THE KING’S ELDER BROTHER: FOREST KING AND “POLITICAL IMAGINATION” IN SOUTHERN ORISSA*

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Today, any traveller can make a “tribal tour” proposed by the local Tourist Offices of Orissa State in order to take snaps of Saora, Kond or Bondo “tribes” at their colourful weekly markets. Our common imaginary of tribes is the product of the 19th century perception, which needs to be clarified. With this aim in view, this communication will try, firstly, to trace a short history of the British gaze on the so-called ādivāsī ‘Indian tribes’, before proposing a renovated perspective on those groups. By using both ethnographical and historical sources of Southern Orissa, we will show here that the “tribes” of this particularly remote area were not so isolated from Hindu kingdoms, as commonly believed. Leaving aside British colonial categories (“tribes” versus “castes”), which so far have been adopted as socio-cultural tools to label those groups, we can find more complex relations by simply coming back to the local Indian categories. Once relocated in their historical and sociological context, even the myths offer rather clear data about the self-image of the people who invented them. By taking into consideration the practical politico-ritual frame of the kingdom, beyond the theoretical castes-hierarchy, this article will eventually throw light on the pre-colonial “political imagination” (Pollock 1993) or rhetoric of the Hindu kings about the tribes and their mythical ancestor.

INTRODUCTION

Today, any traveller can make a “tribal tour” in the Southern districts of the Indian State of Orissa, in order to take snaps of Saora, Kond or Bondo “aboriginals” living there. Following the footsteps of Verrier

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Elwin who worked as an “anthropologist of Orissa” in the 1940s, numerous Indian and European ethnographers (including myself) choose such a “tribe of Highland Orissa” as subject of their studies. If Elwin’s romantic view (not his impressive work) faded away since this time, the idea still persists that “tribal” societies remained isolated from the influence of Hindu kingdoms, and maintained a somehow “prehistoric” way of life through a cyclical time conception. Nearly eighty years ago, Antonio Gramsci (1996: 123), the inspirer of the Subaltern Studies, already prevented us about such hasty conclusion about European folklore (our translation):

R. Corso calls the complex whole of folkloristic facts a “contemporaneous prehistory”: this is just a pun to refer to a complex phenomena which is not so easily defined. [...] The folklore was always linked with the culture of dominating class, and, in its own way, borrowed from it some traits which have been inserted in combination with the former traditions.

Following his advice in an Indian context, I’ll firstly show here that our imaginary of “tribes” still inherits a 19th century perception, which can be further clarified through a more integrated ethno-historical analysis. With this aim in view, I will trace a very short history of the British discovery of the “tribes” of India (known also as ādivāsī ‘aborigines’, a Sanskrit name constructed around 1915), before proposing a renovated perspective on them. Leaving aside colonial categories (“tribes” versus “castes”), which so far have been adopted as socio-cultural tools to label those groups, we will find thereafter more complex relations at work, by simply coming back to the local Indian categories. By using both ethnographical and historical sources of this same Koraput district of Orissa, I will show that the “tribes” of this particularly remote area were not so isolated from Hindu kingdoms, as commonly believed.

Following the steps of Hermann Kulke in Orissa, Burkhard Schnepel (2002) developed such an approach, by combining the study of colonial sources and local legends. He defines his study as “ethno-historical” for three main reasons: (1) he concentrates his work at a “local level of research”, i.e. what he calls the “Jungle kingdom” of Jeypore because of its “tribal” population; (2) he exploits local libraries and local (actually written and dynastic) myths; (3) he focuses on structures of representations. Above all, this author considers the best approach to be to exploit “the overlapping border areas” of history and anthropology (Schnepel 2002: 10–12). Schnepel’s work helped me for my first steps in the area, as I came to work on the same little kingdom of Jeypore (present Koraput District). Nevertheless, my own field-
work eventually brought me a rather different picture of the tribal villages and their relations with the regional Hindu kingdom. Above all, by enquiring more in rural areas, I collected different oral legends clearly linking the “isolated tribes” with the “forgotten kings”, some of them being supported by archaeological, or epigraphic evidences. Therefore, I conceive “ethno-history” in a different way, as a definitely synthetic task (closer to Nandini Sundar 1997), confronting critically both historical sources (archaeological remains, epigraphy, secondary historical studies) and present oral discourses sociologically contextualised. I will try to show here that this approach helps to give historical depth to social structures and local legends on the one hand, as it helps to interpret historical data in the light of socio-political processes on the other hand (Sahlins 1985).

As stated by Gramsci in the above quotation, one must ever doubt about the supposed “an-historicity” of a tradition, or its continuous isolation from the hegemonic society. Of course, “tribal traditions” in India remain specific compared to “folk” ones in Europe, but the boundary between “tribal” and “folk Hindu” subaltern traditions is often more relative than commonly held. The specificity of a considered “tribe” depends very much on its regional situation, and it cannot be decided until one starts to historicize and sociologically locate it. Moreover, as in the European case, this contextualisation must go beyond the solely definition in term of “religious beliefs” and values, by taking into consideration the practical and integrative politico-ritual frame of the kingdom. This approach will eventually throw light on the pre-colonial “political imagination” (Pollock 1993: 280) or royal ideological rhetoric about the tribes and their mythical ancestor (Niṣāda among others). Now, let us come back to the times of the so-called “first contacts”.

1. In a previous article, I analyzed what Louis Dumont — following Marcel Mauss’ idea of the Indian tribes as peoples who “lost contact” with the main “Indian civilization” — called a “local point of view” applied to the tribes of India (Rousseleau 2003). It means to differentiate levels of study integrating the “tribal” village and group inside the “local” society. As commonly known, Dumont considered that the Indian caste society was informed by a “purely religious” principle of hierarchy based on the value of “purity”. So, according to him, the Indian tribes were only more or less autonomous, but nonetheless integrated in the local hierarchy of castes, formulated in terms of relative purity. As many British historians and anthropologists have since shown, by focusing on mostly brahmanical structures, Dumont undervalued the historical changes in India, as well as the centrality of the king in its pre-colonial society (see, among others, Inden 1990). For a fuller discussion, see Rousseleau (2008).
HIGHLANDS IN HISTORY: 
THE COLONIAL DISCOVERY OF THE “TRIBES OF INDIA”

Even before the British arrived in India, certain Indian population came to be considered as “peculiar”. In Southern India, as early as 1603 Giacomo Fenicio, an Italian Jesuit Father, made an expedition in the Nilgiris hills in order to verify a rumour according to which the hills were hiding a lost Christian community, formerly converted by Thomas the Apostle and remained isolated in the mountains. The missionary conversed with a Toda priest, whom he compares to a Nazarean because of his noble appearance and his long beard. The Jesuit Father finally recognized that the Toda did not know any Christian credo (Walkers 1997: 109), but the Western scholars continued to speculate on the origins of the Todas for centuries. At the beginning of the 19th century, the British missionaries and travellers were still celebrating the Nazarean, Roman or even Breton character of the same Todas (Walkers 1997: 114).

Another group who fascinated the imagination of the British were the Bhils of Rajasthan. In his Annals & Antiquities of Rajasthan (1983/1829–1832: I, 53–74), James Tod (1782–1835) defended the idea of their Scythian origin. The Scythian were considered, at this time, as a sort of “missing link” between the European and the Indian peoples and languages. Those two examples, Todas and Bhils are positive, because the British considered them as instances of “noble savages” in a romantic perspective. The word “tribe” itself was used without precise signification, alternatively with terms like “nation” or “people”.

But soon, through the process of commercial and military conquest of the East India Company, the British came to know other “tribes”, less romantic and accommodating with the colonial expansion. Not so far from Calcutta, the Chota Nagpur plateau (present Jharkhand) was soon to become known for his population, rebellious to any sort of “imperial” domination. Described in a derogatory way by the Bengali as the kols ‘Black people’, those peoples were Munda speaking groups, and could be better described as Mundas, Santals and Hos. Their linguistic particularity, their socio-political relative autonomy, as well as certain “impure” habits (hunting, beef eating, etc.) differentiated them from the urban Hindu castes. In accordance with this Indian portrait, the British considered those “savage tribes” with whom they had to fight, as “primitive” in their organisation and religion. In the meantime, another war opposed the East India Company and the Ghumsur kingdom in Southern Orissa. This Ghumsur war (1835–1837) revealed a still more revolting practice: certain Kond tribes were said to perform “human sacrifices” for their goddess. Between 1845
and 1861 a specific administrative entity was created to suppress this sanguinary institution (the so called Merya agency: Padel 1995). Various official agents made tours in the Ghumsur kingdom and in the neighbouring Konds populated areas — among which the present Koraput district — who were suspected to continue hidden sacrifices.

Those wild traits, as well as the linguistic differences, were interpreted historically as evidence of the archaic and indigenous character of those populations. On the basis of the Sanskrit textual division between the “Arya country”, constituted by the plains of north-India, and the regions situated at the South of the Vindhya hill range, by the 1850s, the scholars identified more and more strictly the “forest tribes” with the first and “primitive” inhabitants of India. By contrast, the “Aryan invaders” would have brought with them the Sanskrit language and the caste system, pushing the tribes in forested highlands where they remained isolated from historical events up to their “discovery” by the British. After 1860, the Sanskrit studies, the comparative linguistic and the racial anthropology combined together to reduce both the socio-cultural diversity of India and its history to the conquest of white “Aryas”, or Indo-European languages speakers, on black “Dasyus”, or Muṇḍa and Dravidian Languages speakers. This is what Thomas Trautmann (1997) calls the “racial theory of Indian civilisation”, which continue to nourish our common imagination on Indian “tribes”.

In this general process, the present Koraput area came to be known for the first time by the East India Company, installed in the Vizagapatam port (present Andhra Pradesh), in 1693. It was nominally a part of the territory of the Nizām of Hyderabad, but remained in fact largely independent, and was never under Mughal rule. Between 1750 and 1765, the British and French fought to get the right of the costal fringe between central Orissa and Andhra, called the Northern Circars. The East India Company won, and the said Circars became the northern extremity of the Madras Presidency, under the direction of Vizagapatam. In spite of this theoretical control, the mountainous areas of present southern Orissa and northern Andhra Pradesh remained unknown to such an extent that a Member of the Company’s Board of Revenue, Mr. Thackeray, described the region by the following words towards 1820 (quoted from Francis 1907: 171):

2. The “racial theory” is synthetized in the 1860s, but begins in the previous decades. Thus, Robert Caldwell (1856) distinguishes three types of languages, which are considered as well as population waves: the present Muṇḍa languages, the Dravidian Southern languages, and the Indo-aryan languages (Sanskrit and Northern vernaculars).
[A] wide tract of hill and jungle, inhabited by uncivilized and indeed unconquered barbarians; their climate and their poverty have secured them from conquest. No great native Government ever seems to have thought this tract worth conquering. It has been left as a waste corner of the earth to wild beasts and Konds [sic]. Nobody seems even to know the boundary. This tract has never been explored; there is a blank left here in the maps.

As one can suspect, the description of Mr. Thackeray was right only from a colonial point of view. Nearly all the highland area was not, indeed, left to “wild beast” and “sanguinary tribes” like the Konds, but ruled by a Hindu little king: the king of Jeypore. The British knew very well this state of things, but presented the king of Jeypore as an “oriental despot”, misruling the State. So, on behalf of Humanity, but through fiscal pressure, the East India Company took slowly practical control over the kingdom. After the death of the old rāja, Jeypore became the Head Quarter of a new district in 1863. The colonial administration shifted to Koraput in 1870, presently a township but at that time only a village, a localisation which better suited the health of the British administrators. From that time, we get more information about the population of the little kingdom through the colonial reports. In 1869, the collector of Vizagapatam reports a legend, collected by the Lieutenant J. MacDonald Smith, then posted in Jeypore (Carmichaël 1869: 75):

A certain king in Hindustan, named Vena, dying without heirs, the Rishis or Sages, by the power of incantations pronounced over a jar of oil, which they stirred about with the thigh-bone of the deceased monarch, endeavoured to create a proper successor. The being they summoned into existence was, however, a monster rather than a man, and they forthwith exiled him to the south of the Vindhya mountains, where he became sovereign of the hill tracts. His name was Nishada; he had issue five sons, Gaita, Muka, Manya, Konda et Kodu, and from intermarriage between the descendents of these brothers, the following castes were formed: Koya, Chençu, Savara, Yarakala, Maddu, Bâsa, Rona, Gonda, Jodyâ, Pangu, Nogala, Bottada and Bonka.

This legend was collected most probably from a scribe or royal functionary of the time (Brahmans or Karan by caste), but is actually a regional version

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3. V. N. Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmaniam’s book (2001: chap. 3) offers a clear image of the evolution of karanam’s role within the kingdoms from the 17th till the 19th century.
of the myth of Vena, known all over India through the Sanskrit literature. Significantly, the collector D. F. Carmichaël refers to F. Max Müller and H. H. Wilson (1961/1840: 84), for his interpretation. According to the second author, such description of the “black” and “dwarfish” Niṣāda evocates undoubtedly the “Gonds, Kols Bhils, and other wild tribes, disseminated in the forests and mountains of central India, from Behar to Kandesh, and who are probably the predecessors of the present inhabitants of the cultivated parts of the country”. For Carmichaël (1869: 84) as well, the legend is just an oral, deformed reflection of an historical fact: the conquest of the “Aryans” over the aboriginal “wild races”. Before giving our own interpretation, we can remark for the moment that the myth delivers both the local and the colonial versions of the story, at the very moment of the generalization of the notion of “tribe”.

To this first list of thirteen groups, Carmichaël adds two other different lists of what he calls “the common labouring class of Jeypore”, which he considers the aboriginals of the country. The second list in particular distinguishes seven groups of cultivators living in the “hill tracts”: the Saora, the Joria, the Bareng, the Pengo, the Gadaba, the Parenga Gadaba and the “naked ryots” or Bondo (Carmichaël 1869: 103). This list is globally the same in the Madras Census Report of 1871 and in the following colonial reports up to the most famous Castes & Tribes of Southern India (Thurston & Rangachari 1909: VI, 207–222). After Carmichaël (1869: 16), these successive authors give also a generic term for this class: the Porajās, and some of them try to find linguistic or dress characteristics differentiating each group (Francis 1907). Most of the scholars of that time, indeed, conceived the problem of identity as a collection of material and “cultural” traits. This process of “ethnical construction” is concluded by G. Ramadas (1931: 246) who binds together the various available data, and speaks about a divided tribe, once united under the name of Porajā and whose lost language was Dravidian.

He is, nonetheless, the only author to claim such an unity, while the others speak of “conglomerate” of different groups. In fact, there is absolutely neither linguistic, neither “ethnic” unity of the so-called Porajās.

4. One can remark here the similarity between the approach in India and the “construction” of the European national and regional identities, which began some decades before (Rousseleau 2003).

5. Ramadas uses the definition of a “Parji” language close to the Gondi and spoken by the “Parja tribe” of Bastar, definition given by the famous linguist Grierson (1906: IV, 554). But in fact, the so-called Parji is only the language of one particular Porajā group among others.
Some of them speak Dravidian languages (Ollar Gadaba, Pengo, Kond), some other Muṇḍa languages (Gutob Gadaba, Bonda, Saora), but the majority speak now the lingua franca of the whole district: the Deśia ‘local’ dialect of Oriya.\footnote{As Bell (1945: 57) said, fifty years ago, it should be seen less as a corrupt language (as often said in Orissa), than as an old and localized form of Oriya, compare to the literary language of costal Orissa, now the official one.} For the culture as for the language: most of the ceremonies and gods are shared between the local groups.

Years before Ramadas’ article, the Government established a list of “Hill Tribes” (1917) as a legal category intended to prevent the land transfer from such tribes to moneylenders of different petty merchant castes (Mohapatro 1987: 94). After the Independence of India, in 1950 this old “Hill tribes” list was used by the Constitution comity to write the list of “Scheduled Tribes” of Orissa. Two years after, the kingdom of Jeypore was abolished and remained only the undivided Koraput district.

All those administrative categories and ethnographical reports are at the basis of our present view of Orissa tribes. But, beyond this colonial construction, and through the British reports, we can reconstruct a quite different picture.

**FROM COLONIAL TO LOCAL CATEGORIES**

Coming back to the oldest colonial reports, we find the category Porajā, comprising twelve groups in principle (this number being symbolic of a totality), but actually applied to seven peasant tribes of the area (Joria, Bonda, Gadaba, Parenga, Pengo, Didayi and certain Kond). From our own enquiries, we can add that the myths collected in the region claim that those same groups are born from the same mother, and fed by the same sago palm juice. In other words, the members of those peasant groups consider themselves as more or less equal brothers, working the soil and indulging in palm and rice beer, contrarily to Brahmans’ valorisation of their own “purity”.

Rather than as a mere tribal designation, the very first author who mentioned the Porajās (Carmichaël 1869), identified their name as a corrupted form of the generic Sanskrit word prajā. According to the same author and the local population, this word indicates a “class of ryots” or “commoners”. But the term “commoners” implies a contrastive term like “nobles”. More precisely, in Orissa, the term Porajā directly refers to the relations between prajā ‘subjects and clients’ as opposed to a rāja ‘patron king’. This simple
terminology shows that most of the local peasant groups who can be called “tribes” as far as their clan organisation is concerned, were then recognized to be “subjects” to the king of Jeypore. Still, this did not mean that they were similar to Hindu castes, and their autonomy varied considerably according to their geographical as well as socio-political situation. For obvious reasons, the tribes living in the plains were much more submitted to the royal power, if compared to the highland ones, who were retaining large independence in all matters. Concerning their status, the proud “hill tribes”, like the Dongria Kond or the Lanjia Saora, were seen as wilder than the plain ones, but were simultaneously often compared to warrior castes, due to their martial qualities.

Once more, a myth indicates very well how the tribes were considering their relations with the king. According to a still widespread legend in Central India, the Porajâs were originally related to the râja. The ancestors of both were brothers, but the younger succeeded in riding a horse and became the first king, while the elder failed and remained a walking peasant.7 This legend is a rhetorical way, through kinship terminology (younger/elder), to claim that the king is only a successful youth. The legend express also a land right, as the Porajâs are said to be the “elder” or first settled in the area, and are also said to be the mâtîa ‘people of the earth’ (Pfeffer 1997; Berger 2002). Still now in the villages, the mâtîa category designates the descendants of the founding clan. On another plan, the peasants consider themselves as, and are considered by others to be, the patrons of the craftsmen and of the untouchable families (Dom, Ghasi) who live at the outskirt of their villages and act for them as intermediaries with the urban society and ritual musicians. For this reason, the “tribesmen” claim to be superiors in term of “purity” (as Dumont would have insisted), but they use also other values according to the context.

If we look now to historical studies about medieval India, we can find that the prajâ category was not only complementary to râja but also, as a general peasant class, to paurâ ‘the residents of the city’ (Inden 1990: 218–220). Actually, Ronald Inden’s conclusions, driven from historical data, reflect rather exactly what we have faced in the fieldwork. In the Koraput district, the Porajâ constitute the peasant society, contrasting with the more

7. V. Elwin (1954: xxxiii, 519, 678–681) gives various versions of this same myth which he collected from the present State of Jharkhand to Madhya Pradesh. A similar story is actually also told by the Mina and Bhils of Rajasthan (personal communication from Gael de Graverol).
urban and mercantile one concentrated in Jeypore and in the other towns of the area. We need to enquire more closely on the capital city of the kingdom.

FROM JEYPORE TO NANDAPUR

In his study of the kingdom, B. Schnepel showed that Jeypore was organized according to the town planning of Puri (capital of the Puri kingdom and important place of pilgrimage for the Jagannath temple), the model of Orissan kingdoms in the 19th century (Kulke 1993). But, the Puri model was far to be the first in the area, and the king of Jeypore was also called bhūpati ‘lord of the earth’ of Nandapur. Today nothing more than a sleepy hollow located in the middle of the “tribal” area of Koraput, Nandapur is the original capital city of the kingdom and retains probably more interesting historical and ethnographical data on the question of the relations between tribes and kings. Under the present town organization of Nandapur, we can still distinguish an older one, centred on the batisimhásana ‘place of the throne’ located on a small hillock. With this building as a focal point, the old plan of the town and the general repartition of the castes reflect surprisingly the ideal organization of a capital, as stipulated by the famous Sanskrit treatise on political economy: Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra. The throne’s place follows the right location for a “royal residence”, and borders accordingly an East — West oriented street, still dividing the brahman sahi ‘Brahman quarter’ in the North, from the former warrior one in the Southeast (inhabited by a few Kshatriyas but here mostly Paikas). The lower castes and present Dalits (here Dom and Ghasi) inhabit the Western area, once in accordance with the śāstric planification.

But that’s not all. As well as the population of Nandapur properly, the rural surrounding society still reflects an old division of the kingdom’s population. Firstly, the Porajā peasants face a group of formerly specialized castes, still concentrated around the royal city. Those are the former urban castes or paurā, which can be divided into lower and higher castes: the local Domb and Ghasi; the shepherds and milkmen Gouda, the former temple gardeners Mali, the potters Kumhar and the former warriors Rona. The blacksmiths, Kamar, keep an ambiguous status in this scale.8

8. See Rousseleau & Behera (2003). Those “overlapping societies” can be equated, in our view, with what Peter Berger (2002) described sociologically as the three levels of the Desia society. The Porajās in particular stand in Berger’s middle level. For a full development of the argument, from a Porajā village to the kingdom level, see Rousseleau (2008).
In other words, far to show a “jungle” capital lost in the middle of savage tribes and landscape, Nandapur keeps till now the signs of a former Hindu grandeur. This grandeur and the exact relations between the peasant groups and the king appear particularly in the myth associated with the hillock of the throne.

**SUN DYNASTY AND MERCHANT KING:**
**OFFICIAL DYNASTIC MYTH AND ORAL LEGEND**

Before telling the oral story, it is useful to sum up the official legend of the Sun dynasty of Jeypore (*Jayapura Raja Vamsyavali*), written by the brahmin pandit R. Nanda Sarma in 1938. According to this legend, the founder of the Sun dynasty, Vinayak Deo, was a prince from Kashmir, who went in pilgrimage to Varanasi. He dreamt there the god Śiva indicating him Nandapur as the seat of his future kingdom. Reaching the town, he entered the Śiva temple to take rest. The god sent a dream to the then ruler of Nandapur, the king of the Śīlavaṃśi ‘Stone dynasty’,9 telling him that his successor was in the temple. The king found him as indicated by the dream, and eventually married his only daughter to the young foreign prince, before letting him the throne. From their union sprang the Sun dynasty of Nandapur and then Jeypore.

Despite this peaceful dynastic change, the brahmin poet adds that Vinayak Deo was supported by a merchant against a local rebellion. As B. Schnepel (2002) argues, the arrival of the new king can be read more realistically as a military conquest of the throne by Vinayak, legitimized afterwards by an alliance between the two lineages. The rebellion can be easily understood in this case, as a revolt of the local subjects faithful to their ancient king of the Stone dynasty, against the usurper.10 What we know precisely on Vinayak Deo is that he ruled Nandapur between 1443 and 1476.

9. Beside the inscriptions about the Śīlavaṃśi, some much older ones (6th c. A.D.), found in the western Koraput region and in Bastar, mention Śaiva kings, but without any further indication.
10. A sati stone situated in the ancient Nandapur fort seems to belong to the queen of Vinayak Deo (see illustration on the next page), as shown in the very corrupted text (in Devanagari script). The carvings show a king facing his wife, both raising their hand as a sign of mutual vow. On the left side of the stone (not visible here), a second woman is standing, raising her arm as well. She is most probably a secondary wife. According to the local people, the stone commemorates the end of a war.
Due to the legend, B. Schnepel considered that he might have been originally a warrior-merchant himself, or was, at least, an ally of them. A strong clue supporting this hypothesis is the fact that the Jeypore kings kept ending their signature with a wavy line representing purposely the whip of the caravan merchants. This hypothesis seems to be true, as Nandapur was formerly on the caravan road crossing the Koraput plateau from Bastar and Chhattisgarh to the Oriya and Telugu costs. Thanks to early British travelers, we know that caravans of bullocks were conveying and exchanging various goods against the coastal salt in this area long before the opening of modern roads through the Eastern Ghāts (Rousseleau 2008).11

The written version of Vinayak’s story is obviously interesting to reconstruct the past of the kingdom. But the oral legends still transmitted in the Nandapur area give different and most likely older versions of this past. According to those legends, once upon a time, a miraculous boy was found on the throne hillock, then forested, guarded by a cobra and a peacock and fed by a deer. Different people even say that his umbilical cord was kept in a hidden spring within the same hillock. Discovered by a childless couple of forest-dwellers, who were digging edible roots, he was adopted and brought up by them in the hills above Nandapur. According to this tradition, a Domb, that is an impure king was then ruling the kingdom. When the boy grew stronger, he followed secretly his father to the royal ceremony of Dasarā and met the Domb king. While he was seated, by ignorance, he made a namaskār by joining his feet in front of his forehead. This gesture is highly disrespectful and the king ordered immediately to put him to death. The boy ran away to his native jungle and made a bamboo sword and shield (or bow and arrows). With those weapons, he won against the whole Domb army and reigned over Nandapur.

The present oral legend ends at this point, suggesting that it might be only an irrelevant “popular” version of the dynastic written myth. But, an older oral version collected in a Gazetteer (Bell 1945) distinguishes three successive stages in the story. The first is the establishment of the Domb “impure” kingdom. The second is the conquest of the miraculous boy, grown up by forest foster-parents, and then founding himself a dynasty. After an un-

11. Elwin (1954: 528–529) collected a Parenga legend, in which a merchant camped with his bullocks and his “lovely daughter” in Nandapur. The gods Rāma and Lakṣman were there, and seduced the girl who eventually gave birth to twins. The first one became the ancestor of the king, and the second the ancestor of the Gadaba and Parenga, two of the main Porajā groups.
specified period of time, his last successor had no male issue, and “married his daughter to a certain youth who had come to his kingdom, also at the direction of the gods”. This last episode fits, this time, with the official story of Vinayak Deo, and the Gazetteer’s author concludes: “from this union sprang the present family of the Rajas of Jeypore”, that is the “Sun dynasty”.

To sum up, the different legends offer us the following succession of events: before the Sun dynasty and its founding myth (with Vinayak Deo), the previous dynasty seemed to have had its own legend, making reference to a boy discovered on the hillock of the throne. Now, few inscriptions refer to kings of the dynasty prior to the arrival of Vinayak Deo, a dynasty precisely called Śilavamsī ‘Stone dynasty’, who ruled Nandapur at least from 1353 up to 1443 (Bell 1945: 22). Our identification of the mythical boy born on the throne hillock and the founder of the Śilavamsī is confirmed by the name of the “dynasty of the stone” and by the detail of the umbilical cord kept in the stony hillock. Both refer clearly to a myth according to which the founder was born out of the rock.12

This identification of a present oral legend, collected by ethnography, with a medieval dynasty, known by epigraphy, is a rare example of the validity of ethno-history. It is also decisive for our discussion of the relations between tribes and kings, as the first documented founder of the local kingdom is presented as grown up by forest-dwellers.

The tribal foster parents as priests of the soil

In the legend, the foster-parents of the future king are called either the Benek king and queen or Benek Porajā. This strange name Benek barely hides the more famous name of Vinayak, and refers to the memory of the “king time” as a whole (see also Skaria 1999). But the Benek Porajā are not limited to a mythical name. The members of a small lineage, inhabiting two villages located in the highlands above Nandapur, are still recognized as the descendents of the forest-dwellers of the myth. As foster-parents of the ancient royal dynasty, they kept few special privileges, up to the abolition of the kingdom in 1952. The elder of their lineage, considered as a sisa or jāni ‘priest’, was previously performing the first rice consecration in the entire

12. Interestingly enough, K. N. Thusu (1977: 13) collected a legend among the Pengo tribe, which reflects the same idea. According to it, the Jeypore rāja was born out of a stone broken into pieces. This legend recalls also the older origin myth of the ancient Śailodbhava dynasty of the Chilika area (7th century).
kingdom, and had an honorific place in the Jeypore Dasarā festivities. According to Kidar Nath Thusu (1977: 13–14), his presence was even necessary for the consecration ceremony of every king of Nandapur-Jeypore, as he enjoyed the privilege of representing the Singhāsan Māti ‘throne’s soil’.

Presently, the Benek Porajā lineage is linked by intermarriages with the Joria and the Ollar Gadaba, two Porajā groups. To come back to the legend opposing the rāja riding a horse and the Porajā cultivating the soil, Thusu gives a more complete view on this myth. He adds that, though the junior brother became rāja, the peasant Porajā stayed senior and priest. As we have just seen, the mythical relation between the rāja and his older brother, the Porajā priest, was actually enacted during royal rituals. During the first centuries of the kingdom, the Porajā in general, with the Benek priest as representative, were truly the senior “people of the earth” (see above, p. 47) who were dominant in the area and with whom the king had to deal. They were, not only metaphorically, the local “support of the throne”.

Elsewhere in Orissa, particular relations between the king and the local population, linked with the earth and the forest, have been underlined. In the former kingdoms of Kendujhar and Pal Lahara, the would-be king should be seated on the lap of a local chief (a member of the Bhuyā community in case of Kendujhar, and a member of the Savar one in case of Pal Lahara), covered with a red cloth and embodying the throne. The former consecration ritual of the Bhanja dynasty of Kendujhar, in northern Orissa, was particularly spectacular. Among other rituals, one mahānāyak ‘Bhuyā secular chief’ carried the rāja on his back, as a horse, to the simhāsan melā ‘throne room’, where the king sat on the knees of a kātoï, that is, a sort of Bhuyā priest. The Bhuyā were also considered as the descendants of the foster father of the founder king. More famous examples of such a participation of “forest kings” in royal consecration rituals are known in Rajasthan (Tod 1883/1829–1832: 1, 180–183) and Gujarat (Tambs-Lyche 1997: 32–40). Nevertheless, in Western India, such groups are commonly shepherds (Bhils in Mewar; Ahirs and Chudasama in Junagadh; Mers and Jethwas in Porbandar) rather than highland peasants. For both types of ethnographic examples, we can find literary comparisons. The shepherd character, who adopts and protects a prince whose throne has been usurped, evokes the famous adoptive fa-

13. See Dalton (1872: 145–147) and Roy (1935: 119–133). Detailed studies of such relations in the “forest kingdom” of Kendujhar (called as such in the inscriptions) by Burkhard Schnepel (in collaboration with Devdas Mohanty), as well as in that of Bonaï by Uwe Skoda are looked forward eagerly.
ther of Krishna: Nanda. The king of the forest and its margins, receiving the “great” royal prince in exil, finds one of his incarnations in Guha, the king of the Niṣāda people, fishermen and hunters, descendant from the mythical king of the Vindhya already quoted, and faithful friend of Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa. So, the character of the little king of the forest, supporting the prince and ideal urban king-to-be in his forest trial is actually a quite common topic in Indian political imagination (Shulman 1985; Rousseleau 2006). We may come back to this myth in order to better delineate the status of the forest king in a more general discourse on the ideal Hindu kingship.

**NIṢĀDA IN THE MIRROR OF PRṪTHU, OR TWO MODALITIES OF KINGSHIP**

Let us come back to Niṣāda, which is both the most common name and revealing conception for the forest population vis-à-vis the urban Hindu kings. It is mentioned not only in Southern and Northern Orissa (for example in the origin myth of Ranpur kingdom, see Kulke 2004: 52), but also elsewhere in India. Speaking about the Bhils of Rajasthan, the Major Malcolm (1832: 1, 518–519) quotes one of their legend according to which the god Śiva begot various sons through a beautiful woman encountered in the forest. The ugliest of those children “slew the favourite bull of Mahadeo [Śiva], for which crime he was expelled to the woods and mountains; and his descendants have ever since been stigmatized with the names of Bheel and Nishāda, terms that denote outcasts”. In Southern India, the origin of the Kuruvar, a group of warriors and robbers is also traced back to Nishudu, son of Venudu, exiled as “governor of the forests” (Thurston & Rangachari 1909: III, 445). As in the Sanskrit versions, Niṣāda is contrasted to his younger brother Prthu who bears the title of cakravartin ‘universal king’ (Inden 1990). It is also one of the most revealing myths as it conveys a clear social meaning: the relative inferiority of highland peasants in the local hierarchy. But one should

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14. In this regard, it must be noted that Jeypore still displays, not only a Jagannath temple in a side street, but also a Rāmacandra temple precisely located in front of the royal palace. Historically, it shows the strength of the politico-cultural links between southern Orissa and northern Andhra Pradesh, where such temples are among the oldest ones (Pollock 1993: 265–269). Ideologically speaking, this divine character was ideally fit to legitimate the relations of necessary alliance between a “little king” (like the Jeypore one) and his relatively subordinated highland chiefs.

15. The myth of Vena or myth of Prthu is related in various Sanskrit texts (among others: *Atharvaveda* viii; *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1.13.37; *Mahābhārata* xii.59.99–103).
carefully consider that this status is not directly opposed to the “pure” brahmans, but well contrasted to the ideal king. Is there a more profound, socio-political ideology to be drawn from this mythological story?

In the more lengthy versions, the myth begins with the king Vena, who rejects the authority of the original ṛṣis ‘seers’. In reaction, those latter assassinate this excessive king (with a sacred herb…) but, in front of the risk of anarchy menacing a country without ruler, they take out a bone of the right hips of the royal cadaver to produce magically a new sovereign. As we have already seen, the first being produced in this way is disfigured, and so disqualified to reign. He is exiled as king of the hills and forests, and his offspring are the inhabitants of such places. Contrarily to the Jeypore’s version, the story does not end at this point. After their failure, the seers try again by using, this time, the bone of the cadaver’s right arm. Their *mantras* over the bone give birth to a perfect king: Pṛthu, guardian and servant of the *dharma* stipulated by the seers. Contrarily to his father Vena, the new king shares the earth’s products, according to the social order. After a long reign, he renounces to the world with his queen in order to conclude his life as a forest ascetic, according to the ideal successive “man’s goals”.

Beyond the plane story, we can deepen our understanding of the relation between the two brothers as more complementary than a mere structural opposition. Niṣāda is actually “demonic” as much as he concentrates the excessive part of Vena (coming from his own grand-parents Desire and Death, see Doniger O’Flaherty 1976: chap. xi; Shulman 1985: 75–88), the part of wild ambition and violence present in the conquest of sovereignty. The father and the first-born son inherit such dependence on their own passions, while Pṛthu is able to keep it under control, up to the point to eventually renounce the world. The same opposition appears in the different body parts giving birth to both beings. Niṣāda is born from the right hips, associated with the peasants in the vedic myth of the primordial man’s dismembering (*Ṛgveda x*), while Pṛthu was made from the right arm, standing for the nobility. In socio-political terms, Niṣāda sides with the brutal power, and Pṛthu with the legitimate or consecrated one,¹⁶ by his respect for priestly knowledge of the laws and the social hierarchy. Therefore, the couple constituted by Niṣāda and Pṛthu expresses two complementary poles of sovereignty.

¹⁶. According to the Agnipurāṇa 18.12–15, Pṛthu would have been even the first king to receive the unction. The opposition between *kṣatra* ‘territorial power’ and *rājadharma* ‘universal sovereignty, ritually sanctioned’ was underlined by Robert Lingat in his work on laws and kingship, before being used by J.-C. Galey (1989) in particular.
The myth of Niṣāda gives a dominant view upon the relations between urban castes and forest peasants and hunters. Different in forms, the popular story according to which the younger brother became king by mounting a horse, conveys a nearly similar lesson concerning the respective status of the peasants and the kings. In both cases, they have close kinship ties (contrarily to the racialist interpretation), and the forest-dweller is the first-born, but he remains a rude version of his brother. Now, the argument of seniority can be understood in the metaphorical sense of primacy of land occupation, or land rights. The distinction between direct village land-right holders and tenants is common in the Indian land systems. As already mentioned, in Orissa, the founding lineage of a village bears the title of bhūinharī, bhūmīj, bhūmiā, mātīa ‘people of the earth’. The elder members of such a lineage enjoy a politico-ritual precedence and a free disposition of the village lands towards the secondary inhabitants. But, at the kingdom level, the legitimacy by the “seniority over the soil” competed with the right by conquest of the king, and the supposed universal values of the Hindu gods and their interpreters, the brahmins. We eventually face a system with double reference: to the seniority over the land and to the king’s delegation associated with “purity” evaluation. In the same way, the Porajās were recognized as the sons of the soil, dominant at the village level but devaluated at a more general one. Conversely, the Porajās knew very well that they were despised as “jungle / hill folk” or impure “hunters”, indulging in various kind of meat and alcohol, but they were largely free to do it in the local scale. And they would reverse the hierarchy in their own village where even the more urban castes depend on them as uprīa ‘latter settled’.

Well beyond Orissa, the relation between a former dominant recognised as “senior” and master of the soil, and a warrior king said to be of “junior” status was mentioned about Kerala (South-West India) and Java (Tarabout 1990: 112) as well as about Fidji islands (Sahlins 1985: chap. 3). In this last case, the king was presented as the descendant of a foreign chief, while the priest accompanying him to the consecration ceremony represented the local population, and sometimes the heir of the former proprietary of the

17. See Dumont (1966: 75–77) on the distinction between mirāsi ‘hereditary land-right holders’ and upari ‘tenants’. See also Habib (1999: 131, 157, 172). Such a distribution shows that this distinction is not a “tribal specificity”, even if, obviously, it appears more common in peasant society contexts.
country. The diversity of such examples shows that the distinction between senior religious leader and junior warrior chief, which is omnipresent in the highlands of Orissa (Pfeffer 1997), knows a much wider repartition in Asia, if not worldwide. In India however, this relation finds a specific sanction in the texts about the brahmmins/kings relations, since the first is often presented as the senior of the second. In this perspective, the priest and former master of the soil can be compared to a sort of “forest brahmin”, wise man or priest. In this connexion, it is interesting to note that the northern Bhūyās (Hazaribagh district) styled themselves Rikhyāsans (Roy 1935: 30, 265), claiming that their ancestor Rikh-Mun was eating only roots and fruits (like the Nandapur foster parents), like an ancient Hindu mūni or ṛṣi ‘seers’.

**JAGANNATH AS IDEAL KING**

**BETWEEN THE FOREST PRIEST AND THE BRAHMIN**

A similar comparison is clearly exposed in the Oriya version of the *Mahābhārata*, written by Sarala Das in the 15th century, which means when Vinayak Deo was living in Nandapur. In this book, the pan-Indian war history of the Pāṇḍavas is intertwined with references to regional traditions (*Vana Parva* 2.6). In particular, the foundation myth of the Jagannath temple of Puri is inserted within the epic frame. According to this text, a hunter discovers the icon of the god, but a brahmin settles the cult at the royal level. To be still more precise, the “discovery” takes place twice: firstly under the form of a blue stone in the forest, and secondly under the garb of a wooden piece washed up on the Puri beach. The second time, the god present in the image does not allow anyone to lift and transport him to the city except the hunter Jārā, on the left, allied to the brahmin Basu, on the right. Therefore, the founding myth of the Jagannath cult precisely emphasizes the necessary cooperation of a forest-dweller with a court brahmin, around the main patron god of the kingdom of Orissa (Kulke 1993).

As a matter of fact, such a complementary relation is still enacted through the presence, close to Jagannath, of a temple servants’ corps: the Daityas, said to stand for the original hunter. Scholars often used this argument, together with the “rude” aspect of the god’s statue, to support the tribal origin of Jagannath (Eschmann 1978). Now, once more, it is possible to see here an ideological structure more than a dramatized “memory” of the past. The recognition of the necessary alliance of the king and his brahmmins with a forest representative does not suppress the ambiguity of the “forest/earth priest” status. Recognised as the privileged mediator with the throne’s soil, he is no less expelled from the throne properly said. The
priestly function establishes clearly a parallel between the forest king and the brahmin, but the gods they respectively worship still rank them in a hierarchy: universal sovereign gods for the latter, local and land ones for the former. They impersonate two opposite modes of legitimacy for a king, who remains the central figure in the picture.

CONCLUSION

We have shown that the colonial category of tribes hides more complex identities and socio-professional distinctions of pre-colonial India. Despite of their partial distortions, the western reports give nonetheless clues to reach a better interpretation. Together with oral sources, they eventually show that the Scheduled Tribes of Koraput did not remain isolated as “living fossils” since “neolithic times”. Both archaeological, epigraphic evidences and legendary traditions too, prove that the region knew a Hindu politic and ritual organisation since at least the 14th century A.D., whose influence is more important than the present state of the erstwhile capitals can let imagine. Above all, the fact to be recognized as pra j ā s by a king imply a certain change in status, particularly the duty to give customary gifts during the royal ceremony of Dasar ā, and to pay some tribute for the land. In this sense, the tribes of Koraput who entered under the pra j ā category can be said subalterns, but this “subalternity” was still more political and ritual (through Dasar ā) than economical. Outside this category, as we said, there existed different degrees in the autonomy of more Dongaria ‘hilly’ tribes from the king — and then colonial — administration. On the cultural domain, despite the linguistic differences (some of them speak Dravidian languages, others Muṇḍa ones), all the various Porajā villages in the Nandapur area show a basically common pantheon, which borrows some traits from the old temple organization of the capital (Rousseleau 2008). Therefore, as Antonio Gramsci put it, in India too, we must explore documented political history and social anthropology before referring to an imagined “ethnic prehistory”.

We explored in the very same way the regional mythology referring to Niṣāda, the wild father of the forest-dwellers, and then to the discovery of the great god Jagannath of Puri by a local hunter. In both cases, the hunter or forest-dweller appears either as the first-born, or as the first worshipper of the god in comparison to the king. Through this character, the peasant lineage-based groups are therefore recognized as senior, or first settled in the locality. Their representative held, for this reason certain ritual privileges that place him on nearly common ground with the court brahmin, as a sort of “savage” or forest priest. The recurrence of such imaginary structure
points eventually towards a socio-political or ideological use, more than to a conjectural remembered past. The pre-colonial royal discourse was no less rhetorical and “constructed” than the colonial one. The centre of this discourse was obviously the figure of the king, as much idealised as he was contrasted to demonized others (Pollock 1993, whoever those “others” would be: Turuk or other Hindu kings identified with Ravana), but also to allied “wilder” kings of the forest. To become aware of the full implications of such discourse and its political hidden agenda would warn the present adivāsi representatives to be cautious about the Hindu nationalist “Rāma rhetoric” in Orissa or elsewhere (Kanungo 2003; Froerer 2006; Kanungo & Joshi 2010). To point out a supposed common enemy, especially on religious ground (here recently, the Christian Dalits), is the best way do induce people to act as you wish without doing it yourself. The tale’s moral is rather clear: Rāma praised the faithfulness of Guha indeed, and he “entered history” as a king on a chariot. But what about Guha? Like all Niṣāda’s heirs, he remained barefoot in the hills.
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