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### **The Dreadful Dance of the Goddess Creativity and Mimesis in a Possession Cult of Assam\***

**SUMMARY:** Every year in August devotees flock to the Kāmākhyā temple (Guwahati, Assam), to attend and observe the Deodhāni-nāc, (the dance [*nāc*] of the sound [*dhāni*] of god [*deo*]). The main feature of this three-day festival is the dance of the *deodhās*. The *deodhās*, Assamese males, become possessed by the goddess Kāmākhyā (and the other deities connected to her) and dance to the beat of drums. The dance of *deodhās* reproduces to some extent the character and iconography of the possessing deities, but is not limited to that. Through the use of his body, each *deodhā* actively interprets this shared image of the deity, dancing in a singular way. The paper focuses on the creative, yet unconscious process through which each *deodhā* shapes his peculiar dancing style.

**KEYWORDS:** Kāmākhyā temple, Deodhāni-nāc, possession, dance, creativity, *mimesis*

### **Introduction**

While conducting fieldwork research in the Kāmākhyā temple<sup>1</sup> (Guwahati, Assam), I was often told how, long ago, goddess Kāmākhyā

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\* I thank Elisa Ganzer and Ewa Dębicka-Borek who patiently read earlier drafts of this paper and enriched it with their comments. I am also grateful to CIS anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Data was collected between 2011 and 2013, during five periods of fieldwork research (thirteen months in total), that I carried out in the Kāmākhyā temple-town, located on Nilachal. While I was conducting fieldwork research about the temple Brahman priests as part of my Ph. D, many people in

used to dance in her temple. The narrative about the dancing goddess is widespread among the Brahman and non-Brahman servants of the temple. For the purpose of the present paper, I sum it up as follows:

Kendukulāi, a Brahman priest, was taken to the Kāmākhyā temple by the Koch Bihar king.<sup>2</sup> He used to play music for goddess Kāmākhyā during the night (or at sunset) inside the temple. The goddess was pleased and used to dance naked before him in the form of a sixteen-year-old girl. The Koch Bihar king, intrigued by the music, approached Kendukulāi and inquired about it. When the priest told him of the dancing goddess, the king immediately said he wanted to see her. As Kendukulāi refused, the king threatened to kill him. Eventually Kendukulāi agreed. The two men devised a plan: that night the priest would play as he usually did, while the king would peep at the goddess

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the temple town (including the priests) talked to me about the Deodhāni-nāc. Their enthusiasm roused my curiosity and in 2012 I observed the dance for the first time; its preparation and the rituals following the festival, when *deodhās* gradually go back to their everyday life. Whilst in the field, I always resided on Nilachal, in the surroundings of the Kāmākhyā temple. As any *deodhās* live on Nilachal, this privileged position allowed me to form meaningful relationships with a number of them. Besides that, I visited some of the *deodhās* who live in Guwahati and near-by areas. *Deodhās* speak Asamiyā (Assamese) and know few English words, but none of them speaks English. As I have been studying Assamese as an autodidact since 2008, I could talk to them in their own language (sometimes helped by bilingual common friends). The familiarity I developed with a number of *deodhās* brought me to observe the festival again in 2013, and to make a documentary film on it called *Ghora. Waiting for the Goddess*, co-authored by filmmaker Alessandro Cartosio and myself. The film follows two *deodhās* (also called *ghorās*, ‘horses’) in the delicate phase preceding the dance and explores the way they gradually part from their families and their day-to-day life. This work explores the way the *deodhās* experience what, in their eyes, is the overwhelming intervention of the goddess in their lives. Thereafter, I went one more time to the field in January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The Koch Bihar kings built the Kāmākhyā temple in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the Koch Bihar dynasty see Gait 2008: chapter 4.

through a hole in the temple wall. That night, as soon as Kendukulāi started playing, the omniscient goddess understood what was going on and became enraged. The priest lost his life and the king was cursed: if he or his descendants ever returned to the temple, they would die.

From that time—a non-Brahman servant of the temple concluded—goddess Kāmākhyā stopped dancing in her own form and started dancing through human vehicles: the *deodhās*. Deodhāni-nāc<sup>3</sup> is the name given to the dance (*nāc*) performed by these chosen human beings (the *deodhās*), as possessed by goddess Kāmākhyā herself or by other connected deities. In the account just mentioned, the Deodhāni-nāc is explained as the residual form of the original immanence of the goddess.<sup>4</sup>

The Deodhāni-nāc takes place every year in August at the Kāmākhyā temple. The salient feature of this three-day festival is the dance performed by *deodhās*, attracting thousands of pilgrims. *Deodhās* are Assamese males. The Deodhāni-nāc preparatory phase starts one month before the dance takes place. As will be described in more detail, *deodhās* follow a set of restrictions in order to make their bodies fit to become the deities' vehicles. The Deodhāni-nāc starts on the *saṅkrānti*

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<sup>3</sup> The term *deo-dhāni* (or *deo-dhvanī*) means the 'sound or voice of god'. For an analysis of the compound Deodhāni-nāc and the vocabulary connected to it, see below. If not otherwise stated, all quotations and single terms reported in this paper come from Assamese—the reader will notice that many Assamese terms have an equivalent in Sanskrit and in other South Asian contemporary languages. Assamese is written with the alphabet which is also used for Bengali. I transliterate Assamese terms following their standard written form. See my Ph. D. thesis for details about Assamese pronunciation, that departs from the Hindi pronunciation on a number of graphemes (Majo Garigliano 2015: Introduction).

<sup>4</sup> Gold points out a similar conception of possession with regard to rural Rajasthan. It is believed that deities used to appear on earth "in their 'own forms' (*svarūp*) or as 'descended incarnation' (*avatār*)" (Gold 1988: 41). The deities' former immediacy is contrasted by her interlocutors to possession, where deities act indirectly, through human vehicles (*ibid.*).

(auspicious day of passage) between *śāoṇ* (mid-July to mid-August) and *bhād* (mid-August to mid-September) and reaches its climax on the first two days of *bhād*. During these three days, *deodhās* dance to the beat of drums and are worshipped by devotees, who beg for their blessing. Once the festival is over, devotees stop worshipping *deodhās*. However, it will take one more month for the *deodhās* to go back to their every-day life. During this time, *deodhās* are still bound to follow the restrictions. Moreover, each one of them sponsors a *pūjā* for the deity who possessed him. On the last day of *bhād*, *deodhās* resume their ordinary status.

The Deodhāni-nāc is intrinsically connected with the Manasā-pūjā (the worship of goddess Manasā), which is performed in the Kāmākhyā temple, before the statue of Manasā. The two events take place simultaneously. While the *deodhās* dance, the Kāmākhyā temple priests perform the elaborate worship of Manasā, the goddess of cobras.<sup>5</sup> The devotees, who flock to the temple to watch the Deodhāni-nāc, go inside the temple to benefit from the *darśan* (mutual vision connecting deity and devotee) of Manasā, presenting her with various offerings. As will be shown, during the dance, *deodhās* frequently rush to the statue of the snake goddess to grasp a flower imbued with her power. Besides being present in her statue, goddess Manasā also possesses her human vehicles during the dance. In 2012 and 2013, when I observed the festival, she possessed two men, through her different forms. Although Manasā is of central importance during the festival, the dominant presence of Kāmākhyā is unmistakable. In the month preceding the dance, all *deodhās* repeatedly visit the sanctum of the Kāmākhyā temple to benefit from the *darśan* of the goddess.<sup>6</sup>

In line with the questions raised by the editors of this volume, the present paper asks to what extent the categories of theatre

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<sup>5</sup> The Manasā-pūjā is not the object of the present study. Thus it will not be analysed in itself, but rather in its connection to the Deodhāni-nāc.

<sup>6</sup> Anyone, regardless of caste membership, can enter the Kāmākhyā temple and go to the sanctum, including Westerners.

and ritual are useful to investigate the Deodhāni-nāc.<sup>7</sup> My aim is not to encapsulate the Deodhāni-nāc in a neat definition, but rather to explore its complexity. The paper introduces the notions of *śakti* (divine creative/destructive female power) and *līlā* (divine play), and the vocabulary used to refer to possession. These two sections aim at understanding the way *deodhās*, priests and devotees conceive the Deodhāni-nāc. Then, the shifting boundaries between the categories of theatre, possession and ritual are debated with reference to the relevant literature. Possession is a category that has long engaged the attention of South Asian scholars. The term ‘possession’ has been used to describe very different phenomena. In a recent article, Basu distinguishes “good possession” from “bad possession”. The former is due to deities; the possessed person often becomes an oracle—as *deodhās* do.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, “bad possession” is due to super-human wicked beings—rituals are carried out to free the concerned person from the harming possessing agent (Basu 2016). In this frame, the possession *deodhās* undergo can be labelled as good possession. However, on the basis of my fieldwork, I argue that the good/bad possession opposition does not fully take into account the viewpoint of the people affected by possession. As the documentary film *Ghora. Waiting for the Goddess* shows, in the month preceding the dance, *deodhās* express a certain anxiety regarding the moment when they will be possessed.<sup>9</sup> Being a *deodhā* is not something people can control

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<sup>7</sup> Several aspects of the Deodhāni-nāc are analysed in my Ph. D. thesis (Majo Garigliano 2015). Apart from that, literature on the Deodhāni-nāc is extremely sparse. See Arrago-Boruah 2015; Dold 2012 and Goswami 1960.

<sup>8</sup> See below for the *deodhās*’ oracular function and the consultations demanded by devotees.

<sup>9</sup> In 2013, a few months before the dance took place, a *deodhā*, now in his early fifties, told me that he would have preferred not to be possessed. Goswami reports of people trying to prevent a junior kin from becoming a *deodhā*. In one case sanctified water and basil were used on the person showing signs of possession. Another way to prevent a deity from descending into a human body was to put some ritually impure object under the skin of the person who

or look for and imposes severe limitations on one's life. In this regard, *deodhās* are closer to people affected by bad possession.

Another recent categorisation of possession was advanced by Schömbucher. She identifies four forms of possession, namely: "unwanted and uncontrolled possession by harmful spirits (spirit possession)", "ritually induced and controlled states of possession by deities (spirit mediumship)",<sup>10</sup> "possession by a deity as the result of *bhakti*" and "possession of impersonators during ritual performances" (Schömbucher 2015: 291). Although making such distinctions is surely useful, living traditions often cross the conceptual boundaries set by scholars. The Deodhāni-nāc is certainly an example of "possession of impersonators during ritual performances", but also exhibits elements of "spirit mediumship", as was highlighted above.

For the purpose of the present paper, I evoke the performative approach to ritual and intend the Deodhāni-nāc as a "performance in which a certain reality is created by the performers as well as the audience" (*ibid.*: 298). Schömbucher defines 'performance' as "a highly structured event in which time and space are specified, the sequence of events is fixed, and performers and audience exercise specified roles" (*ibid.*: 296). The present paper shows how, within the fixed structure of the Deodhāni-nāc, enough room is left for each of the *deodhās* to carry out a highly individualized dance, through the use of their bodies. It therefore draws on recent literature that highlights the significance of the body in possession rituals.<sup>11</sup> While some authors focused their attention on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of possession,<sup>12</sup>

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was suspected to be possessed by a deity (Goswami 1960: 46–47). However, according to Goswami, such measures to block possession can enrage deities, who, in turn, may harm the concerned person or his kin (*ibid.*).

<sup>10</sup> These two forms of possession are equivalent to what Basu labels as "bad possession" and "good possession".

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. Malik 2009; Sax 2002 and Sax and Polit 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See, among others, Berti 2001, who writes about the oracles of Himachal Pradesh village temples. The title of her book *La Parole des Dieux*

Sax and Polit stress how knowledge is produced and conveyed to others through the body:

We understand ritual movements such as dance and possession as ways of experiencing and transmitting cultural knowledge and collective memory. They are vehicles for forms of embodied knowledge, which are different from language-based knowledge. (Sax and Polit 2012: 230)

Similarly, in Deodhāni-nāc the gestures and dance style of a *deodhā* are revealing of the possessing deities. Devotees and priests are, most of the time, able to understand the code of this ‘embodied knowledge’. This approach centred on the body is reminiscent of Csordas’ classical *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology*. According to Csordas, “the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1988: 5). Csordas, in turn, evokes the notion of *habitus*, elaborated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990). *Habitus*, as far as I understand it, is not the conscious learning of a set of explicated rules. Rather, it is the unconscious adherence of a person to the unwritten rules of the group s/he belongs to. The notion of *habitus* will be utilized to show how, during the dance, *deodhās* make use of their bodies in an unconscious, pre-reflexive way, informed by their shared understanding of the deities.

On the basis of these considerations, the paper explores the various phases of the dance, namely the descent of the deities into the *deodhās*’ bodies, the dance itself, and its concluding phase. Significant elements of the Deodhāni-nāc will be highlighted, such as the *deodhās*’ individual use of the body and the non-verbal knowledge transmission taking place between them and devotees. The overall attention of the paper is on the creative process through which each *deodhā* shapes his own dancing style. Toward the end of the paper, the notion of *mimesis* (Bourdieu 1990) will be evoked to analyse the informal process

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is revealing of her interest toward the conversations taking place between devotees and possessed oracles.

through which *deodhās* ‘learn’ how a *deodhā* is expected to behave. Before proceeding to the core of the paper, some information needs to be presented regarding the Kāmākhyā temple and the *deodhās*.

### The Kāmākhyā temple and the *deodhās*

The temple of the goddess Kāmākhyā is situated in the present-day town of Guwahati, the capital of Assam and gateway to North-East India. The temple stands on Nilachal (*nīlācal*, ‘the blue hill’), whose northern slope ends at the mighty river Brahmaputra. Along with the Kāmākhyā temple, the hill hosts about thirty minor temples, dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses. The Kāmākhyā temple is considered by devotees and priests to be an extremely powerful tantric shrine.<sup>13</sup> Until recently, the temple (and likewise Assam) was feared as the mysterious abode of a mighty, threatening goddess. Today, the pilgrimage to the temple is dramatically increasing.

Apart from the goddess Kāmākhyā, many deities inhabiting Nilachal ‘participate’ in the dance, by possessing their human vehicles.<sup>14</sup> Each *deodhā* is possessed every year by the same deity,

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<sup>13</sup> One can see in the narrative reported at the beginning of this paper a reference to transgressive tantric rituals—the goddess danced naked—and their secrecy—the goddess danced beyond the temple closed doors. On tantric cults at the Kāmākhyā temple see Urban 2001 and 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Nilachal hosts the temples of the Daśamahāvidyās (the Ten Great Wisdoms), a group of ten goddesses. On the cult of the Daśamahāvidyās, see Majo Garigiano (2015: chapter 1 and 6) and Ramasso 2007. Some of the Daśamahāvidyās, like Kālī, are famed goddesses revered well beyond their inclusion in the group; other ones are quite obscure goddesses. Besides the Daśamahāvidyās, several other goddesses, who are not part of this group, inhabit the Hill. Among them is the already mentioned Manasā, the snake goddess, whose cult is strictly connected to the Deodhāni-nāc. While her statue stands in the Kāmākhyā temple, she also has a smaller temple of her own. Male deities, including Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Gaṇeś, have several temples of their own on Nilachal. Besides temples, deities inhabit smaller shrines, scattered in the temple-town, as well as

or by the same form of a deity.<sup>15</sup> *Deodhās*' number may vary from year to year. Most of the time, when a deity chooses a man as his vehicle, that man will be possessed till the end of his life.<sup>16</sup> After the death of a *deodhā*, he may or may not be replaced by another person possessed by the same deity. In fact, not all the deities of the temple complex are represented in the festival every year. It is believed that some deities, due to their inscrutable wish, are currently not possessing any human vehicle. In the month preceding the dance, Kamakhyaans keep saying that newcomers may show up before the festival starts: *Nije nije āibo* ("They will come on their own"). *Deodhās* belong to different castes, but none of them is a Brahman.<sup>17</sup>

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in the jungle that covers large parts of the Hill. The divine presence on the Hill is believed to be extremely vibrant.

<sup>15</sup> The goddess Kāmākhyā, for instance, has three *rūpas* (forms) and has been possessing three men for many years. One man, now in his sixties, has been possessed by Calantā (the moving one), the goddess inherent in the movable image, worshipped in the upper chamber of the temple. This *deodhā* has some sort of command over the others, who frequently ask for his permission before dancing on the swords (see below). A second man, now in his late forties, has been possessed by Burī Kāmākhyā (the old Kāmākhyā) for some forty years, if not more. A third man, now in his thirties, has been possessed by Kumārī Kāmākhyā (the goddess in the form of a girl). Apart from Calantā, the two vehicles of god Śiva (understood to be Kāmākhyā's husband) have some authority over the other *deodhās*.

<sup>16</sup> I know of at least one exception. In January 2018 I was informed that a *deodhā*, who had danced for many years, had stopped to do so. When I asked why, another *deodhā* told me: *Mā āhā nāi* ("Mother [Goddess] did not come [to him]").

<sup>17</sup> For instance, a *deodhā* is a *kumār*, the potters' caste; two *deodhās*, who are brothers, are *rājbaṅsi*, an indigenous Assamese group; another *deodhā* belongs to the *kāyāsthās*, the scribe caste. At my question "Why do the Brahmans not get possessed?" my interlocutors looked puzzled. A Brahman woman told me (my translation from Assamese): "Brahmans have a different power (*śakti*). They do the *pūjās*". A *deodhā* told me with a smile on his face (my translation from Assamese): "If they get possessed, who would perform the *pūjās* for the people?" After a few

They are all males.<sup>18</sup> They either come from the Kāmākhyā temple, town, located on Nilachal, or from Guwahati and near-by areas. The majority of them belong to families of modest means. Many *deodhās* work: one of them is a rickshaw-driver, another one is a cashier in a bank, two of them run souvenir shops for pilgrims in the temple premises, etc. Those who work take a pause from their occupations in the period before and after the dance.<sup>19</sup>

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words, they would stop talking, looking right into my eyes, as if they wanted to say: “It’s like this and that’s it”. Eventually, I realized that the fact that Brahmans do not get possessed is not backed up by any shared idea; no myth explains it. One can say that being a *deodhā* is a means through which a non-Brahman person raises his status. Similarly, Mayaram concludes that possession was the only tool the Rajasthani female oracles she observed had to better their position within the household and in the local society (Mayaram 1999: 123). Berti makes a similar point regarding the low-caste oracles of Himachal village temples (Berti 2001: 71). Through possession, *deodhās* are able to gain a (temporary) significant role in the religious and ritual life of the Kāmākhyā temple. It needs to be highlighted that the Kāmākhyā temple priests often comment positively about the importance of the Deodhāni-nāc. “We have seen incredible things”, a priest told me, with regard to the Deodhāni-nāc (on the interactions between priests and *deodhās*, see note n. 37). This is quite peculiar, considering, with Basu, that “Brahmans and people from other high castes often look down upon practices of possession and related ideas held by lower castes” (Basu 2012: 3).

<sup>18</sup> I asked the question “Why do women not get possessed?” innumerable times to both priests and *deodhās*, without receiving any definite answer. In my opinion, gender issues are at work here: unlike Mayaram’s female oracles (Mayaram 1999, see previous note), in the Kāmākhyā temple women are not allowed to be possessed by deities, to make such a dramatic use of their body in public and to be worshipped. In 2012, just before the Deodhāni-nāc started, a Kamakhyan non-Brahman girl, belonging to an extremely poor family, showed signs of possession by goddess Manasā. Her family did whatever possible to ‘block the way’ and finally succeeded. It is noteworthy that in the Darrang district (Assam), a form of dance is known as *deodhāni* and is executed by female dancers (see Sharma 2002).

<sup>19</sup> *Deodhās* do not receive any monetary compensation from the temple. Devotees donate them various offerings (flower garlands, cloths,

The Deodhāni-nāc attracts thousands of pilgrims, mainly from Guwahati and nearby areas, and invariably makes the front page in the local newspapers. This festival is much smaller compared to the *ambuvācī-melā* (the Kāmākhyā temple greatest festival, celebrating the goddess' annual menstruation), which is attended by lakhs of pilgrims coming from different regions of South Asia. In fact, the Kāmākhyā temple is considered by many Hindus to be one of the most powerful *śakti* sanctuaries of India.<sup>20</sup>

### Two key-notions: *śakti* and *līlā*

Two key-notions—*śakti* and *līlā*—need to be introduced here in order to frame the discussion. *Śakti* ('power', 'energy') is the female, dynamic, generative side of the divine. Combined with the male part, which, by contrast, is depicted as still and cool, it creates the universe.<sup>21</sup> *Śakti* animates all living beings and is tightly connected with motherhood. The concept of *śakti* is double-edged: the idea of an overwhelming energy implies that the same energy can be very dangerous. Hindu goddesses are depicted as loving mothers, as well as ferocious and threatening.<sup>22</sup> This sketch does not render justice to the complex notion of *śakti*, but may help the reader to understand the significance of the Kāmākhyā

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he-goats to be sacrificed) and money. Once the festival is over, each *deodhā* sponsors a ritual for the deity who possessed him. So, the money they receive is (partly) spent to organize this ritual. It may be that some *deodhās*, those the audience love the most, make some profit out of the Deodhāni-nāc.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed description of the Kāmākhyā temple and the other temples of Nilachal see Majo Garigliano 2015: chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Talking about the relation between goddess Mīnākṣī and her divine husband, as exemplified by Mīnākṣī temple rituals—Tamil Nadu—Fuller affirms that: "a male is quiescent unless he has access to feminine power and the complete unity of the god, as of his servants [the temple priests], is only attained through the conjunction of the male and female opposite principles" (Fuller 1984: 31).

<sup>22</sup> Fuller nicely portrays the ambivalence of the notion of *śakti* with reference to Tamil Nadu goddesses (Fuller 1984: 8–10). According to him, those goddesses who are married are considered to be more peaceful than unmarried, independent, dangerous goddesses. Kamakhyans do not classify

temple. The temple was built over a spring. The sanctum, a subterranean cave constantly illuminated by oil lamps, enshrines a natural rock, furrowed by a long slit, from which water flows spontaneously. The rock filled with water is understood to be the *yoni* (vulva) of the goddess Satī<sup>23</sup> and is the temple's core-element—the imposing dome of the temple stands over the cave. The spring receives the enthusiastic devotion of the pilgrims visiting the Kāmākhyā temple. That the temple enshrines no less than the goddess' *yoni*, the organ of sexuality and generation, is the reason for its renown.

The notion of *śakti* is at the core of the Deodhāni-nāc. According to the common view, the tremendous *śakti* of goddess Kāmākhyā and the other deities enters the *deodhās*' bodies and dances through them. Hence the Deodhāni-nāc is considered awe-inspiring and is described as *bhayānak* ('dreadful'). Since it is the deity who chooses to enter a man as his vehicle, the *deodhās* are not acting or playing any part.<sup>24</sup> They are said to be the deities' *ghoras* ('horses'). The horse metaphor is widespread in South Asia<sup>25</sup> to describe the person affected by good

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goddesses through the married/unmarried opposition. However, *śakti* is considered an ambivalent energy in both contexts.

<sup>23</sup> Sircar 1948 provides a detailed analysis of the Sanskrit texts which contain the numerous variants of the myth.

<sup>24</sup> All *deodhās* affirm that they do not recognize even close relatives (let alone acquaintances) while they are possessed—indeed many oracles belonging to different South Asian traditions affirm the same. Talking about possession, a *deodhā* told me: "That time [when he is possessed] is different. During that time, when the mother [goddess] possesses me, I will be aware only of her. I will be like her [...] Now I am Ronju's father, Dipu's father, Bapu's father. But during that time I won't be anyone's father". The original Assamese expression is the following: *Ei time* (the English term was used) *tu beleg. Ei time tu māi māne lambhi gole, āmi māne devī ke jāno āru. Āmi devī tullo [...]* *Etyā Ronjur bābā, Dipur bābā, Bapur bābā. Ei time kintu kār bābā nāi.*

<sup>25</sup> See, among others, Gold 1988: 36; Malik 2009: 94, note 16; Polit 2013: 157 and Sax 2002: 23. Assayag 1999: 421 reports the use of the horse metaphor in a case of bad possession.

possession. The image it conveys—as far as I understand it—is that of a human mount, completely controlled by the divine being riding upon it.

The second notion introduced in this section is *līlā*, whose primary meaning is “play, sport, diversion, amusement, pastime” (Monier-Williams 2005: s.v.). In his pioneering article on the fascinating notion of *līlā*, Coomaraswamy affirms that “the emphasis is, we realise, always upon the idea of a ‘pure’ activity that can properly be described as ‘playful’ because the game is played, not as ‘work’ is ordinarily performed with a view to secure some end essential to the worker’s well-being, but exuberantly” (Coomaraswamy 1941: 98–99). According to Coomaraswamy “the best and most God-like way of living is to ‘play the game’” (*ibid.*: 99). The idea of divine play can be seen, according to Hindu theologians, in the magnificent image of Śiva Naṭarāja (lord of dance/drama). “Livré, exultant, au libre jeu de la création—sa *līlā*—qui est projection et résorption alternées de l’univers, Śiva, le Naṭarāja, prince et modèle des acteurs, y est une figure d’Īśvara, le Seigneur suprême, en tant qu’il est le dieu qui joue, souverainement” (Bansat-Boudon 1997: 9).

The notion of *līlā* is fundamentally important to understand the significance of the Deodhāni-nāc. According to *deodhās*, priests and devotees, the Deodhāni-nāc, the playful display of goddess Kāmākhyā’s power, depends upon her inscrutable *līlā*. Goddess Kāmākhyā plays and dances for her own amusement. According to the narrative introduced above, goddess Kāmākhyā used to dance in her own form in her temple; at present she dances through human bodies. The notion of *līlā* is not restricted to the ambit of the Deodhāni-nāc. *Deodhās*, priests and devotees plainly affirm that whatever happens in their lives and in everyone else’s life is only due to the goddess’s *līlā*. A *deodhā* told me, with eyes full of awe (my translation from Assamese):

This is all the mother [goddess]’ *līlā*. Not our *līlā*. Today I had food in this house, it’s her *līlā*. Where will I eat? Where will I go? Where will you people shoot your film (see note 1)? It’s all her *līlā* [...] We are human beings. What do we know? We know nothing.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The actual words pronounced by the *deodhā* are the following: *Eibilāk māier līlā sab. Āmār eku līlā nāi. Āji etu gharad kāicchu. māier līlā.*

The *deodhā*'s words imply that the notion of *līlā* is not only connected to the goddess's awesome dance. The goddess's *līlā* happens all the time and is the very modality by which she is active in the world. This implies that even the evil in humans' lives is somehow due to the goddess. After telling me at length about some problem affecting him and his dear ones, a Kāmākhyā temple priest concluded: *Māyer līlā* ("[this is] the play of mother [goddess]"). While saying so, his face, which had been contracted in a disconsolate expression throughout the narration, relaxed. His feeling—as far as I could understand it—was that of acceptance: the goddess's mysterious play can result in weird twists and turns in humans' lives, but that does not at all diminish her status in the devotee's eyes.

### The vocabulary of the Deodhāni-nāc

As to the name of the phenomenon under scrutiny, Bronson translates *deo* as both "god" and "demon" and *deodhani* as "the trembling of one supposed to be possessed by an evil spirit" (Bronson 1867: s.v.).<sup>27</sup> As with many 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionaries,<sup>28</sup> Bronson's viewpoint may have been vitiated by a strong Christian bias. In present-day Assamese, the term *deo* is used to indicate a ghost or a malevolent spirit;<sup>29</sup> the meaning 'god' is generally conveyed by the terms *devatā*, *īśvara* or *bhagvān*. However, according to devotees, priests and *deodhās*, it is deities, not demons, who possess their human vehicles during the Deodhāni-nāc. *Deodhāni* is sometimes spelled as *deodhvani*, *dhvani* meaning 'sound' (Barua 2011: s.v.). In fact, some Kamakhyan understand the term

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*Kat khābo lāge? Kat phuribo lāge? Kat photo uṭhibo lāge? Māier līlā [...] Āmi manica. Āmi ki jāno? Jāno nāi.*

<sup>27</sup> The same meaning is further supported by Barua 2011: s.v.

<sup>28</sup> Schömbucher affirms that "[e]arly descriptions by missionaries do not clearly differentiate between different forms of possession. According to their world view, possession only by demons or devils is possible" (Schömbucher 2015: 292–293).

<sup>29</sup> A Kāmākhyā temple priest used the term *deo-logā* to indicate possession by harmful supernatural beings.

*deodhāni* as ‘the sound of God’. Bronson translates *nāc* as “dance” (Bronson 1867: s.v.); the term is related to Sanskrit root *naṭ*, meaning both “to dance” and “to act” (Monier-Williams 2005: s.v.).

Why is the phenomenon under analysis called *Deodhāni-nāc*? My hunch is that the ‘sound (or voice) of God’ could be related to the *deodhās*’ oracular function. The *deodhās* dance most of the time throughout the festival. During the second and the third day, however, they are expected to stop dancing for some time and to sit in the *bali-ghar* (the pavilion dedicated to sacrifice) for a while. During these pauses, devotees approach *deodhās* in order to consult them and get their advice regarding their problems.<sup>30</sup> The words a *deodhā* utters are understood to be those of the deity. My hypothesis is supported by Sharma, who describes the *deodhāni* dance of the Darrang district (Assam), executed by female dancers (Sharma 2002: 56). According to Sharma, “[i]t was believed that the dancer used to get possessed by god (Devata or Deo) and it was god who spoke through her, so the dancer was called ‘Devadani’ or ‘Deodhani’” (*ibid.*).

In order to understand the way *deodhās* conceive the possession they undergo, I will quote the expressions used by Deviram Das, one of the two men possessed by *Manasā*. Now in his fifties, Deviram Das became possessed in his teenage years. He used to work in a bank as a cashier and retired in 2017. I became particularly familiar with him throughout my fieldwork, because he lives with his family near the *Kāmākhyā* temple, in the same neighbourhood where I used to stay. When talking about possession, Deviram Das employs the verb *lambhi*. *Lambhi* is uniquely used to point out the fact that a human being

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<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, I cannot say which problems the devotees submit to the *deodhās*. Conversation between them takes place in a very congested and acoustically saturated place. In fact, several *deodhās*, sitting side by side, are consulted simultaneously by different groups of devotees. According to Goswami “[t]wo principal categories of clients are observed. The dominant section is represented by those who are barren and whose children die prematurely. The other category covers all those who suffer from some sort of illness” (Goswami 1960: 51–52).

becomes possessed by an external, non-human force, either a deity or a devil (see Bronson 1867: s.v.). Deviram Das also says that deities' *śakti śarīrod jāi* ("goes into [*deodhās*'] body"). To describe the first time he became possessed by Manasā, Deviram Das uses the verb *uṭi*, 'to alight'.<sup>31</sup>

Deviram Das's words convey the idea of a veritable invasion of the divine energy into the *deodhā*'s body. The *deodhā* cannot cause the deity's entry into his body, nor can he stop it. This view can be contrasted with the logic inherent in Mutiyettu, a Kerala performing art dedicated to goddess Bhadra-Kālī. In her analysis of Mutiyettu, Pasty-Abdul Wahid affirms that "the Hindu logic of imitation allows the materialization of the goddess" (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2017: 33). The enactment of the goddess's ferocious battle against demon Dārikan pleases the goddess. Bhadra-Kālī, in fact, loves to see her victorious fight being performed whilst possessing the main performer simultaneously. "Mimesis has a real power of creation and transformation" in Mutiyettu, which allows the performer to personify the goddess, and the audience to identify the presence of the deity in him (*ibid.*: 40). Costume and acting should be as 'realistic' as possible to recreate, along with music, the violent scene of the battle. Divine presence is constructed through the use of multiple media in Mutiyettu as much as in Deodhāni-nāc, but the logic at work is different. In Mutiyettu, in fact, the realistic imitation of the goddess's battle and triumph attracts her to the performance as it is carried out, while in Deodhāni-nāc the deities enter their favourite human vehicles out of their wish to dance before their devotees. In both cases, however, selected humans become imbued with divine energy, which entails the need to make their bodies suitable for the deities. That is why, during the month before the festival, the *deodhās* observe a set of limitations, concerning

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<sup>31</sup> Indicating a movement upwards, the use of the verb *uṭi* in the context of the Deodhāni-nāc seems to suggest an elevation of the human vehicle towards the divine realm. Conversely, the final stage of the dance is described by the verb *pari*, 'to fall'.

diet, sexual activity, clothing, etc., and on the first day of the festival undergo a purification ritual known as *prāyaścitt*. Several *deodhās* affirm that anyone who does not follow these limitations risks causing divine anger. The transgressor may go through all sorts of misfortune and hardship; he may even become crazy (*pāgal hai jābo*).

Referring to possession, Deviram Das also used the expression *māyer lagat khel kheli* (“playing with mother [goddess]”). This use stems from the centrality of the notion of ‘play’, as underlined above, in the Deodhāni-nāc. Two more terms deserve some attention. As said earlier, *deodhās* are also called *ghorās*, ‘horses’.<sup>32</sup> Finally, a Kāmākhyā temple priest said that *deodhās* are sometimes referred to by the term *joki*, ‘someone who trembles’ (although they actually do not tremble).<sup>33</sup> The same term, according to the priest, is used to point out people possessed by evils.

A *deodhā* now in his early fifties told me that when he was first possessed, in his teenage years, his mother initially wondered whether her son was possessed by a demon. Later, it was ascertained that goddess Kālī was possessing him. As the previous lines show, the Deodhāni-nāc shares several common terms with possession by demons or harmful beings. Although the two phenomena are clearly distinguished by the persons involved, who adjust their behaviour

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<sup>32</sup> The term *deodhā* is used as a general label to talk about the people who are possessed by deities during the Deodhāni-nāc. If one wants to point out a particular *deodhā*, the term *ghorā* is used preceded by the name of the possessing deity, for instance, “Bhadra-Kālīr ghorā”. To be as closer as possible to the local use, I will employ *deodhā* to talk about the *deodhās* in general, and expressions like “Bhadra-Kālī’s *ghorā*” or “the *ghorā* of Bhadra-Kālī” to point out specific *deodhās*.

<sup>33</sup> The vocabulary of the Deodhāni-nāc shows significant similarities with the way possession is described in other parts of South Asia. Among others, Berti (Berti 2001: 72) and Gold (Gold 1988: 39–40) report notions of trembling and playing (*khelnā*) with regard to Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan, respectively. For the widespread notion of the deity’s mount, see above, note 25.

accordingly, the common vocabulary stems from a similarity: in both cases, we have to do with an external super-human force that temporarily enters a human body, thus obliterating the personality of the concerned individual and altering his/her normal behaviour.

### Theatre, possession and ritual

In North India, *līlā* denotes the huge Vaiṣṇava festival observed, among others, by Sax (Sax 2009 and 1990). According to him, in the *līlās*, “the gods are literally present on the stage, they are embodied and not merely represented” (Sax 2009: 94). Blurring the distinction between theatre and ritual, Sax calls the *vaiṣṇav līlās* “ritual dramas” (ibid.: 81). As Sax himself says, the pilgrims who flock to Ramnagar to watch the Rām-līlā actually worship the *svarūps*, the male children who are believed to be possessed by Rām, his wife Sītā and the other divine characters.

According to Grimes “ritual and performance are not opposite, nor are they mere analogues. They are kin—substantively related but importantly different” (Grimes 2006: 392). The author distinguishes between ‘ritual enactment’ and ‘ritual performance’:

If ‘performance’ is heard to suggest ‘fictional’ or to imply ‘for the sake of the audience’, then speaking of ritual as performative can lead to serious category mistakes. To enact is ‘to put into force’, a claim more consonant with claims that ritualists are prone to make. (*ibid.*)

Schechner makes a similar distinction too (Schechner 1995). Although his notion of ‘performance’ embraces a wide range of distinct phenomena, stretching from drama to ritual, sports and the continuous role-shifting people experience in their day-to-day life, he distinguishes between “make believe” performances and “make belief” ones:

In make believe performances, the spectators more or less know that what they are witnessing is not really real; that the social and personal worlds of the characters are not the worlds of the performers. Or, to put it in a few words, Juliet’s world is not the same as the world of the actress (or actor) who plays her. In make belief performances, there is an intentional blurring of the boundary between what is fictionalized, constructed, made to order and what might be actually real. (*ibid.*: 2)

By now, it should be clear that describing the Deodhāni-nāc as ‘drama’ would be inappropriate. What devotees see in the Deodhāni-nāc is not a fiction, but rather the ultimate divine reality being displayed before them. However, the *deodhās* show some similarities with actors. The actors in a drama each play a different role. Similarly, each of the *deodhās* is possessed by a specific deity and behaves accordingly. Most importantly, like actors who interpret their roles in their own personal way, *deodhās* creatively interpret the deities’ images, which are based on the shared repository of knowledge regarding each deity, including iconography and mythology. The following pages will describe and analyse in more details the individuality of the *deodhās*’ dances.

Before moving to the category of ritual, one more author should be quoted, who aptly points out the similitude and difference between an actor and a person undergoing possession. Talking about the Siberian shamans, Filliozat is illuminating in this regard:

Le chaman [...] ne procède pas au hasard dans sa frénésie, tout se passe comme s’il jouait à la manière d’un acteur un rôle de forcené [...] Mais ce fait ne contredit pas l’existence d’un véritable état de possession [... Les] chamans reçoivent une initiation et acceptent les idées courantes dans leur milieu, se croyant au moins deux esprits protecteurs dont généralement l’esprit d’un ancien chaman. Ils apprennent donc et s’attachent à reproduire les actes et les paroles de leurs prédécesseurs, d’où le caractère stéréotypé de leurs pratiques. La possession dont ils se croient atteints est bien un rôle qu’ils jouent mais rien n’empêche que ce soit un rôle tenu de bonne fois et qui consiste non seulement à agir d’une certaine façon mais à croire qu’on le fait par une force étrangère. (Filliozat, quoted in Leiris 1958: 12–13)

Filliozat’s argument is relevant here because, just as shamans reflect ideas that are current in their milieu and do not act out of sheer spontaneity, *deodhās*, priests and devotees also share a set of ideas about how the Deodhāni-nāc in its distinct phases is supposed to take place. The *deodhās* are expected to dance in a frenzied way, especially those possessed by furious goddesses. The way *deodhās* behave is informed by ideas about how deities should behave, circulating in the milieu they are part of, namely the Kāmākhyā temple.

As per the category of ritual, Tambiah's classic *A Performative Approach to Ritual* can be evoked to highlight one more element of the Deodhāni-nāc. Right at the beginning of his essay, Tambiah poses the problem of conceiving ritual as both a highly predictable event, constituted by "seemingly invariant and stereotyped sequences" (Tambiah 1979: 115), and an event that is "affected by processes peculiar to the oral specialist's mode of recitation, and by certain variable features such as the social characteristics and circumstances of the actors which [...] affect matters such as scale of attendance, audience interest, economic outlay, and so on" (*ibid.*). The three-day Deodhāni-nāc strictly follows a sequence of phases. *Deodhās*, priests and devotees know where and when *deodhās* will dance and what they are expected to do, besides dancing.<sup>34</sup> Formality, conventionality, stereotypy, and rigidity are, according to Tambiah, among ritual's salient features (*ibid.*: 122–130). However, Tambiah also affirms that "[v]ariable components make flexible the basic core of most rituals" (*ibid.*: 115). The tension between ritual's fixity and flexibility, as highlighted by Tambiah, is relevant for the analysis of the Deodhāni-nāc. Within the limits of the festival's structure, there is room for *deodhās* to interpret their 'role' in a distinctive way. Each year, each *deodhā* carries out a unique, unrepeatable performance.

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<sup>34</sup> On each of the three days of the festival, possession takes place in the early afternoon, after goddess Kāmākhyā has been offered her *bhog* (daily meal). On the first day of the festival (the *saṅkrānti*), *deodhās* dance in one of the five Śiva temples of Nilachal. Before sunset, they are expected to move from this temple to the Kāmākhyā temple to continue dancing there. The fact that *deodhās* dance first in the temple of Śiva is in tune with divine hierarchy. Śiva, goddess Kāmākhyā's husband, is superior to her. On the second and third day *deodhās* dance in the Kāmākhyā temple for many hours, from the early afternoon until nighttime. As mentioned earlier, when they stop dancing, devotees approach the *deodhās* in order to consult them. Later on, the dance is again interrupted when *deodhās* are served the freshly severed heads of he-goats.

## Heightening the divine presence

On each of the three days of the festival, Kamakhyan women play a crucial role during the descent of the deity in the *deodhā*'s body. For that to happen, in fact, the choral singing of women, the *nām*,<sup>35</sup> is needed. In 2013 I observed and shot the descent of goddess Rakṣā-Kālī (the protective form of fearsome Kālī, 'the black one') in the body of her vehicle. Some twenty Kamakhyan women, mostly elderly ones, met in the Brahman house where the *ghorā* (or *deodhā*) of Rakṣā-Kālī<sup>36</sup> had established his *thāponā* ('temporary residence').<sup>37</sup> They kept

<sup>35</sup> *Nām* is the chanting of the names of God. See Dold 2011 for an analysis of the significance of *nām* in the initial phase of the Deodhāni-nāc.

<sup>36</sup> As said earlier, the term *ghorā* is used in the local parlance to point out a specific *deodhā*. See note 32.

<sup>37</sup> Three days before the festival starts *deodhās* are expected to leave their house. Most of them take a room in a Kamakhyan household (which is not theirs, of course). It is essential that the *deodhā* establishes his *thāponā* in the hosting household. The weapons he will grasp during the dance are worshipped by the *deodhā* himself as well as by Kamakhyan. Near the weapons, the *deodhā* sets a thin mattress where he sleeps. It is from the *thāponā* that the *deodhā* goes to the temple to dance. Once the festival is over, the *deodhā* spends three more days at the *thāponā* and then goes back to his own house. The relation between a *deodhā* and the hosting household can be a long lasting one. That is, a *deodhā* may establish his *thāponā* in the very same household for several years running. It is not clear whether this relation entails any monetary exchange as well or not. The house where the *deodhā* establishes his *thāponā* can be either a Brahman or a non-Brahman household—I observed both cases. It is not surprising that a *deodhā*, who is a non-Brahman, temporarily resides in a Brahman house. In fact Brahman and non-Brahman servants of the Kāmākhyā temple enter one another's houses. Berti, who writes about temple oracles in Himachal Pradesh, says that when a low-caste oracle entered a high-caste house during possession to drive away a ghost, the high-caste people took precautions to protect their house from the presence of the low-caste oracle (Berti 2001: 67–69). This is because, outside possession, the low-caste person is not allowed into the high-caste house. But this is not the case among Kamakhyan. In fact, the *ghorā* of Rakṣā-Kālī moved to

on singing *nām* for some three hours, by rhythmically clapping their hands. The *deodhā* kept on entering and exiting the tiny room where the weapons to be grasped during the dance had been kept and worshipped for the previous three days. From time to time he was moving to the rhythm of the clapping hands; in other moments he was twisting on the floor, just to stand a second later with his eyes broadly open in an ecstatic expression and showing his tongue—this was understood by everyone as the sign that Kālī was about to possess him. Three *kumārīs*, immature girls,<sup>38</sup> had been summoned and the *deodhā* repeatedly asked their blessing, with a worried expression on his face. To sum up, phases showing the human nature of the *deodhā* alternated with phases showing the deity's behaviour. In the late morning, musicians started playing just outside the house, whilst the women kept on singing. Eventually, the *ghorā* of Rakṣā-Kālī grasped the massive *dāo* (sacrificial sword) and ran to the temple. Shortly afterwards, the women stopped singing and left. The word on everyone's mouth was '*gel*' ('[he] went [to the Temple]').

Analysing the Rajasthani vocabulary for possession, Gold argues that "the basically fluid and unstable nature of *bhāv* [deity's 'feeling'] is not quite consonant with the sense of clutch upon an object implied by 'deity X possesses person Y'" (Gold 1988: 38). Similarly, in the context of Deodhāni-nāc, possession is understood as unpredictable and shifting. Some action of prompting or facilitating the possession to take place seems to be implied by practices such as the *nām* and drumming.

During the dance, some forty drums are simultaneously played for *deodhās* to dance, creating a rave-like extremely intense rhythm. According to Polit, who writes about drumming in possession rituals of Garhwal, "the rhythms call the deities into the realm of the living,

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the Brahman house before he was possessed, that is, when he was a normal human being.

<sup>38</sup> In Assam, as in other parts of South Asia—Nepal, for instance—female children and prepubescent young girls are treated as forms of the Goddess. On the *kumārī* cult in Nepal see Letizia 2003.

making it possible for the devotees to enact a special relationship with the gods during the ritual” (Polit 2013: 153).<sup>39</sup> Similarly, music plays a vital role in stirring up the divine presence in *deodhās*’ bodies. The drummers are at the service of *deodhās*, who frequently command them to play faster or to a different rhythm. It happens that during the three-day festival, drummers sometime play at a steady rhythm, while *deodhās* dance without much energy. Suddenly, a *deodhā*, who feels particularly powerful, runs to the drummers and shouts at them, using ample gestures. The drummers immediately speed up the rhythm, which, in turn, provokes the energetic reaction of all *deodhās*. Besides the drummers, two men play *kāliyās*, wind instruments made of brass. *Deodhās* frequently put their heads near the instruments, in such a way that the latter are played directly into their (the *deodhās*’) ears and stay so, listening to the instruments, for some time (usually a couple of minutes). This practice ‘charges’ them. Most of the time, once they move away from the *kāliyās*, they dance frenziedly and scream loudly. Besides music, other elements enhance the divine presence. In fact, the divine presence is not considered as stable, but rather subject to ups and downs.

The barefoot dance on the *dāo* is considered as one of the climacteric moments of the three-day festival.<sup>40</sup> According to a widespread discourse shared by both *deodhās* and devotees, if a *deodhā*’s feet are cut by the swords, it means that he is not really possessed by any deity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Polit’s remarks are based on Alter’s work (Alter 2008), that analyses the correlation between drumming and the possession cults of Garhwal. See also Michaels (Michaels 2016: 148–150) for the centrality of music in ritual.

<sup>40</sup> While standing, two *deodhās* hold a *dāo*, which in this way is around one metre above the floor; the sharp edge of the blade is turned upwards. To help himself step on the *dāo*, the third *deodhā* puts his hands on the other two *deodhās*’ heads. Once standing on the *dāo*, he remains in this position for some time (usually not more than a minute) with an ecstatic expression on his face. The *deodhās* possessed by fierce goddesses are served freshly severed pigeons’ heads, while dancing on the *dāo*.

<sup>41</sup> While we were talking about dancing on swords, a *deodhā* spontaneously showed me the soles of his feet, stating proudly that he never cut them on the swords.

The dance on the *dāo*, accompanied by massive drumming, commands the full attention of the devotees. It is relevant for the present purpose that the *deodhā* who is going to dance on the *dāo* rushes to the statue of Manasā,<sup>42</sup> situated in the Kāmākhyā temple, in order to charge himself with divine energy. Moreover, just before stepping on the blade, he seeks the blessing of *kumārīs*.

Throughout the three-day festival, *deodhās* smoke the *cilom*, the Indian pipe, containing hashish. The effect of THC must be particularly strong, because *deodhās* are fasting. Moreover, *deodhās* do not regularly smoke hashish. To sum up, several distinct elements, such as *nām* singing, drumming, contact with Manasā's statue and with the *kumārīs*, and hashish smoking, conspire to enhance the divine presence in the *deodhās*' bodies.

### **The *deodhās*' dances: creativity and *mimesis***

As I observed, it appears that *deodhās* have a character or an inner image of the possessing deity in mind, which they coherently play year after year. By saying so, I do not mean that *deodhās* are playing a role as in staged drama or that they are just pretending to be possessed. In line with Filliozat (quoted in Leiris 1958: 12–13), I argue that somewhere in the *deodhā*'s mind an image exists of the deity who is believed to possess him and it is this image that shapes his performance. Each deity has his/her iconography and appears in a number of narrative genres. Gods and goddesses are fond of this or that offering; they are worshipped for particular reasons at specific times. Aware of the deities' attributes, *deodhās*, priests and devotees share the same understanding. In this perspective, I agree with Michaels, when he points out that ritual dance is socio-culturally embedded, and therefore cannot be studied in

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<sup>42</sup> Throughout the dance, *deodhās* repeatedly visit the statue of Manasā, often picking up a flower that has been previously offered to the snake goddess. The final stage of the dance again revolves around the statue of Manasā (see below).

itself, but rather in the larger—ritual, social, cultural—framework in which it takes place (Michaels 2016: 152–153).<sup>43</sup>

According to the common view, the *deodhās* possessed by ferocious (*tān*) deities (like Kālī) dance in a frantic way, while those possessed by cool deities (mainly male) dance in a calmer way. In 2012 I had the chance to observe the *ghorā* of Gaṇeś (the elephant-head god).<sup>44</sup> His composed dance and regular, steady pace were extremely different from the frenzied movements of the *deodhās* possessed by *tān* goddesses.

During the dance, *deodhās* appear to behave in accordance with the deities' iconography. A few examples may be explicative in this respect. All the five *ghorās* of Kālī<sup>45</sup> show their tongue during the dance, the outward stretched tongue of the goddess being a salient element of her iconography. The *ghorā* of Chinnamastā—the self-decapitated goddess—repeatedly brings his hands to his neck in a rapid gesture mimicking the severing of his head.<sup>46</sup> The *ghorā* of Manasā, goddess of cobras, repeatedly pushes his tongue out of his mouth with rapid movements, as snakes do. Thus, information about the identity

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<sup>43</sup> Spencer affirms that “dance is not an entity in itself, but belongs rightfully to the wider analysis of ritual action, and it is in this context that one can approach it analytically and grant it the attention it demands” (quoted in Michaels *ibid.*).

<sup>44</sup> Gaṇeś possessed the same man for some twenty years (if not more). Unfortunately, some time after the 2012 festival, this man, who was well-known in the Kāmākhyā temple, was injured in a car accident. He did not take part in the 2013 festival.

<sup>45</sup> Kālī is believed to have nine forms. In 2012 and 2013, five *deodhās* were possessed by five forms of the goddess, the remaining four being absent from the dance. As said earlier, not all the deities residing on Nilachal take part in the dance every year.

<sup>46</sup> He actually does so only on the first day of the dance (the *saṅkrānti*), when *deodhās* dance empty-handed. On the second and third day of the dance, they hold weapons and sticks, which prevents him from making the gesture of the head severing.

of the dancing deities is transmitted to the audience through the use *deodhās* make of their bodies.<sup>47</sup> Sax and Polit utilise the notion of “body memory” to stress how, during religious performances, knowledge is non-verbally transmitted to the audience through the body of the possessed (Sax, Polit 2012). “These bodily positions and movements transport information connected, for example, to the identity of a deity, its mythical story, the history of its worship and the group, but also more complex meanings of social norms and moral obligations” (*ibid.*: 230). Knowledge about how a deity behaves is ‘stored’ in the *deodhās*’ body and is reactivated every year through music, *cilom* smoking, etc. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*—evoked by Sax and Polit too—is particularly appropriate to describe how *deodhās*’ non-verbal knowledge is inscribed in their bodies:

The *habitus*, a product of history [in our case, previous editions of the festival, as well as knowledge about the deities’ mythology and iconography] produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms”. (Bourdieu 1990: 54, square brackets mine)

The identity of the dancing deities is also visible in the weapons *deodhās* hold and in the colours of the clothes they wear.<sup>48</sup> Thus, for instance, the five *ghorās* of Kālī, the *ghorā* of Chinnamastā and the three *ghorās*

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<sup>47</sup> By this I do not mean that everyone in the audience is able to identify all the deities who take part in the dance. I once observed a Brahman woman in her fifties, belonging to one of the temple’s priestly families, enquiring from a priest about the identity of the deity possessing a *deodhā*.

<sup>48</sup> The *dhōti* is a single long piece of cloth which is tied around the waist and then passed between the legs. *Deodhās* wear the *dhōti* only during the festival and the months preceding and following it. In the remaining part of the year, *deodhās*, like most adult Assamese men, wear trousers and shirts. Similarly, Kamakhyan priests wear the *dhōti* (and a shawl) when engaged in religious activities, but prefer trousers and shirts during their free time.

of Kāmākhyā hold sacrificial swords (*dāos*), in accordance with the goddesses' iconography. By contrast, the *ghorā* of the goddess Lalitā Kāntā (understood to be a form of Durgā) carries a trident, one of Durgā's weapons. Besides weapons, *deodhās* hold bamboo sticks. Concerning the colours, the *deodhās* possessed by goddesses generally wear red, the colour favoured by the Devī (the Goddess, par excellence), with the exception of Bagalā's *ghorā* who wears a sharp tone of yellow, the goddess's favourite colour—Bagalā's priests wear the same colour too. The *ghorā* of Sitalā, the goddess of smallpox, wears white. The *deodhās* of male deities wear either white or saffron. The *ghorā* of Śiva sometimes wears a *dhoti* with a leopard pelage pattern, in accord with the god who is depicted wearing a leopard/tiger skin. The make-up of *deodhās*, whose faces and bodies are smeared with red paste, adds to their impressive appearance.

So far, it has been discussed how the iconography of the deities is expressed through the *deodhās*' bodies, as well as the 'costumes' they wear. However, the depiction of the common images of the deities is not the entire content of the dances of the *deodhās*. Each *deodhā* actively interprets the image of the possessing deity, showing *gupt-mudrās*<sup>49</sup>

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The *dhoti* is particularly apposite for religious purposes because, like the sari (*sāḍī*), it has no stiches.

<sup>49</sup> *Mudrā* (seal) indicates "particular positions or intertwining of the fingers [...], commonly practiced in religious worship and supposed to have an occult meaning and magical efficacy" (Monier-Williams 2005: s.v.). The *mudrās* executed by *deodhās* are not part of the standard repertoire of Kāmākhyā temple priests, nor are they in accord with the iconography attributed to the concerned deities. Therefore, these *mudrās* are called *gupt* (hidden, secret), although they are openly displayed in the dance. As far as I understand it, the *gupt-mudrās* executed by the *deodhās* are conceived as a spontaneous (and mysterious) manifestation of the deities who possess their human vehicles. Serbaeva Saraogi too highlights the connection between *mudrās* and possession. In the Sanskrit texts she analyses, the tantric initiate executes specific *mudrās* to attract super-natural beings and to be possessed by them. It is the initiate, as described in medieval textual sources, who

and expressing a specific mood. As said earlier, all the *ghorās* of Kālī show their tongue. However, they do it in different ways. For instance, the *ghorā* of Smaśān-Kālī shows his tongue much less than the others.<sup>50</sup> He is rarely satisfied by the drummers who are at the *deodhās*' service: I have seen him making eloquent facial expressions of disdain towards them. He does not always give a flower from his garlands (*mālās*) to the begging devotee. He frequently has an angry expression on his face. He rarely attains the peak of the dance by showing the tongue with an ecstatic expression. By contrast, the *ghorā* of Rakṣā-Kālī (the protective form of Kālī) is much more inclined to dance in a frenzied way; he moves quickly. He frequently shows his tongue and gives flowers to the begging devotee. He screams furiously but is never as gloomy as the *ghorā* of Smaśān-Kālī. Naturally, these differences are in accord with the character attributed to the various deities—Smaśān-Kālī is considered the fiercest form of Kālī—but are not limited to that. Each *deodhā* has developed his own dancing style. The *ghorā* of Bagalā exults, overwhelmed by joy, completely thrilled and intoxicated by bliss.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, the *ghorā* of Padma-Kumārī—a form of Manasā—keeps a lower profile while dancing and rarely yells. He, however, has a peculiar way of dancing, consisting of circular movements; he rotates around himself—something the majority of *deodhās* do not do—his eyes shut.

Some *deodhās* have developed a repertoire of performances of their own. The *ghorā* of Bhadra-Kālī dances whilst keeping the *dāo*

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intentionally makes the first step towards the deity (Serbaeva Saraogi 2012). Unlike him, the *deodhā* is the arrival point of a movement that starts somewhere else, namely in the deity's will to possess a human body and dance. Everything that the *deodhās* do during possession is attributed to deities' will, not theirs. On *mudrās*, see also Padoux 2010.

<sup>50</sup> The fierce goddess Kālī is generally believed to inhabit the cremation ground (*smaśān*); among her nine forms, Smaśān-Kālī is understood to be more tightly connected to this frightening place.

<sup>51</sup> Kālī and Bagalā are two of the Daśamahāvidyās (the Ten Great Wisdoms), a group of goddesses who have their temples on Nilachal. See note 14.

in a horizontal position in his mouth, with the sharp edge of the blade placed over his tongue. One more element of the dance of this *deodhā* can help to clarify my point. As with any other *deodhā*, the *ghorā* of Bhadra-Kālī listens to the *kāliyās* (wind instruments). When he moves away from the *kāliyās*, he has a startling expression on his face, with his eyes widely open. In 2012, when I first observed him doing this, I thought it was some spontaneous behaviour dictated by the spur of the moment. Next year, I saw him doing exactly the same thing. *Deodhās*' behaviour is 'scripted', so to say.<sup>52</sup> In this regard, Schechner's definition of performance seems particularly appropriate to describe the *Deodhāni-nāc*: "performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn the body with costumes, and provide people with behaviour that is 'twice-behaved', not for the first time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared" (Schechner 1995: 1). Schechner stresses another important point, when he talks about authorship:

In performance, these rehearsed behaviours are heightened, marked and framed: different than everyday behaviour. Most of these not-everyday-behaviours are not fully owned by the person doing them. The ballet dancer's plié or the bull fighter's move with the cape or the Buddhist priest's hand gesture are conventional actions, *scripted, authored by someone other than the performer*". (*ibid.*, my italics)s

Applied to the *deodhās*' dances, this affirmation calls for some reflections. Within the frame (and limits) of the 'role' they undertake, *deodhās* mould their own performance. *Deodhās* depart from Schechner's definition of the performer in that they are the authors, so to speak, of their dance.

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<sup>52</sup> Although constant patterns can be detected in the dancing style of *deodhā* X, every year his performance is unique. During the dance, one does not know what *deodhā* X will do next. *Deodhā* X may dance in a frenzied way for some of the time, screaming loudly; then he may follow the rhythm in a calmer way. After some time, he may rush to the statue of Manasā to stir up his energy. People who are having the *darśan* immediately make room for the approaching *deodhā*. It is considered highly inauspicious to block the way of a *deodhā*.

A distinction needs to be pointed out. The tongue-showing of a *deodhā* unmistakably identifies Kālī as the possessing deity. By contrast, the widely open eyes of the *ghorā* of Bhadra-Kālī are not connected to the iconography of the goddess. The staggering expression on his face communicates the immense, threatening *śakti* of the Goddess in general terms, but does not convey information regarding the identity of the deity. Similarly, the rotatory movements of the *ghorā* of Padma-Kumārī are not revelatory of the snake goddess. To sum up, *deodhās* do not simply reproduce, through the medium of dance, aspects of the deities' iconography, but rather introduce to their dance elements that go beyond it.

The audience prefers the *deodhās* who dance in a furious, energetic way. For instance, the *ghorās* of Rakṣā-Kālī and Bagalā, with their flamboyant dance and loud yells are among those the audience love the most. The *ghorā* of Smaśān-Kālī, with his fearsome, intimidating behaviour, is also highly revered by the audience. These (and other) *deodhās* receive bulks of *mālās* and presents (usually *sāḍīs* and he-goats to be sacrificed) by devotees. By contrast, the unobtrusive dance of the *ghorā* of Padma-Kumārī does not attract the audience's attention and the *deodhā* receives much fewer garlands and presents.<sup>53</sup>

Each *deodhā's* dance has thus a strong individual connotation. In this regard, *deodhās* are very similar to the actors in a drama, who,

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<sup>53</sup> Berti highlights a similar situation, with reference to the *gurs* (oracles of Himachal Pradesh village deities). According to her, one of the eight *gurs* she followed was able to acquire a great prestige in the village and beyond it. As the deities incarnated by *gurs* are approached to rule over public issues and contrasts that involve various sectors of a village or several villages, this man ended up having a significant role in the local social and political arena (Berti 2001: 69–71). Unlike *gurs*, *deodhās* do not enter this arena; they are consulted regarding the private problems of their devotees. The *deodhās'* peculiar activity is dancing, while *gurs'* ones are listening and talking. However, notwithstanding these significant differences, in both cases, the skill of the possessed person to take on the role of the deity profoundly impacts the audience's response.

each, interpret a different role. Compared to them, the *svarūps*—the boys who embody Rām-līlā’s divine characters—resemble fixed images of the divine beings they embody. Considering the term *pātr*, meaning both ‘vessel’ and ‘actor’, Kapur affirms that “as the taste of wine does not stay in the vessel, the actor does not acquire the qualities of the character he portrays” (Kapur 1985: 65). According to Kapur “the *swarūpas* look tranquil and composed on all occasions; indeed, whether they are in the palace or in exile, they always look the same” (*ibid.*). Sax highlights the significance of the *ārati* performed for the enthroned (and immobile) *svarūps*,<sup>54</sup> and discusses the importance of the opposition between the motionless divine and the incessantly flowing world (Sax 1990: 151). By contrast, the dynamism and energy of the *deodhās* are understood as the display of the goddess’s overwhelming *śakti*.

The singular features of each *deodhā*’s dance is connected with the fact that no one teaches them how to dance. The eldest *ghorā* of Kāmākhyā and one of the two *ghorās* of Śiva have some command over the remaining *deodhās*, but no *deodhā* controls other *deodhās*’ dances. Unlike actors, *deodhās* receive no formal training; they have no need to, because, according to them as well as to priests and devotees, they are not dancing of their own will nor within their own capabilities: it is the deities who perform through the *deodhās*’ body. However, my view is that some kind of training, based on observation and emulation, is involved in the *deodhās*’ dances. Young children of Kamakhyan families are regularly brought by their relatives to the temple to watch the Deodhāni-nāc.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, people coming from Guwahati and

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<sup>54</sup> *Ārati* consists in worshipping an idol by weaving lights before it.

<sup>55</sup> In 2013, while the Deodhāni-nāc was going on, my landlord’s nephew, a three-year old child, started imitating the *deodhās*’ behaviour at home. He would grasp a metal ladle with his right hand—the *deodhās*’ weapons—and hold a teddy bear with his left hand on his left shoulder—the goats *deodhās* carry. In this fashion, the child would dance rhythmically, provoking joyful laughter in his family members.

near-by areas, who flock to the temple to observe the dance, bring their children with them. When a boy or a man claims for the first time to be possessed, he knows what is expected of a *deodhā*. It is the fear-some behaviour of a *deodhā* that future *deodhās* (as well as people who will never be *deodhās*) learn through watching. Similarly, Berti highlights how the *gurs* (oracles) of Himachal Pradesh village temples are often previous *gurs*' relations or people serving the concerned temples (especially, musicians) (Berti 2001). This situation, Berti says, "semble suggérer une transmission non officielle, fondée davantage sur l'observation que sur un apprentissage initiatique" (*ibid.*: 67).<sup>56</sup>

Bourdieu's notion of *mimesis* can be evoked in this connection.

The process of acquisition—a practical *mimesis* (or mimeticism) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an *imitation* that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a model—and the process of reproduction—a practical reactivation which is opposed to both memory and knowledge—tend to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose. (Bourdieu 1990: 73)

"What is 'learned by body'—Bourdieu states—is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is" (*ibid.*). *Deodhās* do not consciously decide how to dance. The process through which they shape their dancing style is unconscious.

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noticed that a number of present-day *deodhās* are related to each other. Several brother-brother and uncle-nephew relations exist among the *deodhās*. A couple of *deodhās* are the sons of former *deodhās*, the deity who used to possess the father being the same now possessing the son. Two *deodhās* are childhood friends; now in their early fifties, they started to be possessed in their early teenage—a number of *deodhās*, however, seem to have no relation of any kind with other *deodhās*. In my view, these relations suggest a sort of unofficial transmission. A person who has a *deodhā* among his close relatives acquires a particular intimacy with what it means to be a *deodhā*. However, according to *deodhās*, it is the deities who choose their human vehicles.

To sum up, a *deodhā* is someone who ‘learnt’ how a *deodhā* is expected to behave; he has a specific ‘character’ in mind and ‘plays’ it before an audience. Every year, each *deodhā* repeats particular ‘performances’, consisting of fixed patterns of movement, facial expressions and gestures. During the dance, each *deodhā*’s temper and attitude are unique. Seen from the external observer’s viewpoint, a *deodhā* has a lot in common with an actor. But unlike a play, the Deodhāni-nāc has no plot: there is no story to be told. By contrast, in the Rām-līlā of Ramnagar, the story of Rāma is narrated to the audience. In this sense, the Deodhāni-nāc is not very close to a theatrical performance.<sup>57</sup> Notwithstanding this, the personal, creative interpretation the *deodhā* gives of the deity-character brings him very close to an actor.

### **When *deodhās* fall: the end of the dance**

The final, intense phase of the dance takes place before the statue of Manasā, inside the Kāmākhyā temple. At night, after a frenzied dance, *deodhās* collapse one by one at the feet of the statue of the goddess. The fact that a *deodhā* falls (*pari*)<sup>58</sup> is understood to be the sign that the deity has left his body. Consequently, devotees stop worshipping him. The *deodhā* who has his weapons taken away from him by a fellow dancer will be the next to fall. In these circumstances, *deodhās* negotiate with one another to decide who will be the next to fall. *Deodhās* look at each other with piercing gazes. They exchange a few rapid words. Those *deodhās*, who feel powerful, are reluctant to give up their weapons and try to grasp other *deodhās*’ weapons instead.

The final stage of the dance can again be analysed through the perpetual tension between a ritual’s fixity and variability, as highlighted by Tambiah (Tambiah 1979). Everyone knows that *deodhās* are going to fall one by one. But no one—including the *deodhās*—knows who will

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<sup>57</sup> This is true if we understand the plot to be an intrinsic element of theatre. By contrast, contemporary theatre (for instance Pina Bausch’ theatre) often lacks a plot.

<sup>58</sup> See above, note 31.

be the next *deodhā* to fall. Within the rigid ritual framework, *deodhās* engage in lively, spontaneous interactions with one another.

Having divested the garlands, the *deodhā* who lost his weapons performs a solo dance, running through the temple. The other *deodhās* keep on dancing, but everyone's eyes are on the frenzied dance of the one who is about to fall. This is considered to be one of the culminating moments of the entire three-days [of] dancing. The *deodhā* finally falls before the statue of Manasā. He remains prostrate on the ground for a few moments, his head at her feet. On standing up, he is no more a deity, but a human being. He picks up a flower and leaves.

### Concluding remarks

The editors of the present volume question the relevance and utility of analysing South Asian performative traditions by positing a clear-cut divide between the categories of theatre and ritual. The Deodhāni-nāc cannot be described by a single word. Classifying complex phenomena, giving them a precise location in the scholar's conceptual map is not always the best way to embrace and analyse their complexity. As Schechner puts it "the neat categories teachers admire are not obeyed by people and events" (Schechner 1995: 1).

As has been shown, the Deodhāni-nāc cannot be defined as 'drama': according to *deodhās*, priests and devotees, the dance is the deities' *līlā*. *Deodhās* do not act; rather, they are the vehicles through which deities show their dance on earth. However, significant similarities can be noticed between the figure of the *deodhā* and the actor. The argument advanced by this paper is that *deodhās* do not simply reproduce through the dance the deities' iconography, but also creatively interpret the deities' image, giving shape to their own dancing style. In this sense, they are similar to actors who interpret their role in their own, personal way. In line with Tambiah, I considered how the ritual known as the Deodhāni-nāc is both fixed and flexible (Tambiah 1979). It has been highlighted how the peculiar dance of each *deodhā* takes place within the rigid framework provided by the festival structure.

In the dance of the *deodhās*, knowledge transmission to the audience happens non-verbally. It is through the use of their bodies that *deodhās* express the identity of the deities possessing them, as well as the immense *śakti* of the deities (especially goddesses). The *deodhās*' behaviours and 'costumes' impress the spectators. Wearing dozens of flower garlands, the *deodhās*, their faces and bodies smeared with red paste, wave weapons and bamboo sticks. On each of the three days, they dance for hours, screaming loudly. *Deodhās* engage in elaborate, demanding performances. Yet, unlike actors, they do not undergo any formal training. It is through *mimesis* (Bourdieu 1990) that future *deodhās* unconsciously learn what is expected of a *deodhā*. It is precisely the lack of an authoritative figure—a teacher, a guru—that leaves room for each of the *deodhās* to dance in a distinctive and personalised way.

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## Documentary film

- Cartosio, A. and Majo Garigliano, I. 2014. *Ghora. Waiting for the Goddess*.



Fig. 1. The startling expression of Bhadra-Kālī's *ghora* after he listened to the *kāliyās* (photo by the author).



Fig. 2. The thrilled, joyful *ghora* of Bagalā (photo by the author).



Fig. 3. Rakṣā-Kālī's *ghora*, showing the tongue, wrapped in the *sāḍīs* donated by devotees (photo by the author).



Fig. 4. The gloomy expression of Smaśān-Kālī's *ghora*, listening to the *kāliyās* (photo by the author).



Fig. 5. Smaśān-Kālī's *ghora*, showing his *gupt-mudrā* (photo by the author).