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ESSAY



Divine Kinship: Towards an Ethnographic Theory of Political Theology

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I believe that whenever the name of Krishna appears, it does not make any sense to avoid politics. Lord Krishna fought for the underprivileged groups like today we descendants of Krishna fight for social justice and for the social well-being of Indian backward communities. (Mulayam Singh Yadav, Yadav Caste Association Meeting, Delhi, 1999)
Socialist policies must be ‘endogenous’, based on a vision of social justice that is ‘Indo-Venezuelan, home-grown, Christian, and Bolivarian’. (Hugo Chávez, Caracas, January 2006)

With these two quotations I opened up an essay I published in 2013 on contemporary popular sovereignty and the divine. The first extract belongs to Mulayam Singh Yadav, who has been the chief minister of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh three times over the past 20 years and is the founder of the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party. His son, Akhilesh Yadav, has been also chief minister between 2012 and 2017. Why the references to Krishna? Krishna is one of the most celebrated deities in the Hindu pantheon. He is a complex figure with a royal pedigree, but was brought up by low-caste cow herders. Krishna is mainly worshipped as a mischievous boy who plays tricks and as the adulterous lover of the gopis (female cowherds). However, Krishna the “lovable-but-untrustworthy” god has been gradually transformed into a “quasi-ideal king” by Hindu nationalist narratives.¹ And it is precisely Krishna the warrior who has been worshipped as a humanized socialist democratic political hero by members of the Yadav community to which Mulayam Singh Yadav belongs.

The second quotation is from Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuela and leader of the so-called socialist Bolivarian revolution, who died on 5 March 2013. In the Venezuelan case, it is the military leader of Latin American independence, Simon Bolivar, who has been transformed into a godlike figure. Simon Bolivar was a divine inspiration for Hugo Chávez’s socialist revolution. The president cultivated the notion that he was the true heir to Bolivar and fashioned himself after Bolivar. Similarly, the nation was renamed after Bolivar, and it is now called “The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” Chávez called his socialist experimentation a Bolivarian revolution. Most Venezuelan towns have a Bolivar statue and, importantly, a number of Venezuelans pray to Bolivar as they would a Catholic saint. In addition, Bolivar occupies an important role in the popular Maria Lionza spirit cult,² a syncretic religion that brings together elements

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¹Davis, “The Iconography of Rama’s Chariot,” 34–45.

²Placido, ‘It’s all to do with words’.

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of possession cults from African and indigenous traditions and Catholicism. Also known as “the Queen,” Maria Lionza reigns over a kingdom of spirits located in the center of the Venezuelan democratic state. The spirits of the Queen’s kingdom are historical and legendary characters from Venezuelan history. As well as “el Libertador,” Simon Bolivar, they include “el Negro Felipe,” a black man who is said to have fought with Simon Bolivar in the South American independence wars, and “el Indio Guaicaipuro,” who is believed to have fought against the Spanish conquerors at the time of Spanish colonization of South America.

Both in Hindu North India and in Afro-Catholic syncretic Venezuela, gods (and kings) are ancestors and ancestors can become gods (and kings) and I argued that the relation between humanized gods and divinized (regal) men and women indirectly inflects local political charismatic traditions and modern forms of political authority and representation.³ In both my field sites subaltern communities and/or individuals claim in different ways divine and regal ancestry. It follows that doing fieldwork across India and Venezuela, on caste, race and personhood, local politicians, leadership and electoral representations led me to understand local forms of community and individual sovereignties through the concept of “divine kinship.” Famously Hocart and Frazer used the universal motif of divine kingship to compare emerging forms of political authority across the globe.⁴ By contrast, I proposed (with Alice Forbess) “divine kinship” (without the middle “g”) as a comparative analytical tool with which to explore the interlocking relations between sovereignty, the sacred and kinship in the contemporary “secularised” world.⁵ Broadly, we used the term “divine kinship” to refer to the mapping of relations between human and divine/regal beings (kin, kings, heroes, gods). More specifically across North India and Venezuela I argued that divine kinship is crucial to understanding the processes by which political leaders and elected representatives become the embodiment of “the people,” and highlight the processes through which “ordinary people” are transformed into “extraordinary people” with royal/divine/democratic qualities. Processes of deification of the people have important implications to understand the hopes, dreams and fears which accompany forms of democratic millennialism and ethno-populism in different parts of the world.

The relation between humans and god is indeed a crucial vernacular sphere in which to examine sovereignty within and beyond the state. However, while the anthropology of the relation between humans and deities has been the subject of much interest for a long time – the place of such relations in politics – where they have been strikingly prominent – remains conspicuously under-analyzed. This is unfortunate because “divine kinship” ethnographically and theoretically problematizes “political theology” and its European (Christian) genealogy rooted in the work by Schmitt, Kantorowicz and more recently Agamben. In many ways, political theology in a Schmittian way looks at how Christian concepts has been “secularised” and have become political. By contrast, divine kinship cuts across politics, economics, religion and kinship and develops a distinctive notion of sovereignty as a performative category and inherently lawless and enchanted.⁶ In the rest of this essay, drawing from my recent fieldwork on bosses, extortion/protection

³Michelutti, “Sons of Krishna and Sons of Bolivar.”

⁴Hocart, *Kings and Councillors* and Frazer, *The Golden Bough*.

⁵Forbess and Michelutti, “From the Mouth of God.”

⁶For an understanding of sovereignty as a performative category see Hansen, *Sovereignty in a Minor Key*.

and mafia political and economic systems of governance I will show how divine kinship as a comparative analytical tool has the potential to help us to develop *an ethnographic theory of political theology*.

My recent research asked how do bosses rule “de facto” and how do they gain authority and legitimacy?⁷ What sort of processes of “myth scripting” do they need?⁸ What kind of theologies of protection we find on the ground? These are the questions we posed in a collaborative project in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and more recently in a new project on extortion in 22 sites across South and East Asia, the Americas, Europe and Africa.⁹ Take for example Lady Dabang – a powerful business lady who is making her career as a politician and a boss in a provincial town in Western Uttar Pradesh.¹⁰ In India, it has been documented that crime (and violence) pay in politics. Local systems of (criminal) economic and political governance are popularly referred to with vernacular terms such as “Mafia Raj” and “Goonda Raj” – the kingdom of mafia or rule by mafia/gangsters. Dabangs (enforcers/bosses) are key actors in these muscular forms of politics. They are the local de-facto sovereigns who can kill and punish with relative impunity and, increasingly, with democratic legitimacy. Enacting their personal sovereignty requires a capacity for violence and for making money, patronage, a flexible attitude and – crucially – the cultivation of personal mythologies. Here I focus on the latter and explore the reliance of Lady Dabang’s authority on the fictional and enchanted power of Mafia Raj. Gangster movies, TV series, YouTube videos, video games and novels have come to encapsulate the fantasy of the self-made entrepreneurial man/woman in the new Indian neoliberal economy, and with it notions of self-assertion and rebellion and of social banditry. Central to these “fictional realities” is the romanticization of the boss as a champion of the people, and a provider of local justice whose acts of violence are motivated by a deep sense of honor and order. In this local context, Lady Dabang’s sovereign power is deeply shaped by the figurative power of Phulan Devi, aka the Bandit Queen – one of the icons of North Indian low-caste politics and Indian feminism and now a deified figure. I shall now briefly describe how the lives (and afterlife/myth) of these two women interact, and how such interactions are helping the production of Lady Dabang’s authority, the awe she inspires and her capacity to “boss” and win elections in this corner of the world. Lady Dabang is a remarkable woman. She started her “Dabang career” by allegedly cutting the throat of a doctor and by allegedly killing a policeman. According to folklore, they both tried to rape her. In the late 1990s, she moved to land grabbing and joined hands with local property developers and the construction industry; simultaneously, she started her political career. She is now a multi-millionaire thanks to land speculations and alleged appropriations of public funding. She is also the founder of a growing local political dynasty. I was introduced to Lady Dabang when she was at the start of her impressive career about 20 years ago. At the time she was presented to me as the local emerging “Phulan Devi.” Phulan Devi was a dacoit and criminal politician from a lower caste. In 1996 she won elections in western Uttar Pradesh. She was a sitting Member of Parliament when she was

⁷Michelutti et al., *Mafia Raj*.

⁸Michelutti and Picherit, “Le bandit et ses mythes.”

⁹Projects were funded by ERC-AIMSA/284080 (2012–2016) and ESRC-ES/1036702/1 (2012–2016). My current research is funded by ERC-EXTORT/884839.

¹⁰Michelutti et al., *Mafia Raj*.

assassinated by rivals in 2001. Over the past 15 years, Phulan Devi has become a heroine – goddess, achieving international status through numerous biographies, movies, theatrical performances, comics, and video games. Like Phulan Devi, Lady Dabang's local self-mythology began with revenge against a gang rape and a struggle against caste social injustices. Like Phulan Devi, she portrays herself as the protector of the poor and marginalized. Like Phulan Devi she entered into politics and won elections. Through the myth of the Bandit Queen, Lady Dabang is in constant dialogue with authoritative “fictional”/religious cultural exemplars that exalt what Eric Hobsbawm has characterized as “social bandits” or “men (women) of honor.”¹¹

It should be emphasized that in this part of the world many people do not experience the myth of the Robin Hood outlaw (the protector) and the reality of the brutal self-serving mafia boss (the aggressor) as contradictory. Obviously, Lady Dabang does not act like a saintly boss most of the time nevertheless, the persistent charisma of Phulan Devi and the ways it shapes local wider understandings of criminal (political) authority does the “heroic job” for her. In short, Lady Dabang manages to benefit from Phulan Devi's cinematographic charisma and myth despite her lack of Robin Hood's deeds. How? For a start, the “fictional realities” that shape Lady Dabang's power go beyond the impact of movies on politics and society at large, a field that has been well documented in South Asia. In addition to the entertainment industry intimate religious repertoires and heroic caste idioms contribute greatly to the legitimization of Lady Dabang's authority via Phulan Devi's cinematographic/religious aura. Phulan Devi has become a goddess. The fact that popular Hinduism makes no categorical distinction between the divine and the human facilitates the production of heroic demigods in North India. Phulan Devi has a shrine dedicated to her where she is worshipped. This popular cult helps Lady Dabang indirectly by creating an environment in which “gangsters” are legitimized by some audiences as sacred figures possessing extraordinary and divine powers. What I am describing is indeed a context where a multiplicity of scripts (movies, myths, cults, novels, digital medias) produce environments and everyday tangible atmospheres that are crucial to creating fear, love, admiration, and respect for Lady Dabang (and for bosses/gangsters more in general).¹²

In North India, today's bosses' tough reputation and proven capacity to exercise violence brings together the two long-valued potencies of a “Hindu king” – to protect and provide.¹³ Yet, whereas the “old” kings relied on Brahmins for legitimacy, today king-boss sovereignty depends largely on business and entrepreneurship for legitimation but it also still depends on gods and goddesses for protection. Importantly, today's “king-boss” is a raja who has given up his/her promise of (genuine) protection to the pursuit of pure extraction, but who nevertheless has not stopped valuing respect. This is a figure animated by a continuous tension between force and disinterested reason, that is, he/she still often frames its authority in terms of *sewa* (service) and work for the others. Today, violent economic racketeering (and capital accumulation) is framed in reconfigured symbols and actions of honor and revenge, caste mythologies, religious practices, indigenous texts of theology and democratic statecraft. Such socio-cultural and

¹¹Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

¹²Michelutti and Picherit, “Le bandit et ses mythes.”

¹³Price, “Kingly models.”

institutional repertoire shapes ideas about who is entitled to violence (and to protect) and who is not, and in the process, transforms violent forms of extortion into appropriate, just, or desired acts of protection, and creates potent Mafia Raj systems of governance. Ultimately, I argue that the theologies of projection of Mafia Raj have an important role in shaping the complicities and opportunistic partnerships that connect bosses with their populations. It contributes to creating an intimate mode of power: an authoritative and charismatic power that is increasingly courted by political parties because it wins elections.

Thus divine kinship helps us to make sense of the “mythological” labor which is needed in order to establish personal sovereignties that rely among other things on the deification of dead bosses. Regional socio-cultural idiom and religious traditions play a key role in transforming bosses into heroes and, after their deaths, into divine figures. Grasping how kinship intertwines with the divine allowed us to understand the power of the intimate links between extraordinary leaders, strongmen and their communities. These are worlds where every human being is regal and potentially even divine.¹⁴ Lady Dabang is not an isolated case, on the contrary. Take for the example of the famous South Indian bandit Veerappan. Despite the ban on any shrines or memorials being created in his honor, a deification of Veerappan is today underway, through a ritual in which children ingesting the earth from the bandit’s burial site are thus transmitted the values of courage. The particular power of this earth, collected in the cemeteries where the heroes are buried, is also mobilized in the logics of bosses’ deification in other parts of the world. Such is the case of the grave of the narco-trafficker Pablo Escobar, also famed for his involvement in Afro-Cuban rituals. As Katerina Kerestetzi and Luis Carlos Castro Ramírez describe, in Santería, believers carry out their rituals with the assistance of the spirits of the dead, the *nfumbis*.¹⁵ These dead are chosen with great care, for their protective capacity is proportional for the success they had in life. From this point of view, for some followers of this religion Pablo Escobar has all the qualities to make him the ultimate *nfumbi* – power, tenacity, boldness, virility, success and versatility. The popularity of these Afro-Cuban religions among drug traffickers is well-known, as is the link between religion and drug trafficking in Colombia. Indeed, a distinct narco culture has emerged, combining moral codes peculiar to each cartel with religious principles but also a particular esthetic that goes hand-in-hand with the sanctification of certain outlaws. In Mexico, one thinks of Jesús Malverde, a famous nineteenth century criminal who became the holy bandit protector of narcotics. In Venezuelan cities, we see certain gangs turning, as part of *Maria Lionza* spiritualism, to the spirits of the *malandros*, historical figures of local banditry who redistributed their loot to the poorest. Obviously, Hinduism and Afro-Cuban cults are not structurally linked to criminal groups. But they do have certain peculiarities which may help explain their current dynamism among very heterogeneous social circles and populations: namely, their extreme adaptability and, most importantly, their regal malleability and capacity to legitimate rule. Thus, local sociocultural templates and religious traditions play a role in transforming flesh-and-blood bosses into living heroes and, after their death, eventually into godlike figures. Notions of divine kinship create

¹⁴Banerjee, *The Mortal God*.

¹⁵Kerestetzi and Castro Ramírez, *Des dieux complices des narcos?*

extraordinary bosses and powerful intimate links between strongmen and their caste/communities and kin. This shared divine kinship creates a structure of intimacy between them and the people and with it forms of enchanted power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Lucia Michelutti is Professor of Anthropology at UCL. Her major research interest is the study of popular politics, religion, law and order, and violence across South Asia (North India) and Latin America (Venezuela). She is the author of *The Vernacularisation of Democracy* (2008) and co-authored of *Mafia Raj: The rule of Bosses in South Asia* (2018) and *Wild East: Criminal Political Economies in South Asia* (2019), and has published scholarly articles on caste/race, leadership, muscular politics and crime, and political experimentations. She is the convener of the MSc in Politics, Violence and Crime and currently the PI of a five year ERC funded project entitled 'Anthropologies of Extortion'.

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