Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

In praise of death : history and poetry in medieval Marwar (South Asia)

Kamphorst, J.

Citation
Kamphorst, J. (2008, June 18). *In praise of death : history and poetry in medieval Marwar (South Asia)*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12986

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12986

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

1 Death and Deification

Rajasthani heroic and epic poetry records legends and semi-historical tales regarding the socio-religious status of the Bhil, Charan and Rajput communities of the Thar Desert in north-west India bordering present-day Pakistan. This warlike poetry documents how, even after the gradual establishment of Rajput (warrior) dominion in the area, non-Rajput groups continued to articulate claims to autonomy. The poets of cattle rearing communities and tribal peoples like the Bhil, Charan and Rajput forwarded these claims through heroic and epic poetry, giving voice to distinctive interpretations of what it means to be a warrior, some times in accord with but at times also in contradiction to dominant martial ethos. An important aspect of these medieval identity politics was the deification of warriors, a literary-historical and religious process which is the subject of the present study. Of particular interest for my research are the legendary and semi-historical tales that document the divinization of the Rajasthani warrior-hero Pabuji Dhamdhal Rathaur.

From approximately the fourteenth century onwards, the period when Pabuji is believed to have distinguished himself by his valour, his worship as a god and deified forefather by devotees of all kinds of caste backgrounds has inspired the on-going recollection of Pabuji's martial deeds and battle death. The hero's glorification and deification through oral and written Rajasthani heroic and epic (henceforth: heroic-epic) poetry continues to inspire a range of different poetic histories that contain historical fictions and divergent facts which enable us to imagine what the "lived past" of the inhabitants of the Thar Desert may have looked like.

Pabuji is first and foremost remembered as an exemplary warrior of the Dhamdhal Rathaur lineages of the Rajput (warrior) rulers of Marwar, an erstwhile desert kingdom in north-western India. His tale is part of a more than eight centuries old tradition of poems and semi-historical prose stories clustered around the medieval warriors and rulers of this former desert kingdom. The poets of the Pabuji tradition,[1] like the poets of heroic-epic poetry worldwide, accorded superlative praise to their protagonist. From their compositions, we come to know Pabuji as a an exceptionally valiant wielder of spear and sword, an outstanding brave who was at all times ready to give battle and protect cattle; a most noble man who always kept his word; a protector of his clan, family and retainers who gave his life to safeguard their honour and material interests. In addition, Pabuji is also remembered as a

[1] Considering the many different genres, performance styles, poets and singers which have been, and still are, part of the Pabuji tradition, it would be best to speak of "Pabuji traditions". For the sake of brevity, I refer to the studied contemporary and medieval genres, performance styles, poets and singers as part of one all-encompassing "Pabuji tradition".

deified forefather (*jūṃjhār*), *devā* (god) or *devatā* and *lok-devatā* (folk-god).[2] Till today, many different social groups continue to revere the Rathaur hero-god. Pabuji's Charan and Rajput devotees do this by transmitting written and oral traditions of heroic-epic poetry, prose tales and devotional songs. The hero's Bhil devotees and priestly-performers pay homage to Pabuji and his Bhil archers through the religious performance of drum and story-cloth epics. In the contemporary versions of his tale, Pabuji is identified as an incarnation of Lakhsman, the brother of Ram, the exemplary warrior and god of the *Rāmāyaṇ* epic.

Approximate location of Kolu, north-west of Jodhpur.

Pabuji's story

Today, Pabuji's story is narrated throughout Rajasthan, Gujarat, parts of southern Punjab and Sindh. The heartland of the contemporary story-telling tradition is Kolu, a sprawling village in the Thar Desert north-west of Jodhpur (Marwar) where

[2] An account of academic transliteration standards and an overview of the orthography of Rajasthani and Hindi words can be found in chapter 2 under the headings *Academic transliteration* and *Historical orthography*.

Rajasthan's main Pabuji temple stands. Here, Pabuji's Bhil devotees orally transmit his adventures through the performance of the *mātā* (drum) epic commissioned by the Dhamdhal Rathaur villagers and temple-priests of Kolu. The focal point of most contemporary and medieval poetry and prose tales about Pabuji is his promise to protect cattle. This promise, his devotees believe, was made by Pabuji to Charani Deval, a female cattle herder and horse trader of the Charan caste. When Pabuji obtained the much-coveted black mare Kalvi (or Kesar Kalmi) from Deval, he made a promise to protect her cattle against robbers. It is this promise which (in most versions of Pabuji's tale) eventually gave rise to the battles between Pabuji and his brother-in-law and enemy, Jimda Khici (or Khimci). Because of the mare, or more precisely, Pabuji's refusal to give her in dowry to Jimda, the negotiations for Jimda's marriage to Pabuji's sister Pema broke down. Upon Pabuji's denial, Jimda decided to rob Deval's cows to revenge himself. Since Pabuji promised Deval to protect her cattle, he was asked to come to her rescue and attack Jimda. In due course, Jimda killed Pabuji though (as we shall see) not in all versions of the selected poems. The way in which Pabuji, Jimda and their respective armies battled is an important subject of the Pabuji tradition, especially of medieval manuscript versions of poetry dedicated to Pabuji.

The above summary of the focal point of medieval and contemporary renderings of Pabuji's story represents themes which are directly or indirectly part of most narrative poetry dedicated to him. In some of the poems collected by me, Pabuji's battle death earns him a place in heaven given that he gained spiritual merit by laying down his life in battle and thus fulfilling his Rajput *dharma* or religious duty. In other medieval poems, the hero has also been accorded supernatural powers and divinity. Apart from these additional themes, the Pabuji tradition knows many other plots and episodes, variant story-lines, rich collections of poetic metaphors and narrative details which expand on his exploits as a robber of camels, tamer of wild horses or bridegroom at war. The medieval and contemporary tradition also includes tales about Pabuji's family: his father Dhamdhal Rathaur, half-brother Buro, half-sister Pema, and his bride from the Sodhi Rajput lineage of Umarkot. In addition, contemporary tales link the major protagonists of the Pabuji tradition to classical hero-gods from the *Rāmāyaṇ* and goddesses from different story-telling traditions. In some versions of contemporary performances of Pabuji's epic, Deval is now portrayed as an incarnation of Shakti, and Pabuji's foe Khici has become the demon-hero Ravana incarnate. Ravana's sister Surapamkha has come to embody Pabuji's Sodhi bride. His Bhil and Rebari companions Camda, Harmal, Salji and Dhembo are believed to be the personification of, respectively, the goddesses Caumunda, Bhaisand, Visot and/or the god Hanuman and his army of monkey warriors (cf. Smith 1991: 271-72 and Hiltebeitel 2001: 91-92). The literary-historical investigation of the different story-lines, poetic images and idioms, narrative plots, poetic forms and functions of the Pabuji tradition is at the heart of the following study.

Pabuji's Kolu temple.

Approach

My approach to the Pabuji tradition is principally inspired by, and meant as a contribution to, debates about contemporary historical, literary-historical and anthropological insights into the development stages that medieval and contemporary Rajasthani heroic-epic genres may have gone through.[3] This study refers to current discussions about the "origins" of Pabuji's story and how its symbolic content should be read. Important questions raised by these discussions concern the way in which epic heroes have been deified in South Asian traditions, and issues regarding the ascription of divinity and its relation to the historical and literary development of heroic-epic genres. I will ask whether Pabuji's deification should indeed be looked at as the outcome of a literary-historical developmental process which can be documented through the different degrees of narrative importance that the poets attached to battle-death and the martial and/or religious role ascribed to warrior-heroes.

To illustrate common developmental approaches to the Pabuji tradition, I will here consider the present-day discussion about the literary-historical stages that regional heroic and epic poetry may go through and give an overview of the main arguments involved and their implications for an understanding of the narrative development of Pabuji's story and the process of deification as documented in poetic sources.[4] The main question asked is how the Pabuji tradition may have spread from the local level of storytelling to regional performance traditions like the staging of

[3] In particular discussions initiated by (*passim*) N.S. Bhati (1989), Blackburn (1989b, 1989a, 1986), Hiltebeitel (2002, 2001, 1989), Kothari (1989), Smith (1999, 1991, 1989a, 1980) and Srivastava (1997, 1994).

[4] The terms "regional epic" and "vernacular epic" are used interchangeably to refer to regional, martial and/or ritual, oral or written epics in one of the vernacular languages of South Asia.

Pabuji's epic at the Kolu temple. Stuart H. Blackburn (1989: 32) describes this historical development as the outcome of a process of deification "from the bottom up", when the story of the death of a local hero and his subsequent deification extends beyond the village level to broader, regional audiences and, as a result, goes through a process of narrative expansion. The outcome of this narrative process is described as Pabuji's definitive recognition as an incarnation of Lakshman (Smith 1989a: 182). However, Hiltebeitel (2001: 35) sees no explanatory power in Blackburn's "deification-by-death" thesis. He is of the opinion that the development of Pabuji's story and his deification should be understood in terms of the narrative "re-emplotment" (giving a new plot to an existing story) of classical and folk versions of the *Rāmāyaṇ* (Hiltebeitel 2001: 43-47, 88-120). Along these lines, contemporary *avatār*-linkage in epic traditions can be regarded as the result of the creation of additional or complementary plots to the story-lines of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat*.

Deification-by-death

In what follows, the above debate shall be discussed further, beginning with Blackburn's theory of narrative building that aims to account for South Asian patterns of storytelling in geographical, socio-political, narrative and functional terms. Blackburn (1989, 1986) tentatively establishes a connection between "pre-epic", decidedly local narratives, and regional, "truly" epic genres. He traces the narrative development of regional epics (defined as single-story traditions consisting of long epic poems at times interspersed with prose, covering wide geographical areas and audiences) from pre-epic "multi-story traditions". The latter traditions consist of stories, songs and poems with a limited geographical and social range, which are restricted in length as well as thematic interests. To explain how local multi-story traditions develop into supra-regional single-story traditions of epic proportions, like the present-day oral epics dedicated to Pabuji, Blackburn (1989: 1-32) connects narrative changes to a story's geographical and social reach. He postulates a direct relation between the expansion of traditions of story telling to sub-regional, regional and supra-regional audiences, on the one hand, and changes in the narrative structure as well as in the socio-political or ritual purpose of a genre, on the other. Variant versions of a story are accordingly explained in terms of a "narrative building process" that advances by means of cumulative sequences of motifs. In other words, a story accumulates themes, imagery and episodes by crossing local and regional boundaries as poets and performers refurbish their narratives in order to hold the attention of new, regional audiences consisting of people from different social groups who are not necessarily interested in the purely local history of kinship ties or deified forefathers.

A story can travel along two narrative routes. At the heart of what Blackburn (1989: 21) terms narrative pattern 1 lies the "twin-theme" of death and deification.

This pattern is particularly pronounced in stories of the "violation-death-deification-revenge" type that originate as tales about the violation of proprietary rights and related themes like revenge, honour, war, and violent (battle) death. At the local level, it is the story's death motif that is generally thought to lead to a hero's deification. In time, when the transmission of a hero's story starts to spread from local to sub-regional and regional planes, the poets appeal to new audiences by adding supernatural birth stories to their protagonists' tale. At this stage of narrative development, the hero is ascribed (semi) divine origins to mask his distinctly local and human history, usually through the addition of stories about his miraculous birth. This process is believed, in due course, to give rise to the birth of new gods, cults and ritual contexts; a narrative means of "giving birth" to gods that may ultimately lead to the connection between deified local heroes and "pan-Indian" gods or the deified heroes of classical epics. The "mythification" of local history to appeal to a wider audience is fully accomplished when a hero comes to be seen as an *avatār* (reincarnation) of Vishnu, Shiva and Devi, or (like in Pabuji's case) as an incarnation of Lakshman.

Narrative development according to pattern 2 as proposed by Blackburn (1989: 27-32) concerns hero tales that do not have a death-motif and as a result do not speak of the deification of their protagonist. A story that develops according to this pattern may, nonetheless, proliferate from the local to the supra-regional level as well, but it does not attain a cultic or ritual context like it does in pattern 1 because its hero is not deified. Heroic-epic narratives that accord with pattern 2 most commonly develop into romantic epics, whereupon local warriors become romantic heroes. It seems that such stories mainly serve the purpose of entertainment, as opposed to ritual objectives. As one would expect, and Blackburn (1989: 27) also spells out, exceptions to both patterns do abound. An essentially martial hero's story may, for example, include tales of the hero's supernatural birth or his identification with pan-Indian gods or heroes. Blackburn explains this by the fact that the latter motifs are crucial for the spread of a tale to a larger area. In addition, *avatār*-linkage in pattern 1 does not always lead to the expansion of a hero's tale beyond a few villages.[5]

Blackburn describes the current, expanded epic of Pabuji as a highly developed form of narrative pattern 1.[6] Though the medieval Pabuji tradition is not part of his analysis, Blackburn nevertheless proposes that the "historical nucleus" of the contemporary *paṛ* epic of Pabuji should be traced to a local *bhomio* or *jūṃjhār*

[5] Like, for example, in the tale of the hero Muttu Kutti, who is held to be an incarnation of Vishnu and Karl Marx, but whose story has not spread beyond the village-level (Blackburn 1989: 27, n.21)

[6] Blackburn (1989: 25): "(A)ll three motifs of Pattern I are found in the epics of Pabuji and Devnarayan, which represent highly developed forms of that pattern (…) The Pabuji tradition clearly demonstrates the historical development from local to regional tradition. Underneath the accretions of supernatural birth and identification with Lakshmana lies evidence of growth from a local tradition called *bhomiya*". Blackburn's concluding remark (*ibid*.) is more provisional: "Although further evidence is needed for a conclusive statement, the modern epic of Pabuji is quite possibly an extension of a local *bhomiya* cult".

cult.[7] In Marwar, the Jumjhar (*jūṃjhār*) is generally defined as a village hero who died in the defence of cattle against raids, and who afterwards comes to be revered as a deified forefather or local god. Devotees feel that it is essential to appease the roving spirit of a dead warrior to help him retrieve the peace that his unnatural death prevents him from finding. Through worship people hope to stop the wandering soul from developing into a malevolent ghost intent on haunting the living. Thus the beginning of divine or godlike status is conferred to ancestral heroes. Following Kothari (1989: 102) and Smith (1991: 90-91), Blackburn suggests a supernatural birth story was added to the tale of the Bhomio Pabuji as it spread to a wider geographical and social base and that it is this process of narrative expansion that eventually led to Pabuji's identification with Lakhsman.

Avatār-linkage connecting the heroes of vernacular epics like Pabuji with the heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat* has given rise to a debate about the cultural primacy of the Sanskrit epics with reference to regional story-telling traditions. In this context, Blackburn (1989: 8) explains Pabuji's identification with Lakshman in the contemporary tradition as the result of the upwardly mobile aspirations of the hero-god's devotees. By linking their heritage to the canonical tradition of Sanskrit epic, middle- and low caste devotees are thought to aim at validating their own stories and in the process improve their socio-political standing. According to Blackburn (1989:25, 32), perhaps as part of his explicit effort to counter "devolutionary" assumptions that represent regional epics as nothing more than fragments of classical traditions, the former narrative development remains a mostly superficial connection. Devolutionary notions are obviously not helpful in describing the narrative development of heroic-epic and devotional genres, but it does seem to me that Blackburn (1989: 25) subsequently relates the dependence of the oral Pabuji tradition on the classical tradition in a comparable manner by describing the contemporary *paṛ*-epic as "a sequel" to the *Rāmāyaṇ*. The implications of the pre-eminence attributed to classical epic will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. First, let me discuss Hiltebeitel's literary study of vernacular "re-emplotments" of Sanskrit sources and consider its implications for an appraisal of the narrative poetry dedicated to Pabuji.

Classical signifiers

Hiltebeitel's wide-ranging study of South-Asian traditions of martial epic in part opposes the developmental view of Pabuji's contemporary epic tradition as projected by Blackburn for, according to Hiltebeitel (2001: 19), this approach "disesteems" the connections between classical and regional epics. Hiltebeitel

[7] *Bhomiyā*, *bhomio* or *kṣetrapāl* (guardians of village-boundaries) and *jūṃjhār* ("struggler") denote local variations. From my fieldwork, it appears that *jūṃjhār* refers to deified dead in Jaisalmer, while *bhomio* and *jūṃjhār* are used interchangeably in Jodhpur and bordering areas. I refer to Pabuji as a "*jūṃjhār*" because this is the term used for him in medieval texts. See also Srivastava (1997: 73, 1994: 612).

(2001: 96) holds that Pabuji's divinization did not progress from slain hero to Bhomio (Jumjhar) and folk-god and thus resulted in his contemporary identification as Lakshman's *avatār*. According to him, the Bhomio was at no point commensurate with Pabuji. In Hiltebeitel's view, the hero could equally well represent "a residual Vratya", a Vedic cattle-rustler.[8]

Hiltebeitel (2001: 43-45) explains contemporary *avatār*-linkage in terms of "re-emplotments" or "disemplotments" and "dislocations" of classical epic signifiers. He distinguishes between the narrative content of regional martial oral epics, on the one hand, and classical epics or their "folk versions", on the other, to define classical signifiers as narrative frames, images, wordings, themes and plots of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat*. From this angle, medieval and contemporary folk re-tellings of classical epics are based on classical narrative material, together forming "regional pools of classical epic signifiers". The narrative features of Sanskrit epics and of other classical sources are presented as primary process material or images which, according to Hiltebeitel (2001: 45), have been there "*von Anfang an*" and should be thought of as the indestructible and immortal constituents of South-Asian heroic-epic traditions.

In terms of narrative development, this means that the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat* are not only primary in a chronological sense but should be accorded a cultural and creative precedence as well.[9] The latter kind of primacy is understood in terms of the re-emplotment (as opposed to a straightforward re-telling) of classical narratives. Hiltebeitel (2001: 46) argues that Sanskrit epics should be seen as "totalizing texts" that add force to the same narrative realities over and again. Regional epics, on the other hand, re-examine the soundness of the "classical realities" reflected by the Sanskrit epics. Also, regional story-telling traditions are consequently thought of as re-emplotments of the "original", classical versions of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat* or of their folk version, that is, versions of the classical epic told in vernacular traditions. By giving a new plot to classical story-lines, regional poets apparently aim to wrap up the unfinished business of classical epic and in the process render classical narrative material interesting for contemporary audiences. Thus Lakshman's incarnation as Pabuji may be seen as a narrative twist to a tale in the *Rāmāyaṇ*; for in some contemporary interpretation of the story, Lakshman incarnates as Pabuji to fulfill the wedding promise he made to Ravana's sister Surapamkha in some versions of the Sanskrit epic. In contemporary versions of Pabuji's tale, Surapamkha is thought to be embodied by the hero's Sodhi bride (Hiltebeitel 2001: 92 quoting Smith 1991: 93).

---

[8] Hiltebeitel postulates that the Vratya collapses the distinction between Kshatriya and Brahmin and is a precursor of Rajput warrior-ascetics as described by Dirk Kolff (1990: *passim*) quoted in Hiltebeitel (2001: 92, n.15). See also Smith (1980: 53-55, 76, n.10).

[9] I take Hiltebeitel's (2001: 44-45) primary process or "poetic and cultural work" that frames stories and produces regional martial oral epic to refer to the creative, imaginative process of composition.

Hiltebeitel further underlines the creative primacy of classical signifiers by illustrating how these pervade the imaginary universe of contemporary epic traditions like Pabuji's *paṛ*-epic, an approach that results in a view of the latter tradition's use of the *Rāmāyaṇ* frame story as an artful "bardic handling of primary process folklore" (Hiltebeitel 2001: 92). Of immediate interest for the present discussion of the medieval Pabuji tradition is Hiltebeitel's (2001: 29-37) outspoken dismissal of Blackburn's "deification-by-death" theory. According to Hiltebeitel, deification does not (as Blackburn proposes) cover the relation between divine and human beings, ranging from local worship of a deceased hero to divine birth-stories, and linkage with pan-Indian gods. By using the term "deification" in this manner, writes Hiltebeitel (2001:22), gods are presented as "mere" deified mortals and their deeds as "nothing more" than an elaboration upon or glorification of human acts.[10] As an alternative, Hiltebeitel proposes that we think of the death of a hero as a primarily narrative theme that captures an audience's attention because of the "fatality, cyclicity, and divinity" accorded to death, and the way in which an audience is able to relate a hero's death to "so many memorable characters", i.e. the protagonists of classical traditions.

Local death-stories are too fragmented to spread to a wider regional level, writes Hiltebeitel (2001: 22), since these tales are linked with heroes of lineage cults that are confined to small territories and to exclusive and disparate family groups within caste communities which claim a hero as their ancestor. Different castes tell different stories about the heroes from their own ranks, and such local stories cannot take on the character of a regional epic because they do not appeal to the narrative preferences of regional caste groups. Thus the development of a hero's story from local multi-story traditions into a single-story narrative corpus should not be explained in terms of a hero's death and deification. Rather, it should be explained by studying the socio-political composition of a story's audience. What does happen (Hiltebeitel 2001: 30) is that stories centred on the martial heroes and traditions of dominant landed castes are transmitted from one region to another without the story changing appreciably as long as the caste identity of the hero remains the same. In this view, the narrative process at work in regional epics should not be described in terms of a "vertical movement" or the portrayal of deification as an "upward" movement that begins with the worship of an earthly hero and ends in heaven with

[10] Instead, Hiltebeitel (2001: 22) proposes to distinguish between "primary, secondary and tertiary features of extended deification". The force of Hiltebeitel's argument rests on the fact that Blackburn employs a "western" (i.e. Euhemerist) notion of god to formulate his theory of deification (Hiltebeitel 2001: 23). A problematic line of reasoning since the above-quoted phrasing about what gods are *not* appears to imply that gods or God are "in reality" more than deified mortals. This argument amounts to a theological argument and as such does not add to a better understanding of the literary-historical argument at hand. No definition is forwarded to clarify how western ways of thinking about deification differ from non-western views. The few studies of early-Christian traditions of deification known to me highlight the literary-historical similarities and not the differences between South-Asian, biblical and other narrative traditions centring on deification (see, for instance, Beissinger 2002: 236-258 and Norman 1975: 15-19).

the hero's deification. By presenting the narrative process of deification in terms of a horizontal vector, Hiltebeitel (2001: 34-35) proposes a lateral (as opposed to direct) connection between epic protagonists and deities: on a narrative plane, deities are considered to move horizontally into flanking stories rather than descending "vertically" into a hero's death story.

The above argument can perhaps best be summed up by understanding Hiltebeitel's view of deification as a narrative technique to connect heaven and earth through *avatār*-linkage when God, so to speak, descends into a text and becomes human when he is reborn as a story's protagonist. Blackburn, on the other hand, makes a case for an opposite movement, one that can be traced from earth to heaven or from human to godly spheres through the deification of human beings. As I hope to show in a later stage of this study, these narrative movements are not as contradictory as they may seem.

To finish this introduction to theories about the developmental stages that poetry dedicated to Pabuji may have gone through, let me remark that both Blackburn and Hiltebeitel hold that an epic tradition may develop from a geographically circumscribed "multi-story" tradition into a single-story epic tradition with a much larger supra-regional range, albeit following different routes. As the above tentative formulations of narrative development stages suggest, it is difficult to imagine how the transition from supposedly pre-epic poetry to today's vernacular epics may have come about.[11] I feel that this difficulty arises first and foremost from the fact that above discussion is based upon a comparison between Smith's 1991 version of Pabuji *paṛ*-epic performances, on the one hand, and classical as well as vernacular versions of classical *Rāmāyaṇ* traditions, on the other. The missing link in the above discussion is of course the tradition of medieval poetry dedicated to Pabuji. To better see how the medieval and contemporary tradition can be related from a literary-historical point of view, it is moreover important to know not just one but many of the different genres contained in the medieval Pabuji tradition. This becomes apparent when we consider the fact that the inclusion in the on-going debate of one version of a medieval poem dedicated to Pabuji (the seventeenth-century *Pābūjī rī vāta*) does not help in accounting for the literary history of the contemporary *paṛ*-epic of Pabuji. On the contrary, its inclusion raises more questions than it can provide adequate answers for.[12] For example, does the *vāt*, a semi-historical prose-text, stand for an intermediary stage between local Bhomio or Jumjhar narratives and today's *paṛ*-epic (Blackburn 1989: 25)? Or is it a mythic story, as Hiltebeitel (2001: 13-14) argues, and is it "virtually certain" that its subject matter is based on an epical primary source?

---

[11] Blackburn (1989: 1-37) defines "pre-epic" genres as a literature of songs of praise, satire, death laments and war songs. See also Hiltebeitel (2001: 25).

[12] *Pābūjī rī vāta* translated by Smith (1991: 481-96). See also Tessitori (1916: 110-114).

Embedded history

Smith (1991: 82) has argued that we will never know what precisely led to Pabuji's deification: "It is tempting to wish that more sources were available on Pābūjī and his contemporaries, but even if they were it is not likely that they would prove to be of any great assistance: like the sources we have used, they would consist of an indistinguishable mixture of facts and fictions. Traditional history is not concerned with facts as such; it is concerned not with the *right* story but with the *best* story". From the point of view of literary history, one may ask whether it is at all possible to write a "right" history based solely on facts uncoloured by the interpretations of traditional or modern historians. It seems to me that the production of historically "right stories" is most often based on the conscious or unconscious piecing together of "best stories". The following literary-historical examination of medieval poetry sources that are part of the Pabuji tradition is intended to throw some light on the way in which Pabuji's devotees, priests and poets constructed several to their mind "right" and "best" versions of his history. This I aim to do with a study of the historical background against which the Pabuji tradition took shape, with special reference to the history of socio-religious and martial identities of medieval Marwari Rajput, Bhil and Charan communities. By studying the regional martial traditions of the aforementioned communities as part of the medieval martial or military labour market of Marwar, I try to see whether the poetic concerns reflected by the poets of the Pabuji tradition represent themes typical of medieval history, in particular the history of the archetypal early-medieval Rajput warrior, the geographically and socially mobile young man who travelled Hindustan and, as I hope to show, the north-western desert regions, in search of livelihood and employment (cf. Kolff 1990: *passim*). This part of my study also draws upon Harald Tambs-Lyche's (1996, 1997, 2004a-d) analysis of Rajput-Charan relations in Kathiawar (Gujarat).

In addition, my approach to the selected manuscript and contemporary poetry sources has also been inspired by literary-historical, anthropological and literary approaches to heroic-epic genres. No up to date linguistic studies exist of the style and language of medieval poetry composed in Dimgal, the specialized poetic idiom used by the poets of the Pabuji tradition. I have therefore come to depend heavily on Luigi Pio Tessitori's *Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajputana* (1915-21) and grammatical notes in the *Indian Antiquary* (1914-16). Though outmoded, these works remain the most meticulous study in English of Dimgal till today. For my description of the history of the different Dimgal genres part of the Pabuji tradition, I have found particularly helpful the approaches of literary historians like Narayan Singh Bhati (1973, 1989a, 1989b, 1991), Linda Hutcheon (2002), Mario Valdes (2002) and Sheldon Pollock (2003). My assessment of the performance context of oral and written heroic-epic poetry and oral and written transmission techniques is mainly inspired by the work of the anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1977, 1988, and 1992), Hirsch and Stewart (2005) and historians among anthropologists like Shyal Mayaram (2004) and Jan Vansina (1965, 1971, 1997).

Following Vansina (1997: 196), I have come to think of the oral and written poetry dedicated to Pabuji as "historiologies" in their own right, i.e. as the outcome of on-going reflections of people about their "lived past" that become part of collective representations of what communities hold to be factually or potentially true. This process of remembering *and* forgetting serves to establish which past experiences or events retain relevance for the present. In addition, my analysis of the function of poems dedicated to Pabuji is informed by Finnegan's (1992: 137) approach to oral narratives that brings to the fore how their content is commonly shaped by their performance context, audience-performer interaction and the weight attributed to different historical and contemporary worldviews.[13] Finnegan makes clear how, in contemporary settings, the form, content, meaning and function of heroic-epic texts can best be studied as emergent, variable categories that come into being during a performance. In other words, the meaning attributed to oral narrative is "realized" in performance, not just through words but also by means of its delivery, for example, through ritualisation, dramatisation and/or audience-performer interaction (Finnegan 1992: 92f).

In studying the medieval and contemporary sources selected by me, I do not (like Vansina (1997: 49) does) aim to establish whether the poetic sources are in the conventional sense of the word "factual" versions of Pabuji's history by trying to ascertain which poetic evidence may represent "hard" historical facts. Rather, I am inspired by Kolff's (1990: 74-85) description of the Rajput warrior-ascetic in song, ballad, and legend. My main sources are poetic "historiologies" or literary and/or mythical forms of historical consciousness. In seeing poetic sources as a form of historical knowledge that enables people to give voice to their past, present and future as mutually implicated categories, I adhere to the historian Romilla Thapar's (1999, 1979) definition of "embedded history": "Historians tend to view historical writing as conforming almost entirely to the format and pattern familiar from the last couple of centuries, or from models borrowed from particular societies such as ancient Greece and China. The more important but neglected aspect is the search for historical consciousness, irrespective of how immediately recognizable or evident it may be, in its literary from. This (...) requires a distinction between what might be termed "embedded history" forms in which historical consciousness has to be prised out - and its opposite, 'externalized history'-which tends to bring embedded consciousness into the open, as it were (...)" (Thapar 1999: 137f).

By studying the selected oral and written poems about Pabuji as records that are historically accurate (in that they "factually" represent the outcome of "acts of telling" or "narrative deeds") I am able to document medieval and present-day historical, literary and mythical interpretations of the past and present by Bhil, Charan and Rajput communities. In other words, this study of the different meanings

[13] "Narrative" and "narration" are here used in their widest sense to include all verbal forms where temporal sequence is implied and to include scribal and oral transmissions as part of the process of narration (cf. Finnegan 1992: 14).

that may have been (and presently are) conferred to medieval heroic-epic poetry aims to offer insights into the historical consciousness or the "lived past" of some of the communities that inhabited the Thar Desert in different periods of time. Of particular interest for the study of literary forms of historical consciousness are the changing perceptions of socio-political status, power relations and religious worldviews for, as Thapar argues, "[e]ach version of the past which has been deliberately transmitted has a significance for the present, and this accounts for its legitimacy and continuity. The record may be one in which historical consciousness is embedded: as in myth, epic and genealogy; or alternatively it may refer to the more externalized forms: chronicles of families, institutions and regions, and biographies of persons in authority" (Thapar 1999: 138).

Both embedded and externalized history can be seen as narrative ways to sanction contemporary power relations, in present as well as medieval times. These two ways of interpreting the past do not necessarily represent an evolutionary continuum or development from one form to another. Embedded history can be part of externalized history like in chronicles which refer to a community's mythical beginnings to legitimize its claims to status "by tracing links with established lineages through embedded history in genealogical connections or stories of epic heroes" (Thapar 1999: 138f).

The different ways of looking at heroic-epic traditions come together in Hutcheon's literary-historical approach to poetry and prose texts as "historical events of production and reception" that may result in "fictions of power" created by social groups with different histories and political interests (Hutcheon 2002: 6, 67). By asking how the poets may have viewed their world and by looking at the way in which their views can be thought of as "mediated configurations" of their medieval world, I intend to arrive at a better understanding of the historical contexts in which poetry dedicated to Pabuji was composed.

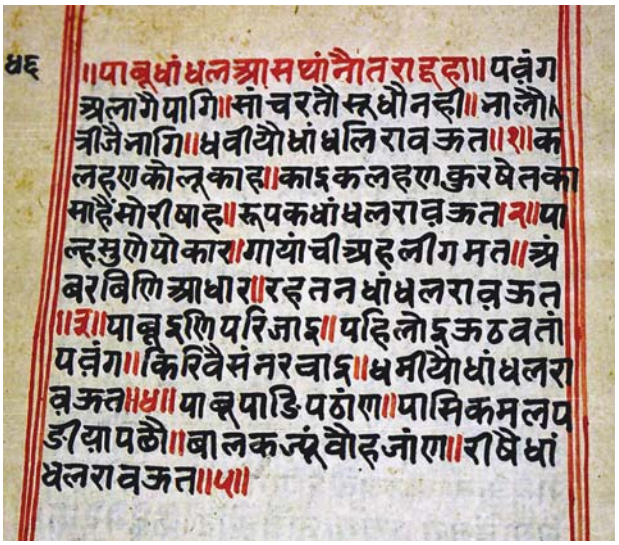
Outline

In the next chapter (2), the written and oral sources selected for this study will be introduced with a discussion of their language, academic transliteration, dating and authorship. My interpretation of the poems' narrative content will be summarized in chapter 3, where I introduce the story-lines and images contained by the selected poems. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the distinctive prosodic features of medieval poetry dedicated to Pabuji, followed by a description of some aspects of the poems' symbolic content in chapter 5.[14] From this I go on to describe "Pabuji's world" in chapter 6, offering a sketch of the history of Marwar from the fourteenth century till the beginning of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, the focus lies on the historical role accorded to Rajput warriors like Pabuji in the context of regional

[14] Earlier versions of parts of chapter 4 and 5 have appeared as articles. See Kamphorst 2003, 2004 and 2006.

kingdom-formation. Chapter 7 offers an outline of what is known of the history of Pabuji's fellow protagonists, his Bhil companions and Bhopas (priestly performers). Literary and historical Charan identities will be discussed in chapter 8 in which I also deal with the relationship between Pabuji's cult and the worship of Charani Sagatis, the past and present living goddesses of Charan traditions. Other religious and devotional narrative themes are studied in chapter 9, including classical, medieval and contemporary strands of religious ideals that converge in heroic-epic genres, prose tales and devotional rites, which are part of the tradition of worship at Pabuji's Kolu temple today. Chapter 9 also offers a brief survey of epigraphic data read from hero stones and commemorative pillars preserved at Pabuji's Kolu temple. By way of conclusion (chapter 10), I deal with the manner in which the study of Pabuji's deification relates history, poetry and religion to each other.

The full academic transliteration of all the medieval manuscript poems and the contemporary oral compositions that are part of this inquiry has been provided in the appendix to this study titled: *Academic Transliterations*.



Pābūjī dhāṃdhala āsthāṃnauta rā dūhā (Ms. 14458).