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# When Fearful Ghosts are Married in Tulunadu

Marine Carrin

## Abstract

In Tulunadu those who meet a violent death fighting for a just cause may become demi-gods, or *bhūtas*. Here, death is a kind of apotheosis, where those who fought against injustice become divine figures after death, receiving a cult in a shrine. Quite different is the story of those who simply experienced a violent death before they even managed to get married. They return as ghosts, *pretas*, and their kin suffer from their absence, but still fear the *pretas* and try to appease them by all available means. The paradox is that when *pretas* manifest themselves their unwanted presence is frightening, while at the same time their absence is experienced as grief. This creates a kind of double bind, which villagers may try to resolve by celebrating the marriage of ghosts, enabling their deceased siblings to marry. This marriage induces the families of bride and bridegroom to unite in their grief, while trying to appease the young ghosts who torment them. This ritual, often held secretly, was documented by a photographer from the fisherman caste who had himself experienced similar fear when his brother-in-law, still a bachelor, committed suicide. The paper reflects on the fear he experienced, wondering if the ritual could really appease the kin.

**Keywords:** Tulunadu, *pretas*, fear, ritual, ghost marriage, death

## Introduction

One afternoon in February 2016, I visited Manu and his wife, who live near the seashore in the village of Yermal on the coast of South Kanara. Manu belongs to the fishing (Mogaveera) community, though he never practiced the ancestral occupation of his caste but became a photographer. Passionate about theatre, Manu has published an excellent book in Kannada on Yakshagana, the local theatre, whose heroes are gods and demons.

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When I rang the bell of their house, Manu and his wife Sushila opened the door, greeted me, and introduced me to their *mami*,<sup>1</sup> Sushila's elderly mother. This thin lady seemed very sad, and guessing my thoughts, Manu explained: "Amma is not well, she has lost her son!" Then he invited me to sit down, while Sushila went to the kitchen to prepare tea. The sitting room is comfortable and decorated with books and trophies that Manu has won for his photography exhibitions as well as for his performances of Talemaddale<sup>2</sup> – he is known in the region for his capacity to sing the epic poems (*pāḍḍana*) all through the night. Manu has a good command of Hindi, which allows me to converse with him, though he always tries to teach me some Tulu, especially when Hindi does not convey quite the same idea. As I ask him whether he has performed recently – he usually rehearses the Talemaddale programme every Tuesday with his friends – he smiles: "I have been busy, I went to the North of the district, I went to pray to Śani, Saturn, the planet which has the most malefic influence over our lives." Having heard of the cult of Śani, which today attracts more and more devotees in different states of India, I wondered why Manu had become a devotee of this terrible god, who is particularly feared in South India.

## Who is Śani?

Śani is a star – Saturn – but also a God, explains Manu, like Śankar, who is the sun but also the God Shiva. He explains that Śani is associated with evil and old age, and that he limps but has a terrible eye (*krūr dr̥ṣṭi*) that can strike people with paralysis and other afflictions. Śani is well known in Vedic and Puranic texts. Guenzi (2004–2005) retraces the mythical genealogy of the god. Śani was born from the Sun and the Shadow, and he is the younger brother of Yama, god of death. Known as the most malevolent and inauspicious of the planets, Śani is included in the group of the nine planetary deities (*navagraha*), which also comprises Sūrya, the Sun, Chandra, the moon, Maṅgala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛhaspati (Jupiter) and Śukra (Venus), as well as Rāhu and Ketu. Guenzi relates the cult of Śani to the Pāla period (8th to 12th century) in Bihar, though there is mention of it in very old texts such as the Atharvaveda. The cult of Śani is now present in many states of India, and his temples are

1 All terms cited are Tulu, but note that some Kannada, Sanskrit or even Hindi terms are used by Tulu speakers. The transcription of the Tulu terms follows U. P. Upadhyaya (1988–1997): *Tulu Lexicon*, 5 Volumes, Udipi: Rashtrakavi Govind Pai Samshodhana Kendra. The transcription of Sanskrit terms follows L. Nitti / L. Renou (1987): *Dictionnaire Sanskrit Français*, Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Jean Maisonneuve. Finally, the transcription of Hindi terms follows N. Balbir / J. K. Balbir (1993), *Hindi français dictionnaire général*, Paris: L'Asiatheque.

2 During the Talemaddale performance, the devotees sing praise songs to different *bhūtas* and Hindu gods. They may dialogue with each other as the deities are supposed to do. The repertoire is based on religious poetry.

visited by local devotees as well as by pilgrims from other regions, come to pacify the anger of the god. The recent development of the cult of Śani in different regions of India foregrounds the importance of astrology. As Guenzi (2013) shows, to consult an astrologer is a current practice through which the clients seek a solution to immediate problems: When and whom to marry? Which profession to choose? Where to build one's house? Astrology as a science is practiced by Brahmins and taught in prestigious universities such as Benares Hindu University, for an audience of urban elites.<sup>3</sup> But in rural India, non-Brahmin astrologers also offer astrological counselling: the diviner engages the client in a communicative interaction where problems can be explored and clarified, but he may also use the dialogue to propose to the client ameliorative patterns of thought and behaviour to neutralise the negative influence of certain planets as well as the negative effects of a bad karma resulting from sins committed in past existences (Pugh 1983, Avdeeff 2011).

In South Kanara, Śani has long been worshipped in the temple of the nine planets in Udyavara, where the priest warns the pilgrims about the malevolent gaze of the god. Most astrologers and healers in South Kanara relate Śani to negative *doṣa*, or inauspicious signs. I knew there were several shrines dedicated to Śani between Mangalore and Yermal, where the priest (*pātri*) offers puja but does not provide *darśan*.<sup>4</sup> But in the North of the district, explains Manu, there are three shrines at Kundapur, Kota and Koteshwara, where Śani gives his blessing through a possessed priest (*pātri*) and through his devotees. In Kundapur, one can experience darśan every Saturday, from 2 to 4 pm. People ask questions (*kanike*) like in the shrines dedicated to the Goddesses.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps to justify his interest in the cult, my friend added that Śani puja is connected to the folk theatre Yakshagana in some ways, “[...] in the way of singing, since Śani likes the voice effects we do in Talemaddale, where everything depends on the voice, since there is no acting and no costumes.”

In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a poet, Chinmaya Das, in Maharashtra who compiled poems to be sung in praise of Śani. Manu shows me the book (45th edition in 1978) with an image of Śani on the cover, sitting on his vehicle, a crow. Then he returns to the ritual. “In Kundapur, the priest is a Mogaveera and people offer black clothes to the god, since he is connected with evil and death, but we take *prasād* [the remains of the god's food].” I am surprised at this last statement, but my friend continues: “Some devotees address their prayers to the terrible form (*ūgra*) of Śani.” With his lower right hand, the god holds a trident (*triśūl*) like Śiva, while a snake is coiled around his upper right arm. In his upper left arm he holds an arrow. The lower left

3 Guenzi (2013) shows how astrology, a Sanskrit tradition between science and religion, is adapted and reinterpreted in contemporary India to answer the questions raised by the transformations of Indian society.

4 *Darśan* means “vision” but in South Kanara, it refers to the revelation of the deity through possession.

5 For further reading see e.g. Carrin 1999.

arm is held in the peaceful (*śānti*) sign – palm flat outwards, fingers up. But, says Manu: “I am not a *mantravādī* [astrologer and magician]. I even fear the peaceful form of Śani, though some Brahmins prefer to offer the homage of the flame (*ārti*) and ghee to a peaceful image of the god [to pacify him]. In his *ūgra* form, Śani sits on a crow. The bird links the god to death, since the mourners at funerals have to feed some grains of rice to the crows before sharing the funeral meal.” Then, Manu comments on the ritual offered to Śani in Kundapur: “When the priests and devotees sing the Śanideva Mahātmya during a whole night, the tune is like in Talemaddale, and fifteen singers perform the twenty roles. Astrologers and Ayurvedic doctors in the region stress that Śani influences the mental equilibrium of people, and most of their clients are afraid. In Kundapur, the *pātri* gets possessed by Śani and provides *darśan*, then they offer one cucumber to the god, the two halves of which are sprinkled with red powder (*kumkum*), to make it look as if it was blood.”

## Fear and sorrow

A few months after his brother-in-law’s death, Manu offered a big *preta* puja in his house – he did the puja to Śani himself with his wife and they did not call any Brahmin. They sacrificed a cucumber to remove *dośa* and *dukh* – inauspiciousness and sadness. Nobody was possessed, but many people came and prayed.

“When Saturn dominates, says the astrologer, the country is full of disasters. Then we fear any event.” Sushila told me that they are still seven siblings in her family, but originally they were eight, and her mother is sad. Here, Manu interrupted her, saying it is not good to talk about *dukh* and *dośa*. This remark reminded us that after such a tragedy, people fear other inauspicious events and they particularly fear the *pretas*, the ghosts who feel lonely in the other world and come back to torment their kin. Those who have suffered a violent death at a premature age are likely to become ghosts since they have been unable to fulfil their lives, to marry and to have children. These roaming souls are frustrated since their premature death seems to defy the natural order of things, time, seasons, and the cycle of life and death. In most Asian societies, the belief in ghosts is well known (Baptandier 2001), but we know little about the articulation of feelings and rituals,<sup>6</sup> or rather, we do not always clearly understand the extent to which such ritual works in the case of a

6 There is a rich literature on the anthropology of emotions (e.g. Lutz / Abu-Lughod 1990), but not on the relationship between feelings and ritual. Literature on ritual seldom deals with emotions, even if we concede that ritual action works not only at the level of meaning and performance of the ritual but also emotionally for the participants. In this regard, phenomenology insists that any attempt at objectivity is always mediated by the context and personalities within which it is framed. Thus Stoller (2017) shows how a serious sickness allows him to develop another level of understanding of Songhay rituals.

tragic event, or an unpredicted death. When such an event strikes a family, people fear the invisible, but their fear also seems volatile, it comes and goes. Brahmanical thought distinguishes the *pitr*, the deceased who are ritually complete, from the *preta* who died a violent death, an inauspicious event that prevents them from receiving complete funeral rites. This is why the *preta* come back to torment their relatives (e.g. Tarabout 2001).

Sushila tells me that both she and Manu were born under the sign of Śani. “We should not have married,” she says, smiling, “but love was stronger than our doubts: it was a love marriage.” She refuses to be tied by a chain of malediction, stressing that the solidarity of the family is most important in the case of grief. “Love (*prem*) should be stronger than fear (*bhaya*),” she adds. She says that she is glad she can be with her mother in these difficult times, and that also her sister is not far: she lives in Manipal with her husband and they have two children. Her husband is a body-builder and has opened a fitness centre in Manipal that attracts a lot of students.

## The suicide

I felt like asking Manu how he interpreted his brother-in-law’s death. But I hesitated to raise the point in the presence of the deceased’s mother. After a while, Sushila took her mother to visit a neighbour. Then Manu remarked: “I have not really answered your question – why I became a devotee of Śani. It was after my brother-in-law’s suicide.” Then he told me: “My brother-in-law was a computer engineer in Bangaluru, he was thirty-two, and seemed to be a successful fellow. I did not know him very well but I know that my mother-in-law, as well as his sisters, were proud of him.” I asked whether his brother-in-law was married. “No, he was a bachelor, though he could have got a good match. But he was often depressed and then, probably, he decided to hang himself on the ventilator of his room. The police called us, saying he did not leave any letter to explain his desperate gesture. [...] A post-mortem was conducted, and he was cremated in Bangaluru.” Then Manu added: “There was no obvious reason, so I thought of Śani, who may inspire negative feelings and push people to commit the most insane acts.”

For my friend, it seemed clear that the suicide of his brother-in-law had been caused by an inauspicious planetary influence, an influence you can neutralise only through fasting and prayers to Śani. It was then that Manu showed me the photographs of the ritual he had held in his house a few months earlier, to appease the planet god. He had invited a *mantravādī* to perform the offering of ghee in the sacred fire. One point was still obscure to me: had the as-

trologer concluded that the suicide had become a *preta*? And who was to be feared, the ghost or Śani himself, the terrible Saturn?

I felt it was not proper to ask my friend whether or not he believed in *pretas* since this belief is very common in Tulunadu. And then, I was convinced that belief was not really the question; rather it was important to know what was to be feared. I asked Manu, cautiously, why he did not consult the priests of the Navagraha shrine in Udyavara, famous in the region for warding off evil influences. I had been to Udyavara myself with Jivan, a Billava lawyer whose neighbour had committed suicide after going bankrupt. Manu did not answer directly, but I was made to understand that he did not want to his fear to become common knowledge, since everybody around the town of Udupi knows him and be aware if he visited Udyavara, which is nearby. Going to a distant Śani shrine, once a month, seemed a better strategy. To convince me, Manu showed me a short film he had made, as he could not take me to this shrine, where women are not allowed. The reason for this ban was not stated, but of course, Śani himself was a victim of the curse of a female, the goddess Pārvatī. She had good reasons, however, to make Śani limp, since his terrible gaze had made her son Ganesh's head fall off (Guenzi 2005: 411).<sup>7</sup> But Manu did not comment on this episode, and I realised that he deemed it too dangerous to speak of the mythic punishment inflicted to the god, a punishment he could evoke only in chanting during the Talemaddale.

The film showed Manu and a few other devotees singing prayers to Śani all night, while men possessed by *pretas* were jumping and snarling around them. This lasted a few hours, until the main performer, Manu, managed to mute the recalcitrant ghosts. I understood, then, that Manu's voice was able to appease the ghosts. Though the male devotees of Śani drink alcohol and use obscenities in some shrines, this is not done in Kundapur. Probably, this practice is related to the secret cult of the Ūgra Śani, a fierce form of the god not worshipped in the Kundapur temple.

The days that followed persuaded me, however, that Manu, though jovial as usual, had been deeply affected by "the touch of Śani" as he called it. He was still joking with his wife but his fear was palpable. Nevertheless, he was called to film various festivities, and continued working with his usual enthusiasm.

7 There are different stories telling how Ganapati got his elephant head. The version quoted by Guenzi (2005) in the context of the Śani cult was also the one told to me by my informants.

## *Bhūtas* and *pretas* in Tulunadu

A few days later, I met Manu and asked him what he knew about ghosts. He told me that, very often, *pretas* are young men who die unmarried or young women – called *curēl* – who die in childbirth. Such figures are feared all over India, but I wanted to understand what was special about them in Tulunadu, where suicide is not necessarily condemned, and where victims may become heroic figures for having experienced a violent but glorious death, allowing them to become *bhūtas* or demi-gods.

A particular political order<sup>8</sup> had developed in the region, characterised by Jain kings and Bunt chiefs who were devotees of the royal *bhūtas*. But the latter also represent a moral order, which corresponds to the political, since the justice of the *bhūtas* concerns everybody. Even non-Tulu such as the Konkani speakers may discover that they must offer a cult to *bhūtas* attached to their land (Tambs-Lyche 2011). Otherwise, the deities will torment them and send illness and other evils. Nowadays, the old chiefdoms are still known, and find their expression in the *bhūta* cult.

The *bhūtas* include some three hundred demi-gods in Tulunadu. Some of them have a human origin, others stem from a mythic birth or have an animal form (Carrin 1999). The *bhūtas* of human origin fought, during their lives, against the injustice of the landlords, fighting for a noble cause until they decided to leave the world. Such dramatic events are reflected in a number of epics in Tulu, known as *pāḍḍanas*.<sup>9</sup> They present the narrative frame of the possession ritual (*kola*), which lasts at least one full night and involves a possession séance where low-caste mediums impersonate the different deities. These poems also describe the labour of the subaltern castes, like the Billavas, who used to cultivate rice and areca nuts in the fields of their landlords.

*Bhūtas*, then, are the spirits of past heroes or heroines who often died a violent death (Claus 1979, Carrin 2017). They are frightening and destructive figures, associated with the wilderness, whom only the just have no need to fear. These *bhūtas* sit in a court of justice in the other world, but they come back periodically and take possession of two kinds of mediums. The first mediums are dancers who enact the previous life of the *bhūtas* while the epic

8 Under the patronage of small kingdoms, *bhūta* worship developed into an organised system. The *rājan-daivas* or royal *bhūtas*, who are celebrated during the *nēma*, a prestigious ritual, are still associated with the coronation ceremony of the local kings. The Bunts act as patrons of the rituals, and ask the *bhūta*, through a low-caste medium, if he is satisfied with the state of his domain. The answers of the deity should contain divine justice beyond any social considerations. The medium who voices the *bhūta*'s answer may express the concerns of the oppressed castes and demand justice from the dominant Bunt (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2003).

9 From *pardū*, which means “sung”. This refers to a singer who sings the epic during the performance of rituals dedicated to the *bhūtas*.



poem is sung. The second kind of medium, the *darśan pātri*,<sup>10</sup> reveals the “vision” of the deity. Death is often described as a passage from this world of manifestation (*jōga*) to the world of *māyā*, which means the “non-manifest” (Nichter 1979). Suicide implies leaving this world of illusion and injustice. It is a recurrent motive in the *bhūta* epics, where one twin commits suicide to join his brother or sister who has been killed. Thus twins share the same destiny after death and represent a superior justice that is true (*satyā*) (Carrin 1999, 2017).

The idea of suicide has been important in the region since the thirteenth century, when Jain men or women practised fasting until death. Suicide is a voluntary and meritorious act (Dikshit 1967). But today, suicide seems also to be an answer to despair. Some suicides have trivial causes, such as when fishermen choose to die in the sea because they cannot repay loans taken to buy a boat. Other cases are ambiguous, as Manu knows very well, since he often looks at the rock inhabited by Bobbarya, the *bhūta* of the Mogaveera caste, who protects the souls of the suicides as well as those lost at sea, and helps them find the land of the dead. Every year, during the annual ritual (*bhūta kola*) of Bobbarya, a medium is questioned by devotees who have lost a relative at sea and wonder whether or not he committed suicide, since he may then become a dangerous ghost (Carrin 2007).

“We mourn the dead,” repeats Manu, “but they are not supposed to come back.” To stress this point, my friend talks about *pretas*. Unlike the heroic dead who become *bhūtas*, *pretas* are ordinary dead, frustrated since they were deprived of a marital life and have failed to accomplish their destiny. While heroic dead such as the twin brothers Koti and Chennaya<sup>11</sup> are worshipped in shrines and protect the members of their caste, *pretas* are feared. Young men and women in particular suffer the attacks of *pretas*, who burden them with headaches, fevers and other illnesses. One often hears a *preta* pelting stones on the roof of a house, causing fear among those who live there. They will then go to a shrine to consult a *mantravādī* exorcist. Girls who refuse to marry the boy chosen by their family are often thought to be possessed by a ghost and taken to one of the many shrines of Babu, a *bhūta* who protects the subaltern communities, to exorcise the ghost (Carrin 2009). During exorcism, *pretas* speak a filthy language, abusing their victims.

10 The term *darśan*, here, refers to the divine vision of the *bhūta* that the medium conveys to the devotees.

11 The Billavas were the traditional healers of the Tulu kings. Koti and Chennaya’s mother knew the medicinal plants and succeeded in curing the chief when the latter’s life was in danger. He promised her that he would donate land to her offspring. The twin brothers succeeded in cultivating lands but were killed by treachery during a war. They became *bhūtas* after their heroic death, which has come to symbolise the struggle of the Billava caste and other subaltern communities (Carrin 2016).

## Death ceremony (*saavu*)

Reflecting on the relationship between the dead and the living, death makes us experience a terrible loss, an absence that cannot be compensated, and this feeling makes us realise our own finitude. Grief may be expressed through different cultural idioms, but the return of the dead in the form of *pretas*, it seems, produces fear, since the apparition of the *preta* seems to contradict the very logic of the events that follow death – the death rituals and the mourning. In some cases, death has not even been proven, as in the story of another fisherman, Ganesh, whose sister disappeared in a market, eleven years earlier. She was never found. Ganesh has searched for his sister in every possible way, but his wife claims to be menaced by her sister-in-law's *preta*, who, she says, wants to strangle her. These attacks are so frequent that Ganesh's wife has obliged her husband to leave their home on the seashore, an isolated place which might favour the coming of the ghost. In this case, the funeral could not be performed because the sister's death could not be proven, and this has been a major source of anxiety (Carrin 2009).

In the Mogaveera community they formerly used to bury their dead. Today, they bring rice and put it at the head and feet of the deceased, while they keep two halves of coconut on a seat like a throne (*gaddi*) to symbolise the presence of the deceased. The head of the family fells a mango tree to make a pyre (*kaṭṭa guruni*), and a Madhivala – washerman – will act as priest. A temporary structure to carry the body, known as a *chatta*, is made of bamboo. They wrap the dead body with banana leaves and tie it with ropes. Then the main mourner's son or nephew takes the body to the courtyard, helped by male relatives. They mix coconut and turmeric powder and apply it to the corpse; then relatives pour water over it. Among upper castes, they offer to the dead a kind of temporary house, a structure made of bamboo with several floors, which allude to the different stages crossed by the deceased in the afterworld. In all communities, they generally perform the *sūta* purification ritual after 11 days. This ritual may include the personification of death in the shape of an old woman with a black face who acts as a medium and informs the mourners of the progression of the deceased into the other world. As a final death rite, the family members purify themselves and have a meal.



Figure 1: A funeral structure for a prestigious dead (M. Kunder, 2016)



Figure 2: The funeral procession for a prestigious dead (M. Kunder, 2016)



Figure 3: Koti and Chennaya dance for the dead and Death walks on the side (M. Kunder, 2016)

## How to deal with *pretas*?

But even if all rituals have been performed, *pretas* may come back and cause trouble. During *amavāsi*, the dark moon, and *ṣṛnīmā*, the full moon, *pretas* may return. In case of repeated attacks by a *preta*, as when a house is haunted, one must call a *mantravādī*. First, the exorcist<sup>12</sup> has to do a ritual to “bind” (*bhāndan*) and capture the *preta*. He ties a thread, on which he chants spells, around the persons suffering from affliction. The latter are tied together under the same spell, demanding their cure, then they are set free. The thread cannot be cut but must be burnt. When the exorcist burns the thread the patients get relief. He may also make a round of the house with a chicken, to catch the *mata* (a maleficent agent), and then he sucks the chicken’s blood. Other techniques consist in transferring the *preta* into a wooden doll (*bombi*) and throwing it away in the jungle (Carrin 2008).<sup>13</sup>

Most people call a *mantravādī* to drive away a *preta*, but some villagers say they do not believe in exorcists, they trust only their own faith. They told me

12 Brahmins expel a *preta* during the rituals for the dead when they send the *preta* to Vaikuṇṭa, the abode of the god Viṣṇu. In Barakuru and some other places, Brahmins sometimes make a human figure and call the *preta* to inhabit the figure they finally destroy.

13 This technique is also used in shrines where they perform exorcisms for several afflicted families at a time, and the *mantravādīs* order the wooden dolls from a carpenter (Carrin 2008).

that *pretas* torment the living because they are both absent and present, producing a logical inconsistency which destabilises humans, who “spend their time defending their world as a world of certitude”, as Manu put it. While most victims of *pretas* tend to consult exorcists or perform particular rituals, others prefer to change their lives and adopt new religious values and practices so as to better confront the *preta*. This is why Manu has become a devotee of Śani, and why Ganesh has decided to join the Hare Krishna movement and engage himself in social work: he has founded a matrimonial agency for the disabled.

### When *pretas* are married

In some cases, *pretas* come back and threaten their own siblings, particularly when the latter reach puberty. This is a source of fear. One day, as Manu came to our home, he seemed to be worried and wanted to talk. I asked him what had happened. He told me he had gone to document a special marriage, a marriage of ghosts (*preta maduve*). Extracting some photos from a file he said: “Didi, it was very sad, they tried to make a marriage but there was too much *dukh*.”

The situation reminded me of the work of Pinney (2013), which shows how fully photography has been absorbed into the traditions of marriage, death and religion in India. Such social uses of photographs, like keeping family albums to document important events, have become utterly routine, allowing the photographer to become a witness able to access different spheres of intimacy.

Then Manu explained that the parents of the boy Arun, who was one year and three months old when he died in a pond, had contacted the parents of the girl Deshma, who died when she was six from an incurable disease. The return of the dead boy was frightening his mother, and everybody knew his ghost had been making noise in the night. His attacks had become more frequent now that his younger brother was reaching his twenties, and approaching the age of marriage. But, as everybody knows, elder siblings should be married first. The parents consulted an astrologer (*jyotiś*),<sup>14</sup> who recommended a *preta* marriage for the deceased elder boy.

A Pambada<sup>15</sup> medium was then called to make a drawing of white flour showing the children as bride and groom. From the higher caste among the mediums, he was in charge of “creating” this ritual: in this context of afflic-

14 The *jyotiś* consults the almanac and calculates the astrological chart of his client. If he sees any bad sign (*dośa*), he sends his client to a *mantravādī*.

15 There are three castes of professional mediums: the Pambada and the Paravas are generally possessed by royal *bhūtas* while the Nalke, who are considered inferior, impersonate ordinary deities (Carrin1999).

tion, the ritual should be adapted to the situation of the bereaved family. The parents brought clothes and jasmine flowers for the girl. The boy was symbolised by a shirt and the girl by flowers, and these effigies were meant to invite the *pretas* to descend into the drawing. The marriage was celebrated in the Enade *garōdi*,<sup>16</sup> on the coast near the town of Mulki, an important Billava shrine, dedicated to the twin *bhūtas* Koti and Chennaya, the champions of the Billava caste (Carrin 2016).

To celebrate the *preta* marriage in this *garōdi* meant that the ghosts were placed under the protection of Koti and Chennaya, which, from a Billava point of view, is the safest way to appease them. Manu told me, however, that the atmosphere was tense during the ceremony, since the families hardly knew each other and were united only by their common affliction. The priest took a golden necklace given by the girl's parents, while the parents of the boy had paid the ritual fees (*dakṣiṇā*). To establish the union, the parents of the couple joined their hands and received the ablution of sacred water, meant for bride and groom, from the priest of the *garōdi*. From a ritual point of view, the marriage of the *pretas* combines elements of marriage (when, for example, the parents join hands) and of funeral rites (such as the old woman clad in black and the funeral meal), elements which vary, however, according to the community and the means of the family.

## The marriage of the *pretas*, a ritual solution?

The idea to marry the *pretas* reminds us of Bloch and Parry's (1999:7) assertion that death is often associated with a renewal of fertility. Ghosts have to be married in order to allow their living siblings to marry and procreate, since the continuity of the lineage is important not only for the bereaved families, but for the reproduction of the social order. The ritual associates fertility with sexuality since the fertility of the real sibling seems to be saved by the eventual sexuality of the *pretas*. Furthermore, the idea of marriage represents here a "life theme" expressed in mortuary rituals (Hutchington / Metcalf 1979).<sup>17</sup>

As we have seen, the marriage of the *pretas* seems to offer a ritual solution for the bereaved families. But Manu felt that the ritual had not really worked to appease the *pretas*, since at one moment, the mother of the dead boy had started shaking. Sadananda, the *pātri*, poured sacred water on her head and murmured some mantras.

16 All Billavas seem to be engaged in reviving the cult of their *bhūtas*, worshipped in shrines known as *garōdis*, which were also gymnasiums where Billavas used to practise martial arts. Today, Billavas celebrate their rites of passage in the *garōdis*, which they consider as their community temples.

17 This reminds us of the parallel that Hertz (1920) noted between death and other rites of passage.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 4: The *mantravādī* adorns the images of the dead children with Jasmine flowers

Figure 5: The *mantravādī* puts the shirt of the bridegroom on the image

Figure 6: Water is poured over the hands of the bride's and bridegroom's parents to celebrate the marriage

Figure 7: The family prays with the *mantravādī*

Source: M. Kunder, 2016

Manu was impressed by the sadness of the children's kin, which he observed while photographing them for the "marriage album". The girl's grandmother could not compose her face, but kept bursting into tears. Manu felt his work as a photographer was in vain, as he could not prevent himself from thinking of his own son, Arjun, now seventeen. Would his brother-in-law's suicide prevent the marriage of his son? Would his *preta* attack his sister's son? He remembered that the sister of the suicide had said that her husband, the body-builder, did not fear the *pretas*. But nobody was convinced by this, since ghosts have their ways and may well compromise a good business, such as the fitness centre.

Manu felt he could keep the *preta* away by praying to Śani every month. He also believed in the strength of devotion (*bhakti*) as the only way to escape malicious planetary influence. Despite this conviction, however, he says, "whatever we do, may turn otherwise." "I was supposed to make a marriage album," he said, "and it became a gallery of dead portraits. [...] But we have no other alternative, we have to struggle against our fear and prayer is the only way."

In contrast to the Billava family, Ganesh still refused to believe that his sister was dead, though his wife protested that she saw the *preta* very often. Ganesh had refused the services of an exorcist since this would mean he had given up any hope of finding his sister again. Whenever his wife told him about his sister's ghost, he seemed relieved, as if this phantom presence was better than complete absence. Ganesh did not fear the ghost since he refused to accept his sister's death and he interpreted his wife's complaint rather as if his sister's spirit was trying to send him a message (Carrin 2009). "When *pretas* send us signals we know they think of us", says Manu, "and we can appease them by our prayers and our engagement."

Manu and Ganesh both preferred to follow their own convictions, rather than to resort to exorcists. They felt strong, while the parents who had wanted to marry their dead children had to rely on exorcists since they could not cope with their grief. I understood that they feared for their living children, since the young have no defence against *pretas*.

The idea of marrying the two *pretas* seems to be spreading, but it is not found among the higher castes. The ritual would seem to imply an effort to pacify the *pretas*. But in the case described, the families may have wanted to do too much, as death and marriage do not easily combine. Manu, the pho-



tographer whose brother-in-law committed suicide, has experienced a similar fear to that of the bereaved families. This parallel destiny allows him to share their emotions even if he chooses to avoid the *mantravādīs* and instead become a devotee of the god Śani.

The idea of an album of photos for the *preta* marriage was meant to render it similar to a real marriage – even if everybody knew that could not be. As Manu put it, “when I started to photograph the kin one by one, I understood I was making a gallery of dead portraits.” And, he added: “How can one photograph the *pretas*, since the symbols which represent them also show the impossibility of their presence?”

Several important contributions have been made to our theoretical understanding of ritual (e.g. Bell 1992, Humphrey / Laidlaw 1993). One of the main problems lies in relating the insights derived from a textual approach (Geertz 2008, Clifford / Marcus 1986) to those stemming from performance theory (Schieffelin 1985). These approaches, I feel, may not really be contradictory; the real challenge lies in defining more precisely the relationship between the structure of the ritual and its innovation and strategic use. The relation cannot be reduced to script and performance nor to text and inscription, since form and content continuously interact in a dialectical manner (Howe 2000). Howe argues that “[...] most rituals are staged to achieve an end and that there is always something at stake in performance” (ibid.: 67). He also shows that rituals are often dangerous because they establish contact with unpredictable forces.

In our example, the *mantravādī* has designed a ritual for the bereaved families himself, though it seems that older people in the region have heard of such rituals. In another context we have suggested that the core of a ritual lies in its syntax (Carrin / Tambs-Lyche 2003). Thus the core of the ritual we are dealing with here mirrors the sequence of the rite of marriage, with the painted images and the parents alternatively standing in for the couple that is to be married. Yet since the actual partners are ghosts, at once present and absent, the belief in the future appeasement of the deceased, a belief that is solicited from the participants – who are also mourners – may be hard for them to realise.

In this marriage of *pretas*, it seems impossible to detach the death, which has preceded and motivated the ritual, from the ritual itself. Since the participants have never seen such a ritual before, they are guided only by the *mantravādī*, who has conceived the ritual, aiming at creating a link between the parents of the bereaved families who, in the ritual, stand in for the *pretas*. In such a case, the dramatic tension resulting from the unacceptable death of the children dominates the ritual. According to the photographer who talked with the mourners, it seemed that the astrologer misjudged the mood of those as-

sembled – the two bereaved families – and failed to adjust his performance in light of the passivity of the audience.

This is why grief and fear encompass the event, and prevent the ritual from working completely. The marriage of the *pretas*, as a ritual of affliction, represents a distorted view of reality, since the participants engage in the ritual to save their living children from unwanted attacks, rather than to appease their own torments. This, probably, also explains why Manu feels more confident in taming his own fear of the god, by learning to sing the different episodes of the god's myth.

In the marriage of the *pretas*, fear experienced as sorrow (*dukh*)<sup>18</sup> is implicitly perceived as a particular notion and is culturally encoded as such. Everybody feels that the ghosts have the power to torment their living siblings, and to prevent their marriage. One may ask why this emphasis on marriage becomes so salient. It seems that fear, here, creates the ritual devices. Since the young ghosts may prevent the marriage of their siblings, it seems logical to marry them, a ritual solution crafted by the *mantravādī*. The kind of fear we encounter here seems to belong with the subaltern communities in South Kanara, where they resort to exorcism when attacked by *preta* – whereas upper castes will call a Brahmin, who will send the ghost to Vaikuṅṭa.

Does fear belongs to specific groups? To take up this question previously raised by Humphrey (2013), let us recall that in medieval Tulunadu, fear (*bhaya*) was a positive emotion related to the place that each member of the society occupied in the hierarchical system. The landlord, generally a Bunt or a Jain, feared only his enemies of equal status and the *bhūta* of his domain,<sup>19</sup> who would manifest his will during the annual ritual (*nēma*) offered to him (Carrin / Tambs-Lyche 2003). In this context, fear was a positive emotion linked to respect. Similarly, in the context of the epic, fear is experienced as an impulse to take action: for example, the heroes see a negative omen in the forest, then pray and decide to fight.

In South Kanara, where society is still traditional, fear is often related to hierarchy. When, for example, a low caste member approaches his previous landlord he may feel fear, though this fear is mitigated today, since low caste people know about their rights. But fishermen still experience fear not just because they brave the sea as they have always done, but also since they need to invest huge capital in boats and gear. Here, fear is manifested in anxiety, since they take financial risks.

In contrast to the fishermen, the members of the Billava community, who still cultivate rice paddies and coconut gardens, seem tied to a more tradition-

18 To express fear, Manu also used the Hindi expression *darte hein*, “they are afraid”.

19 In this case, the royal *bhūta* is considered as the real owner of the domain (*magane*) and he comes back through his medium to inspect how the lord is taking care of his domain. The *bhūta* represents divine justice.

al form of fear, where fear of the ghosts reflects anxiety about kin in a society still embedded in the extended matrilineal family. The recent change towards patrilineal inheritance, imposed by the government, complicates the issue since in many cases, nephews torment their uncles to get their share of inheritance (Rao 2010). But in a context where fearless people are heroic and become *bhūtas* after death, fear must be managed ritually, though, as Manu felt, this particular ritual might have “failed”. In fact, I was told later that the *pretas* had reappeared. The failure of the ritual may indicate, as Schieffelin (1985) notes for New Guinea, a fracture in society. But in present-day South Kanara, it seems clear that various forms of fear, linked to risk and modernity, blur the semantic field of fear. Fear becomes confounded with anxiety, opening the way for the ascendancy of risk consciousness. It is striking that many people who are wondering whether to go to work in the Emirates raise this question in the oracular shrine: “I would like to go there to earn money, but should I take that risk?”

In contrast to this hybrid form of fear, the fear of ghosts brings us back into the intimacy of the family, and the return of the loved ones as ghosts may come as a relief in certain cases. A midwife (*dai*) told me one day that she got her healing gifts from her grandmother, who died violently from a heart attack. The grandmother’s ghost used to return in her dreams and comment on her deliveries: “Here you did well, but next time, be aware of this danger, and so on. [...] In such a case, the *preta* becomes a familiar presence,” she said, “one who guides you.”

These examples suggest that there are different ways to tame one’s fear, ritual being only one of them. Individuals try to cope with ghosts in their own way, since ghosts invite them to be open to the unpredictable, as defined in a particular culture of fear.

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