaces and vice versa. The Kalbeliyas derive from the connection with the *jaṅgal* the impurity and subsequent low social status that defines their social profile and caste membership. The Kalbeliyas, who until recently traced their living space of choice precisely in the spaces considered *jaṅgal*, belong to a Scheduled Caste, a legal category also gathering those who in the past were assimilated to untouchables. Their association with the *jaṅgal* is not, in my opinion, an outcome of their status, but its cause. The placement in the space of the *jaṅgal* is functional for the snake-charming craft, which primarily involves catching snakes.

Although at present the Kalbeliyas are no longer confined to the space of the *jaṅgal* and many communities live permanently in built-up areas, the community I conduct my research with still lives on the fringes of village society. Its members, even the youngest, are all illiterate, and none benefit from the schooling opportunities that are present in the area. This implies that all the community's members of working age fall back on the caste's characteristic forms of earning, including, first and foremost, snake charming, begging, and performing as dancers, singers, and musicians. In all three activities, the relationship with snakes is decisive.

3. The non-human animals: snakes

Snakes (*Serpentes*) are known to play a key role in the creation and maintenance of ecosystems, and their absence can destabilise critical ecological cycles (Narayanan and Bindumadhav 2019: 403). Snakes are common throughout India: being cold-blooded, they adapt easily to challenging conditions to source food. Snakes have adapted to fill niches in multiple different ecosystems, including marine,

arboreal, and subterranean environments. Subsequently they are as comfortable on land as they are in water and in tree canopies, vastly expanding the horizon of their habitable locations to diverse ecologies. Therefore, human encounters with snakes are no longer restricted to areas regarded as wild or forested (Narayanan and Bindumadhav 2019: 404). According to the Million Death Study, the most comprehensive study on snakebites in India, India has one of the highest rates of deadly venomous snake bites globally, with an estimated 45,900 human deaths annually (Mohapatra *et al.* 2011: 2). Recognized as life-threatening animals, snakes are greatly feared even though of the 285 breeds of snakes in India, only about 50 are venomous enough to deliver a harmful or fatal bite to humans. Of these, only 15 are medically important, that is, responsible for human fatalities, of which only four are widely distributed and responsible for most fatal snakebites in India (Narayanan and Bindumadhav 2019: 404). According to Komal Kothari, 90 percent of snakes are non-poisonous, but people bitten by snakes are afraid of dying, not realizing that the snake bite probably won't kill them (Bharucha 2003: 125). Fear of snakes undoubtedly permeates the daily lives of people. Nevertheless, far from being limited to fear, the Indian perception of snakes is particularly complex and driven by many contradictory feelings. Besides playing vital roles in rural and urban ecologies, snakes, in India, have been the recipients of manifold cultural interest since ancient times.

Serpent depictions in art pre-date the presence of the Indo-Aryan culture in South Asia, where the "earliest evidences of the topic of snakes are to be found in the pictorial representations from Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Lothal, that is from the time of about 2000 BC" (Härtel 1976: 664).

As for religious-cultural narratives, references to snakes are both old and widespread, dating back to Vedic literature and epic myths. *Atharvaveda* already provides a spell against the snakes' deadly bite, simultaneously praising and threatening the snakes. Already in this earliest phase, the attitude towards snakes is characterised by a fundamental ambivalence: snakes are feared and worshipped at the same time. The danger of encountering them is averted, but their blessings are sought and coveted.

The epic poem *Mahābhārata* is the first text to treat snakes extensively as a class of beings collectively known as *nāga*s and to dwell extensively on the stories of many of them (Lange 2019). I do not deem it necessary to go over the presence of snakes and their status in Indian literature here, being the subject beyond the scope of this contribution. Besides, the theme has already been brilliantly dealt with by several scholars: it is worth recalling Vogel's exhaustive study on the presence of the snake in Sanskrit literature and folklore (Vogel 1926).

Rather, the ambiguous and even contradictory character of the Hindu perception of snakes will be highlighted, being probably conducive to the snakes' worship. Hindu literature presents the image of an animal that is as sacred as it is dangerous, an object of devotion and, at the same time, of terror.

Hindu religious imaginations of this non-human animal consequently contribute to fear, uncertainty, and tolerance of snakes.

Narayanan and Bindumadhav (2019) show that human-snake relations in India are manifested through contradictory feelings towards snakes as pests/victims, as killable/nurturable, and to be revered/to be demonized. These dualities are a result of the tolerance that human societies develop due to the influence of religion and culture on the one hand, and intolerance due to the purported fearsome and repulsive nature of the animal on the other (Singh *et al.* 2024: 606). In the Rājasthānī context, and especially in Pushkar, the simultaneous awareness of the life-threatening nature of snakes and their holiness is palpable. This double and opposing notion dominates the common perception of people and gives sense and scope to the snake-charming profession. The human attitude towards snakes in India has been described as "at the crossroads of danger and devotion" (Yuan *et al.* 2020: 112), which are the two opposites snake charmers move between.

4. Snake charming

Even if the fear inspired by snakes may be the principal motive behind the worshipping of snakes (Allocco 2009: 29), according to my experience in Rajasthan it is generally not conducive to their killing by human communities. In the Pushkar setting, it is the shared tendency to allow snakes to live to make sense of the role of the Kalbeliyas as snake charmers. As snake charmers, the Kalbeliyas are still commonly asked to free private and public spaces, such as restaurants, hotels, houses, shops, etc., from the presence of snakes. Their function as snake charmers is based on two basic assumptions: the first concerns a society in which humans and snakes can coexist with minimal detriment to the latter. The second assumption concerns the polarized human feeling toward snakes, feared and revered simultaneously. In snake charming, there is a lay component, consisting of removing on-request snakes from human spaces, and a devotional side. As snake charmers, the Kalbeliyas can attract donations with a creature that, as explained, is full of religious symbolism, mystery, and danger to Hindus.

Even though snake charming is de facto illegal, the Kalbeliyas have not sacrificed their traditional profession even to partial secrecy. The Indian Wildlife Protection Act, enacted in 1972, effectively made snake charming illegal (Dutt 2004).

The Indian Wildlife Protection Act was made possible by the Former Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who took a personal interest in wildlife conservation (Rangarajan 2009: 300). The Act was inspired by the rapid deterioration of India's tiger population and it also acted to exhibit India's scientific expertise and ecological responsibility to save tigers from extinction (Aiyadurai 2016: 310). In the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm, in 1972, Indira Gandhi

pointed out the risk caused by international inequalities for failed global commitments to protect nature. She also spoke of the necessity of redressing social inequalities for securing the integrity of the environment. She argued that vulnerable environments could not be pitted against vulnerable people. The poor people, dependent on forest produce and shifting cultivation, could not be expected to pay for the protection of wildlife by the loss of their livelihood. As it has been argued, "Gandhi's environmental legacy is a mixed one, as it involves the unsolved contradiction, on the one hand, of her conservation initiatives and commitment to ease the consequences for the rural and tribal poor and, on the other, her increasingly autocratic exercise of state power and centralised framework" (Cederlöf and Rangarajan 2009: 222). Indira Gandhi's concerns were both ecological and nationalist, and she believed that nationalistic politics and environmental concerns strengthened each other. Since the Seventies, there has been a global rise in protected areas and a proliferation of treaties that led to India's commitment to global wildlife conservation, and by 1980 the sequestration of forest estate for conservation took up a central place. Nevertheless, forest policies have been contested spaces throughout the formation of the modern Indian nation, and wildlife policies throughout India are replete with contradictions. Rao and Casimir (2003: 151) provide many examples of how Indian national forest policies, pleading national interest, have debarred local communities from managing local forest resources and benefiting from these, being forests considered national assets, but not also local resources. Similarly, the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and the 1991 amendment to it are certainly measures aimed at promoting and protecting biodiversity but, at the same time, indifferent to the customary hunting, gathering, and trapping rights of nomadic communities. Recent bans in India on the use of performing animals, while being essential legal measures, are deeply affecting a variety of foraging and peripatetic communities, further impoverishing them.

Implicit in the enactment of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act is a conflict between groups who aim to protect natural resources and those who suffer from their protection. For the former, nature is an entity that needs to be saved, while for the latter, *i.e.* local communities, nature is a source of livelihood (Aiyadurai 2016: 306).

The Kalbeliyas are aware of the existence of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act and the prohibition of catching, selling, possessing, and displaying all types of snakes[2] commonly used by them, including, first and foremost, the cobra (*Naja Naja*).

[2] The Kalbeliyas usually resort to common cobras (*Naja Naja*), rat snakes (*Ptyas Mucosa*), and black-headed royal snake (*Spalerosophis Atriceps*).

Nevertheless, the Kalbeliyas continue to respond to requests from those who call on them to rid their homes, restaurants, hotels, etc. of snakes, to catch snakes, preferably cobras, and keep them in their homes, and to beg in the traditional guise of snake charmers.

Even if over the past twenty years the Kalbeliyas have actively espoused and promoted identification with a community of musicians and dancers, the members of Kalbeliya community living in a camp (*ḍerā*) near the village of Ganaheda, not far from the holy town of Pushkar, still work also as snake charmers. The way they act as snake charmers didn't change much from the description given by Briggs in 1938:

> They go about in the cities and villages in the neighbourhood of their camps taking their snakes with them. These they charm with the music of their queer, gourd pipes (bīn). One of the first things that the Jogīs did, when the visitors reached their camp, was to show their snakes. They brought out their round, flat baskets, took off the covers and prodded the snakes with their fingers to drive them out. They had a good many black cobras, all very large and splendid specimens. One had been caught only the day before in the jungle. Soon after snakes are captured, they are drugged, and their fangs are removed. (...) These Jogis are an unclean and ignorant people despised by almost every class of Indians but feared and dreaded by many (Briggs 1938: 59-61).

The description given by Briggs is generally accurate, reflecting the practice still followed today by members of the Ganaheda/Pushkar community. What differs from my experience in the field and accounts gathered among community members is the removal of the fangs and the narcotization of the freshly caught snake. Fangs are not removed but, as soon as the snake is caught, the venom is squeezed out of the animal. The venom is not stored and is dropped on the ground. According to the Kalbeliyas, although the venom is in great demand and has considerable commercial value, the danger involved in both its sale and storage is too great to take. I believe that snakes are not narcotized after being caught having seen several times freshly caught snakes, I can say that, in most cases, the animals are particularly aggressive. In September 2024, while I was conducting unstructured interviews at the camp (*ḍerā*) regarding the celebration of *Nāg-pañcamī*, Madan Nath, a gentleman of about forty years of age who is active both in snake charming and as a musician in dance performances, arrived, carrying two round baskets. He showed everyone two cobras (*Naja Naja*) he had just caught, each in its basket: both were lively and aggressive and kept leaning rather menacingly towards me.

Generally, adult Kalbeliyas, nowadays both men and women,[3] leave the camp early in the morning and, wearing the typical orange *sādhu* robes, go to Pushkar with their cobras enclosed in the characteristic round baskets.

The Kalbeliyas play the part of *sādhu*s when they leave the camp to go begging with their snakes: when begging with pipes and cobras they usually wear the ochre colour of renouncers (Robertson 2002: 107) and the characteristic clothes of the *sādhu*. Some of them still wear the earrings that are the distinctive mark of Nāth yogis. However, this is a disguise reflecting the understanding of peripatetics that different styles of public posturing may be profitably used to manipulate client perceptions about the efficacy of their goods and services.

With characteristic insistence, they chase the Indian pilgrims and tourists promising blessings or curses depending on the generosity of their offerings. On local festivals, such as, for instance, the Sāvitrī *melā*, the Kalbeliyas arrange themselves along the route to be travelled by devotees visiting the temple and, uncovering their baskets, solicit offerings in exchange for blessings.

Sometimes the request for alms involves, in addition to ascetic clothing and the display of snakes, the accompaniment of the sound of *pūṅgī*. However, the musical instrument, which once permanently characterized the snake charmers' performances, is nowadays preferably used in dance performances.

As snake charmers, the Kalbeliyas are primarily secular beggars: even if the cobra is considered in rural Rajasthan as the embodiment of God (Bharucha 2003: 53) and the presence of the snake permeates so much of Hindu religious tradition, donors nearly always give the alms the Kalbeliyas receive in a non-ritual context. The alms received by the Kalbeliyas are not regarded as *dān*, are not held to transfer sin or inauspiciousness, and are not seen by the Kalbeliyas as constituting a moral peril. The Kalbeliyas have a reputation as practitioners of black magic and possibly some people give fearing they may suffer effects of a curse if they do not (Robertson 2002: 101).

Personally, I do not find that there is any substantial difference between the quest conducted with the snake exhibition, the one in which the Kalbeliyas merely dress up in the characteristic *sādhu* robes, and the one in which the accompanying animal is a cow with five legs, the fifth being on its back, next to the characteristic hump of the zebu. In all cases, the Kalbeliyas act as secular beggars and what they receive can hardly be assimilated to *dān*.

However, one occasion when the Kalbeliyas may be considered the priests of the snake is the festival of *Nāg-pañcamī*.

[3] In the past, snake charming was a male occupation.

5. *Nāg-Pañcamī*

The tradition of snake worship is both old and widespread in India, with roots stretching back to Vedic mantras and epic myths (Allocco 2009: 29). According to Biswajit Pradhan (2001: 149), snake worship is one of the most ancient forms of worship in India. The scholar argues that the earliest evidence of the snake cult in the country has been reported from the archaeological excavation at Chirand, a Neolithic site in Bihar. The terracotta figurine of a snake found at Chirand has been identified as the earliest representation of the serpent cult dating back to the early part of the 3rd millennium B.C. The antiquities dating back to the first century A.D. and the literary references amply testify to the fact that snake worship was prevalent throughout the length and breadth of India. Although *nāga* worship is still ubiquitous in India today, *nāga* traditions are characterized by a diverse array of ritual practices and they are inflected very differently in their varied regional contexts. As missionaries, British civil servants, folklorists, and other scholars have noticed, in most parts of north and central India *nāga*s are regarded as male deities, while across south India and in parts of eastern India, *nāga*s are imaged and worshipped as snake goddesses. Interestingly, Joseph Alter (1992: 143), considering that in Hindu mythology and folklore, snakes are often regarded as the deities of ponds and rivers, argues that snakes represent two aspects of water: masculine rain as semen and feminine water as nurturing essence. The snakes, both falling from the sky and gushing from the earth, must not be strictly associated with either feminine or masculine attributes. According to Alter (1992: 143), they represent both male and female sexual energy, symbolizing a powerful form of androgynous sexuality which is apparent in the reconciliation of male rain with female water.

Alter's analysis gives meaning and significance to the different gender attribution of snakes-deities by different regions of India.

Common elements to the wide and diversified Indian tradition of snake worship are its close association with fertility and anthills, its leading to conception, a safe delivery, progeny, healing, and sustained health. Besides, *nāga*s are described as having a range of powers and abilities, which always include the capacity both to bless and curse. While their blessings lead to conception and progeny, their anger is commonly thought to result in barrenness, miscarriage, stillbirth, illness, and untimely death. Numerous studies mention and/or consider the connection between *nāga* worship and fertility, an association which stands at the center of the contemporary South Indian beliefs and practices (Allocco 2009).

It is possible that the fear of snakes and their poison was an early motivation for their worship, or that some of the snakes' unique characteristics, such as their rejuvenating themselves by sloughing off their skin (Zimmer 1946: 75), led to their being ascribed magical powers and eventually being deified.

Whatever initially catalysed religious and ritual interest in snakes as a class of beings, Indian traditions have long regarded them as divinities linked with water, fertility, and anthills (Allocco 2009: 29). The perception of snakes' life-giving powers is perhaps rooted in their association with water. *Nāga*s also symbolize human fertility and childbirth, as a reflection of the forest's productivity (Yuan *et al.* 2020: 112).

Tough the great variety and heterogeneity of practices and rituals worshipping the snake in India, the only pan-Indian festival dedicated to the snake is *Nāg-pañcamī*. Beyond this minor festival, celebrated in markedly distinct ways in various parts of India, few ritual features or narrative elements unify *nāga* worship traditions across the country. *Nāg-pañcamī* is celebrated throughout North India on the fifth day of the light half of the Hindu month *Sāvan* (*Śrāvaña*). *Nāg-pañcamī* is observed coincident with the rainy season, a period in which snake bites are more likely since snakes are often displaced from their subterranean homes during the monsoon.

In many parts of India this festival is celebrated in commemoration of the day on which the *nāga*s were born to Kadru. Allocco (2009: 344) states that according to some scholars *Nāg-pañcamī* may be the only portion of the extended *sarpabali* rite, or snake sacrifice, a four-month series of rites that coincides with the rainy season, that continues to be practiced in contemporary India. The range of benefits that accrue from the *pūjā* celebrated on *Nāg-pañcamī* is explicated in Sanskrit ritual digests, such as Bhatta Lakṣmīdhara's *Kṛtyakalpataru* (Aiyangar 1953). This text describes the procedures for invoking and worshipping divine snakes on this festival day and lists prosperity, freedom from the fear of snakes, and immunity to snake bites among the fruits of worshipping snakes. This text is not alone in discussing the benefits of performing a *nāga pūjā* on the fifth lunar day (*pañcami*): chapter 180 of the *Agni Purāṇa*, for example, describes how the worship of eight great *nāga*s (Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Kālīya, Maṇibhadraka, Airāvata, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Karkoṭaka, and Dhanañjaya) on this occasion confers health, heaven, emancipation, protection from fear, longevity, learning, fame, and wealth (*Agni Purāṇa* 180: 1-2).

The main ritual event of *Nāg-pañcamī* is to offer milk and crystallized sugar to a cobra: in rural areas people often go to anthills or other places where snakes are thought to live. They make their offerings by lighting incense in front of the snake's hole. Milk is placed in a bowl to entice the snake out and is later poured down the hole as a libation (Alter 1992: 137). *Nāg-pañcamī* is a festival which functions on a symbolic plane to subvert any possible danger of being poisoned. Taking ritual action to avoid being poisoned is translated into a general condition which insures auspicious health and longevity. *Nāg-pañcamī* is celebrated in various ways throughout India. However, the basic practice of propitiating snakes by offering them milk is almost certainly a universal aspect of the festival throughout India. In all the Indian worshipping traditions of snakes, milk works as a symbol of love and

devotion, representing maternity, purity, nourishment, and embodying the lovely relationship between worshippers and the worshipped (Lange 2019).

Nevertheless, the symbolic relationship between snakes and milk, stands in contradiction to biological and biomedical conditions and the fondness for milk traditionally attributed to snakes is therefore defined as 'impossible biology' (Ermacora 2017: 59). Snake mythology and symbolism show a widespread belief in the fondness of snakes for milk in different continents and ethnological contexts. Throughout South Asia, depicted and living serpents are given milk offerings to placate them, to lure them to one's side, and, of course, to prevent them from killing humans. Nevertheless, scholars have remarked how the snake's digestive system does not permit the digestion of lactose: reptiles, of course, lack the lactase enzyme (Ermacora 2017: 62). So, even if snakes are fed with milk, their anatomy making it impossible for them to suck, milk proves to be almost deadly for them.

In the past, about 20 years before, on the day of *Nāg-pañcamī*, the Kalbeliyas used to line the streets of towns and cities displaying an array of snakes. They also knocked on the doors of houses to offer their inhabitants the chance to pay their respects to a snake in the flesh. In return, they received clothes, blankets, food, and, sometimes, money offerings (Kamela Devi, Pushkar, August 2024). Nowadays, they no longer line the streets of towns and villages with their living *mūrti*, but one aspect of the Kalbeliyas' services as snake charmers remains. It is a less obvious aspect and, indeed, invisible to the outside observer: the snake charmer is hired by a family or individual, who may belong to any caste, but is generally of higher status than the Kalbeliya, and is asked, at the end of a particular ceremony, to release the snake into the *jaṅgal*. The person commissioning the *pūjā* must procure all the normal necessities for the *pūjā*[4] in addition to a golden statuette depicting a *nāgin*. After the snake charmer has conducted the *pūjā* for the pair consisting of the *nāga* and the *nāgin*, the customer and the Kalbeliya go to a space that can be considered a *jaṅgal* and the snake charmer releases the snake. In return, he receives an offering decided by the person who turned to his services.

The Kalbeliyas I have spoken to agree on certain aspects of their profession as snake charmers: first, their association with snakes and cobras is the result of their descent from Kanipāv. As disciples of Kanipāv, unanimously recognized as their guru, they are supposed to catch and keep snakes. Secondly, catching snakes is tantamount to keeping them in prison: it is a fault they refer to through the Hindī word *doṣ*. The person who, on *Nāg-pañcamī*, entrusts them with the *pūjā* at the end of which the snake will be freed and returned to the *jaṅgal* gets merit, *puṇyă.* Usually, Kalbeliyas talk freely and

[4] The elements necessary for the *pūjā* indicated by the Kalbeliyas I spoke to are: two incense sticks (*agarbattī*), a red thread (*maulī*), saffron powder (*kuṁkum*), milk, flowers (*khule phūl*), one coconut, rice, *ārtī kapūr*, *kaccī supārī.*

openly about their money transactions but in this case, when I asked how much they charge for the *pūjā* and the freeing of the snake, they told me that they don't ask for any payment: people give as much as they feel to give.

Considering the many studies carried out on the concept and practice of *dān*, I think that the amount of money that the Kalbeliya receives due to his releasing the snake in the *jaṅgal*, may be considered *dān*.

Dān has been a highly theorized subject of discussion in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain textual traditions of medieval India for several hundred years (Eck 2013: 361). Inspired by the classic Indological works of Trautmann (1981) and Heesterman (1959), anthropologists Jonathan Parry (1986) and Gloria Raheja (1988, 1989) have demonstrated that Indian concepts of *dān* are by no means mere relics confined to ancient Hindu texts, but instead, they continue to be an important part of religious ethics and practice throughout India today (Copeman 2011: 1053). *Dān* constitutes a vital contemporary category of exchange that is saturated with associations connected with kinship, sacrifice, sinfulness, asceticism, merit, and caste identity.

Since it has already been discussed, it is not necessary to examine here the prominent and sometimes controversial debates that have framed the question of *dān* in recent years. Besides the classical Indological works on the subject, more recent anthropological studies of exchange practices have attempted to refine various aspects of the earlier theorizations (Copeman 2011: 1053).

It is quite clear from the extensive and articulate academic literature about *dān* that there is no single logic of *dān* shared by all participants and present throughout the whole of Indian society.

However, the persistence and prevalence of particular themes in the practice of *dān* are equally evident. *Dān* is not part of a web of reciprocity and obligation: it flows from the giver, usually a householder, to a worthy recipient, with no expectation whatsoever of return. Indeed, any such expectation is said to taint the act of giving (Eck 2013: 361). No return of any earthly kind is countenanced, and even an increment to the prestige of the donor weakens the gift, which should therefore be made in secret (Parry 1986: 461). *Dān* is equally never solicited: it is given without any expectation, and it is received equally without any demand. Besides, worthiness remains central in the logic of *dān*: the recipient of the unreciprocated gift has to be worthy.

So, *dān* is a voluntary and disinterested donation made to a worthy recipient without ostentation or expectation of any kind of this worldly return, whether material or immaterial.

It could be considered that the Kalbeliyas are given gifts because of the religiosity they represent, acting as the priests of the snakes, and, therefore, connecting to their Nāth identity. However, I think

that they are worthy recipients of the gift because they are intrinsically unworthy: thanks to their *doṣ,* they enable others to gain the merit associated with and consequent to freeing the snake.

As Trautmann (1981: 279) defined it, *dān* is based on a soteriology of reciprocity. *Dān* is expected to bring its own reward, by an entirely impersonal process over which no one has any influence: it does indeed return to the donor, but one cannot know when or in what manner (Laidlaw 2000: 624). It is this unseen fruit (*adṛṣṭaphala*) that withers on the branch if any return is accrued in the here and now. The return is deferred, probably to another existence, and the recipient is merely a vessel (*pātra*) or conduit for the flow of merit (Parry 1986: 462).

The Kalbeliyas performing the *pūjā* on *Nāg-pañcamī* do not assure that the devotional act will bring wealth, health, longevity, fertility, and any of the benefits previously listed. They argue that it will bring merit. A merit people can obtain thanks to the fault the Kalbeliyas, disciples of Kanipāv, blessed and condemned to live with and by the snakes, are tied to. As captors of the serpent who will be freed, the Kalbeliyas are the bearers of a guilt that is what allows the person who commissioned the *pūjā* to gain merit.

6. Beyond snake charming

However, the Kalbeliyas' relationship with snakes does not end in the functions of secular beggar and ritual specialist, but, with the changed conditions under which the caste found itself living in Rajasthan, it also survives in the new caste identity adopted by the caste and, specifically, in the dancer's body's reproduction of the snake's movements. The Kalbeliya dance, an original product of the caste's resilience and vibrancy, establishes a mimetic relationship between the dancers and the snake. The movements of the dancers' body reproduce the movements of the snake, not only through the hand gestures that mimic the movement of the snake's head, but through the sinuosity of the dance. According to Bhānāvat (2004: 40),

> कालबेलिया महिलाएँ नृत्य करने में बड़ी प्रवीण होती हैं। जैसे सांप हड्डियां विहीन होते हैं और द्रुतगति से मुड़ी खाते हुए चलते हैं वैसे ही कालबेलिया महिलाएँ अपने नृत्यों में बड़ी स्फूर्ति और लोच लिये जो अदाएँ प्रस्तुत करती हैं वे देखते ही बनती हैं। ऐसे लगता है जैसे उनके शरीर में हड्डियाँ ही नहीं हैं।

> Kalbeliya women are very skilled in dancing. Just as snakes have no bones, and with quick movements they walk twisting and bending, so the Kalbeliya women in their dances are admired for the vigour and suppleness their performances are praised. It seems as if there are no bones in their body.

Despite its inscription in 2010 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2010), Kalbeliya dance style was far from being a component of the caste's cultural heritage. As has been explained elsewhere (Angelillo 2012), Kalbeliya dance constitutes an eloquent case of invented tradition. It belongs, in fact, to those many traditions that we think of as very ancient in their origins but were in fact invented comparatively recently (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Even if today Kalbeliya dance style is considered a significant part of Rājasthānī folklore, an authentic Rājasthānī tradition, a distinguishing mark of Rajasthan's peculiar culture, this dance style in its present shape is a relatively new dance form. In the past of the caste, dance was performed only during the celebration of some Hindu festivals, and it was bound to an inter-communitarian and inter-caste fruition. Until the recent past, it was a spontaneous display, not codified, open to the free expressivity of the members of the caste, inspired by sheer devotion and free from any commercial purposes. Apart from snake charming and begging (Robertson 2002), the Kalbeliyas have always had several economic strategies, some of cyclical nature, *e.g.* agriculture, others sporadic, such as construction labor, but they have never been and cannot be considered a caste of hereditary professional folk musicians and dancers. They enjoyed the patronage of neither royal courts nor common people as dancers and musicians. Their past spatial mobility was meant to exploit both natural resources, through the capture of poisonous snakes, and social ones, in the form of people needing their services and expertise as snake charmers. The dance style today embodying the specificity of Kalbeliya caste has acquired in the last forty years its present artistic and commercial shape, becoming a recognizable and codified product of Rājasthānī folklore (Bhānāvat 2004), thanks to the intertwining of a series of social, political, cultural and biographical (Robin and Guillien 2000) circumstances.

While reiterating that Kalbeliya dance is a cultural product of recent codification, and its continuity with a historic past is largely factitious, since it is a response to novel socio-cultural situations, I want to suggest that more than an invented tradition it is a reworked tradition. Observing how so many fundamental aspects of the Kalbeliyas' socio-cultural profile converge in the caste's dance style, e.g. snake-charming, devotion to the Mātā Jī, the sound of the *pūṅgī,* the song repertoire accompanying dance performances, etc. We can speak of a reworked, rather than invented, tradition. All the material that went into the dance is pre-existing and has been re-proposed in a new and novel language. In the classic study of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) it was not discussed how far invented traditions can use old materials, "how far they may be forced to invent new languages or devices or extend the old symbolic vocabulary beyond its established limits" (Hobsbawm 1983: 7). I think that in Kalbeliya dance, a new and unprecedented language expresses ancient contents and meanings, related to the socio-cultural identity of the caste. The relationship between the caste and the cobra and the

evolution of snake enchantment have also been handed over to the dance: the snake has been replaced by the dancer's body, imprisoned as well in the logic and dynamics of the caste.

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Maria Angelillo is Associate Professor in Hindi Language and Indian Culture at the University of Milan. Her academic interests lie in the relationship between space and social identities, and the deconstruction of identity as a cognitive category applicable to the understanding of the socio-cultural profile of Indian communities and castes. Among her latest publications: "Da hijṛā a kinnara: le narrazioni autobiografiche specchio di pulsioni contraddittorie" (*Altre Modernità* (31): 2024), and "Appropriating Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Missing Empowerment?" (in: E. R. Kosmidou and L. G. McMurtry (eds.), *Intangible Cultural Heritage and New Methodological Frameworks. Media, Performance and the Public Space.* New York, NY: Routledge: 2025).
Maria can be contacted at: maria.angelillo@unimi.it