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

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9 Kolu

Divinity takes on many forms in the hearts and minds of believers. In poetry dedicated to Pabuji, manifestations of the divine provide evidence for diverse forms of worship, in particular devotional imagery related to Shaktik, Shaiva, Vaishnava, Bhil Bhopa, Nath and Jumjhari worship in Marwar. The main focus of this last chapter will be the relation between the poetic references in the selected poems to various beliefs and worship practices, in particular Jumjhari, Bhil Bhopa and Nath beliefs, and classical imagery, evoking Vishnu, Shiva and the heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat*. The religious strands that converge in the medieval poetry dedicated to Pabuji can also be understood from the epigraphical records, shrines, hero stones and present-day devotional practices at Pabuji's temple in Kolu, and at Jhararo's open-air altar in the Thar Desert surrounding Kolu. As I hope to show in this chapter, a study of the contemporary context of the Pabuji tradition, as reflected by epigraphic, iconographic, oral and anthropological data collected during my fieldwork in Kolu, helps in imagining the possible contexts and functions of the medieval poetry studied by me. This aim is also furthered by a summary of the poetry and prose tales about Pabuji as told in Kolu today. But first, I will call to mind once more the literary and religious images that the medieval poets used to evoke different kinds of gods, including folk-gods, deified forefathers, Vishnu, Shiva and Ganesh. Then, I will examine a few of the many forms divinity is believed to have taken on in Marwar and will follow this up with a brief survey of the beliefs, worship practices and narratives that are part of the contemporary Pabuji cult in Kolu.

Divinity personified

Side-by-side with different aspects of the goddess, the poets of both *chamds* evoked images of different forms of Vishnu and Shiva (cf. my summary of the narrative content of the selected poems in chapter 3). Vishnu's *avatār* Ram is mentioned in the opening-lines of *chamd* I, when the poet pays homage to the *Rāmāyaṇ*'s hero-god. And in both *chamd* I and II, one also reads about Vishnu's dwarf-incarnation Tikama, with whom Pabuji is equated to highlight the Rathaur hero's bodily strength. Also, both *chamds* include similes comparing Pabuji to the ascetic Shiva, bringing to mind the ascetic and sacrificial nature of Pabuji's heroism.

In *duha* I is found the widest range of religiously inspired images, i.e. imagery describing religious practices, like Jhararo's initiation into Gorakhnath's band of yogi's, or imagery referring to religious ideals, gods and goddesses in a historical and/or literary and metaphorical way. Apart from references to Shakti and Charani Deval,

Ladhraj also calls to mind images to evoke Vishnu, the Nath guru Gorakhnath and the worship of popular hero-gods and/or deified ancestors. In the last episode of *duha* I, for example, Ladhraj refers to Vishnu's heaven as the place where Pabuji goes to after dying in battle. In this episode, the poet also describes Nath beliefs and cultic practices, when dealing with the adventures of Pabuji's nephew Jhararo and his initiation in Gorakhnath's sect. Images related to the worship of deified forefathers are part of tales about Pabuji's belligerent torso that can only be halted after a blue cloth has been thrown over it, bringing to mind, as was argued in chapter 5, similar tales associated with contemporary Jumjhar worship in Marwar. And Ladhraj's reverence for regional folk-gods is evident from Pabuji's elevation to divine or semi-divine status and from Ladhraj's description of himself as Pabuji's servant who prays to the Rathaur hero for protection.

The various devotional strands that come together in the medieval *parvaro* include Bhil Bhopa worship of Pabuji as a hero-god and deified ancestor, the worship of different forms of Devi, and a reference to "all other gods". Among the latter, the poets perhaps count the triad Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma and, possibly, other Rajasthani folk-gods like Devnarayan and Teja, though they are nowhere mentioned by name. In the *parvaro*, some aspects of Pabuji's medieval Bhil Bhopa cult and its rituals are detailed, in particular the way in which Bhopas may have performed healing rituals in the past and the importance accorded to temple drums. This poem provides evidence for the medieval status of the Bhil as Pabuji's priests, healers and, perhaps, the medieval performers of a devotional and ritual epic which (like the extant epic tradition) centred upon the worship of Pabuji.

To conclude this summary, I will once more discuss the imagery contained in the shorter compositions dedicated to Pabuji even if not all included imagery is clearly identifiable as "religious". Especially *git* I, with its focus on the martial ideal of protection and on tales of camel robbery, seems a straightforwardly martial, and not religiously inspired, poem. It, moreover, appears to be one of the few studied compositions that is not related to goddess worship, for Pabuji's battle death is not mentioned. Nor does this *git* contain other similes which would allow an interpretation of Pabuji's heroism in terms of Shaktik ideals of sacrifice. *Git* I does seem to be reminiscent of classical epic culture as could be read from the poet's reference to Lamka (*lamkā*), the place where Pabuji is said to have robbed a herd of she-camels, and which could, of course, be interpreted as a reference to the demon-king Ravana's island Lamka in the *Rāmāyaṇ*. The use of "pachīm" in verse-line 4, however, implies that Lamka was pictured as a place in the west or an unspecified "western region". Because of allusions to Pabuji's theft of camels from Sindh in other medieval and contemporary versions of this story, it seems more probable that "Lamka" did not refer to Ravana's island but to an actual place in an unspecified region west of Kolu. Perhaps the medieval poets, like today's Bhopas, meant to refer to villages named Lamkesariyo or Lamkiyo which (depending on the version of the story) are thought to be located in Sindh, Kacch, southern Rajasthan or South India

(Smith 1991: 83).⁴⁷¹ But, since contemporary performers of Pabuji's epic do identify the Lamka of Pabuji's story with Ravana's Lamka, one could imagine that the poet of *git* I meant to connote both mythical and actual geography by comparing Sindh, the region where Pabuji's rivals held sway, with the *Rāmāyaṇ*'s Lamka, the kingdom of Ram's enemy, the demon-king Ravana.

Git III offers evidence for medieval Pabuji worship in Kolu. This composition also seems to document how some poets may have aimed to establish a link between the Rathaur hero-god, on the one hand, and Shiva and Devi, on the other, by comparing Pabuji's heroic qualities to Shiva's asceticism and Devi's magnificence. The poet of *git* III further compared Pabuji's religious influence or worldly power to the Nath's Gramth. And he matched Pabuji's strength up to Arjuna's bow by pairing the "Wielder of Spears" Pabuji with the "Bowholder" Arjun from the *Mahābhārat*. Another reference to this epic is found in *duha* II, the poet of which likens Rajput warriors to the heroes of the *Mahābhārat* and the local battle at Kolu with the battle of Kurukshetra. The poet of *git* IV, lastly, stated that Pabuji earned his fame by waging a war in order to protect the Charan's cows. Though neither Charani Deval nor Shakti have been evoked explicitly, Bamkidas's poem does connote the ideal of sacrificial heroism by portraying Pabuji as a warrior-hero who sacrifices his life in battle by giving up his marital happiness. Thus, I feel, one may imagine that Bamkidas, like other medieval poets, was perhaps also inspired by Shaktik ideals even if he did not refer to goddesses directly.

Pabuji's temple

The above-surveyed religious strands coming together in Pabuji's medieval tradition are also part of the present-day epigraphical records, shrines, hero stones and worship practices at the Kolu temple, the contemporary centre of Pabuji worship. The extant temple lies in the middle of a sizeable *orḥaṇa* (*auran*), a vast sandy plain cut in two by the metalled road which connects Jodhpur with Phalodi. Small flocks of goats, sheep, camel and oxen graze among the *orḥaṇa*'s weathered shrubs and trees and beyond where the sandy planes of the Thar Desert extend in all directions. Surrounding Kolu, scattered among small sand dunes, one finds tiny lakes, caves situated in red rock formations jutting out from the yellow sands, and numerous hero stones (*devaḷīs* and small cenotaphs (*chatarīs*). The *devaḷīs* and *chatarīs* serve to commemorate the deaths of warriors and other local heroes and heroines, like *satīs*, widows who immolated themselves on the pyre of their husbands or to honour the collective *jauhar* of Rajputnis which they performed upon hearing the news of their husbands' (impending) defeat and death in battle (cf. Tessitori 1916: 109).⁴⁷² The

⁴⁷¹ In their performance of the *byāva rau paravāṇrau* discussed below, the contemporary Bhopas of the Kolu temple refer to Lankitale as the place which was robbed of its camels by Pabuji.

⁴⁷² Reportedly, mothers who burnt themselves on the pyre of deceased sons can also be honoured with a *devaḷī*.

hero stones and cenotaphs are most often found near wells, either old wells which have fallen to disuse or newer wells from which people still draw water. The old, abandoned well opposite the Pabuji temple's main entrance is now said to be the source wherefrom Pabuji watered Deval's cattle and where the final battle between Pabuji and Jimda Khimci took place.

Village Kolu is made up of numerous hamlets of round clay-huts with matted roofs and/or square brick houses that lie scattered throughout the desert at considerable distances from each other. The huts and houses are surrounded by sandy fields where pumpkins and barley grow, if the rains permit or household finances allow for the purchase of water to irrigate the fields.⁴⁷³ Kolu has a sizable population of cattle-keepers and farmers who claim Dhamdhal Rathaur Rajput status and/or Bhil ancestry, a few households of Jat, Dholi and Nath communities, and a small number of villagers who refer to themselves as Purohit.⁴⁷⁴ The senior priest of the temple, the knowledgeable Rajput Tulsi Singh Dhamdhal Rathaur, counts persons of all social strata as visitors to the Kolu temple, except for the formerly untouchable community of Meghwal who used to be, and often still are, leatherworkers. Though the latter do now present their offerings at Pabuji's temple, they do not cross the temple altars' thresholds.⁴⁷⁵

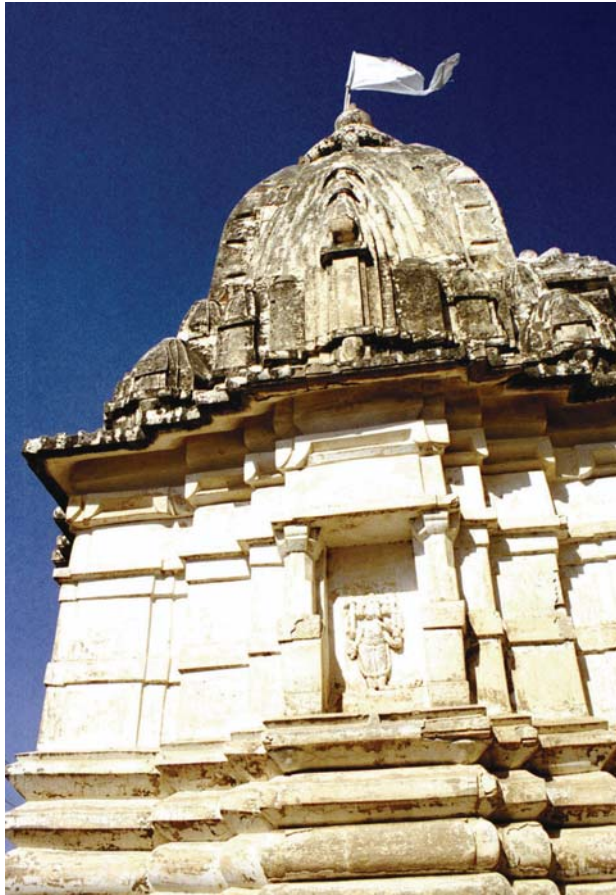
Among regular visitors to the temple are Rathaur, especially of Dhamdhal ancestry, and Jat, Nath and Purohit devotees. Mishran Charan who converted to Islam and Sindhi Muslims also visit Pabuji's shrines. During Navratri, people of all kinds of caste backgrounds from all over Rajasthan, and a few from neighbouring states and even from Kolkata, attend the celebrations at the temple. Devotees from all over Marwar visit Kolu throughout the year. Newly-wed men, for example, visit the temple to circumambulate Pabuji's altars with their brides, before taking them home to their parents' houses. The borders of the brides' dress are tied to the grooms' clothing and they thus lead their wives around the temples, hoping to ensure a long marriage. Women who wish to become pregnant or who desire male offspring come to tie small strips of cloth to the red temple's window bars, promising to return to the temple with offerings for Pabuji, after their wish has been

⁴⁷³ During my visits to Kolu, the villagers were struggling with the consequences of four years of drought, and were busy opening up old wells in the hope that the old wells could provide water as the new wells had dried up. Those people who could afford it would water their cattle and small fields with water bought from private entrepreneurs who brought it in tanks from Phalodi.

⁴⁷⁴ Jat communities are traditionally classified as agriculturalists in Rajasthan, but in the desert they (like all other inhabitants) have to combine agriculture, cattle keeping and trade to survive the harsh climate. Dholi are performers of folk songs usually accompanied by drums. Nath are followers of Gorakhnath or other Nath guru's. Rajpurohit are now defined as the erstwhile priests at Rajput courts; they now claim Brahmin status and are the genealogists of Bhil communities in Kolu.

⁴⁷⁵ It is the constitutional right of Meghwal to visit temples, but I gathered that old habits die as hard in Kolu as anywhere else. By way of compromise, formerly untouchable devotees can come up to the temple compound but cannot, like other devotees, enter Pabuji's shrines to genuflect and personally offer *prasād*. Instead, they are required to hand over their gifts to the priests who will offer them to Pabuji's hero stones on the main altar.

granted. Pabuji's Rebari devotees also visit Kolu, but no longer, like in the past, bring along their camel (dromedary) herds to take the round of the temple compound and thus ensure the lasting good health of their animals or seek the hero-god's help in curing camel diseases. Until two decades ago, the Rebari were rather welcome to bring their herds along, the temple priests indicated, but now fodder has become scarce and there are no longer enough trees and shrubbery for the camels to graze on.⁴⁷⁶



Vishnu's Varaha avatār at the Kolu temple.

⁴⁷⁶ My questions about this matter received indirect answers, which gave me the impression that, just like elsewhere in Rajasthan, there is a growing tension between the inhabitants of Kolu and the Rebari. With the development of irrigation and agriculture, grazing-lands have become scarcer in Rajasthan. But since irrigation and agriculture were not at all developed in Kolu, the apparent tension between more or less settled graziers and farmers, on the one hand, and pastoral-nomadic Rebari, on the other, should probably be attributed to the ongoing process of desertification and the resulting dearth of fodder in Kolu (cf. Gupta 1991: 325–40 and Robbins 1998: 86).

Within the Kolu temple compound, two shrines or small temples have been built next to each other, both with a rectangular sanctum topped by small pavilions with embellished ceilings and outer walls. As noted in chapter 5, the oldest, “red temple”, is thought to have been constructed in 1458 on initiation of a warrior-patron named Dhamdhal Khimamra. The second temple, the “white temple”, was built more recently, probably in the eighteenth century. Within the compound, hero stones for Pabuji and his Thori companions, the Nath ascetic Jhararo-Rupnath and a carving of a goddess’s trident are found. On the outer walls of the temple, depictions of classical gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati and Ganesh are found. The daily *pūjās* (worship services) for Pabuji are at present performed in the red temple, in front of an altar containing numerous old and new *devaḷīs* depicting Pabuji, most often as a warrior carrying a lance and/or sword and shield and seated on a horse. On some hero stones, Pabuji is accompanied by one or more Bhil retainers who carry bow and arrows.⁴⁷⁷ In front of this collection of hero stones, a flame is kept burning with daily offerings of incense. One *devaḷī* carries a rudimentary carving of a trident, evocative of Shakti and Charani Sagati Devi. As remarked in the previous chapter, there appear to be no other *devaḷīs* which could be related to Charani Deval.

On the outer walls of both temples, several stone images of classical deities are found. Carvings on the exterior of the red temple represent Vishnu’s Narasingh *avatār*, Varaha *avatār* and a third image that is no longer recognizable. On the outer wall of the white temple, much eroded stone depictions portray a man (or woman) wielding a sword, a man with a smaller figure on his right knee (probably representing Shiva and Parvati) and an image of Ganesh. Other images of classical gods are found on commemorative pillars (*kīrtistambhs*), including a four-sided pillar in the middle of the courtyard bearing the image of Ganesh, a weathered image of a man or woman with a trident and two unidentifiable carvings that are eroded beyond recognition. The *kīrtistambh*, left of the white temple, has four sides with images of gods that the Pujaris were no longer able to identify, except for a worn image of Ganesh, recognisable only by his trunk. These carvings are not used as objects of devotion. It is unclear whether they have ever been used for devotional purposes in the past. Today, Kolu’s priests and devotees do not seem to relate the temple-carvings depicting Vishnu or his classical *avatārs* to Pabuji’s role as an embodiment of Lakshman.⁴⁷⁸ The main objects of devotion are Pabuji’s hero stones

⁴⁷⁷ Several hero stones carry inscriptions which date them to the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most hero stones, however, are undated or so weather-beaten that it is difficult to read their inscription. The *devaḷīs* kept at the Kolu temple show remarkable differences in style and iconography, seemingly representing different historical representations of Pabuji. As I am not an archaeologist or art-historian, I can only guess at the historical context and/or social groups which the different styles may represent. My guess is that some of the bare, unadorned *devaḷīs* represent “early” perhaps “tribal” renditions while the more ornamented and highly crafted *devaḷīs* perhaps represent a regional Rajput style or school and later medieval iconography inspired by Mughal depictions of warriors and their horses.

⁴⁷⁸ *Avatār*-linkage can be very clearly read from the iconography of the Pabuji-Lakshman temple at Pushkar. This brand new temple, which I visited in 2000, was built by the *Rabārī Sammelan*, a modern Rebari caste association. In this temple, Pabuji is unambiguously worshipped as an incarnation of

positioned on two ledges of the red temple's altar. On the highest ledge stand three hero stones with Pabuji's image, of which only the inscription on the middle one is (partly) readable, dating it to Samvat 1770 (1713 CE). On the lower ledge, four more hero stones depicting Pabuji stand together with one hero stone dedicated to Pabuji's nephew Jhararo, with inscriptions that have become illegible.

Jhararo has been represented as a small figure with long hair, a severed head (identified as his uncle Jimda Khici's) in one hand and a water pot or begging-bowl in the other. In his ears, Jhararo wears the traditional Kanpathi Nath yogi earrings.⁴⁷⁹ Nath relations with Kolu may be dated to at least the eighteenth-century, judging from the inscription on a memorial pillar in the centre of the temple compound that documents that it was erected in 1709 by one Narottam Nathji, the son of Karni Dan, a Paliwal (a title which commonly refers to Brahmin Purohits from Pali).⁴⁸⁰ However, the present Pujaris of Kolu remember Narottam Nathji a Rajput priest who was converted and became a member of the Kanpathi Nath. Today, he is thought of as a Kanphati Nath yogi (Paliwal, *jāti* Dharmath) from Savarije, a village neighbouring Kolu.

Though I have not been able to talk with Jhararo's Nath devotees, it even so became clear that the Nath now worship Pabuji's nephew as the Nath Yogi Rupnath. This boy-yogi is worshipped in the Kolu temple and at his own open-air altar (*bhākharī*) on a hillock in the desert, some thirty kilometres away from the Pabuji temple. During Navratri celebrations, I was told, Nath yogis come all the way from Kashmir to visit Rupnath's desert shrine since they believe it to be the site where Rupnath attained *samādhī* (spiritual liberation) after "seven years" of meditation. His shrine is also believed to be the spot where Rupnath departed for heaven, seated on his horse. During my visit to the *bhākharī*, villagers passing-by were eager to show me where Rupnath's foot left an imprint in the rock and also pointed out the hoof marks left behind by his horse, indicating round blotches in the rocky surface. At the open-air altar, there are no images of Rupnath as a child-yogi, carrying his uncle's head, like in the Kolu Pabuji temple. The two hero stones worshipped at the open-air altar depict Rupnath in a fashion equal to Pabuji, i.e. as a horse-rider, holding a weapon, probably a dagger, in one hand.⁴⁸¹ A small cave in the rock underneath the altar was pointed out as Rupnath's ascetic-hearth (*dhūnī*). It now also

Lakshman. Not one traditional hero stone or statue of Pabuji is found in this temple compound; instead the altars house big brightly-coloured plaster statues of Lakshman, Ram, Sita and Hanuman.

⁴⁷⁹ These three symbols, by which Jhararo is usually recognized, are not found on another hero stone identified as Jhararo's and kept in the temple's side-wing. This stone represents him as a lone standing figure without any attributes.

⁴⁸⁰ A very weathered inscription which I render as follows: "1767 *vaisāk sudhī 6 śrī pabuji maharāja karnī dānda putra palīwāla jāti dhamatha gāom savarije narottama nathaji maharaja di raja śrī śardāra simghajī re vāra mem*".

⁴⁸¹ When I was at Rupnath's *bhākharī*, a young Pujari from the Kolu temple came along and officiated at the altar, offering *prasād* to Jhararo on a makeshift fire and ringing the copper bells, which hang from surrounding shrubbery.

serves as a place of worship for Nath yogis and for members of all castes in the neighbouring villages.



Rupnath's *bhākhari*.

Thori shrines

Opposite the entrances of both the red and white Pabuji temples, rectangular stone slabs carrying the images of Pabuji's seven Bhil or Thori companions have been positioned. The carvings have been elevated on small pedestals roofed by *chatarīs*. One pedestal stands opposite the entrance of the white temple, the other opposite the red temple's entrance, their *chatarīs* contain respectively two and one stone slab with the images of seven bearded men with bow and arrows. Rajput and Bhil devotees at Kolu identified these men as Ishal, Vishal, Kaku, Baku, Harmal, Camda and Dema, the seven Thori archers who fought alongside Pabuji.⁴⁸² The stone slabs serve as shrines where especially Bhil devotees worship the Thori.⁴⁸³ It is here, next to the Bhil shrines, that Pabuji's contemporary Bhil Bhopas (priestly performers) sit and stage the *paravāṛaus* that are part of Pabuji's *mātā* (drum) epic.⁴⁸⁴ The Bhil Bhopas of Kolu hold that it was Pabuji who appointed their forefathers, the Bhil archers, to perform the *mātā* epic. Several stories are told to explain how this came

⁴⁸² At times, Harmal is also identified as a Rebari warrior.

⁴⁸³ After paying their respects at Pabuji's altars, most devotees also visit the Thori shrines and stand in front of them with folded hands. Some devotees genuflect in front of the Thori shrines. During nightly performances, a small oil-lamp was lit in front of the shrines, similar to lamps lit in front of Pabuji's altars on such occasions.

⁴⁸⁴ I use *paravāṛau* to refer to the contemporary *mātā* tradition and to differentiate between this tradition's *paravāṛaus* and the earlier-discussed medieval *parvaro*.

about. One tale commemorates how Pabuji ascended to heaven during a competition with Sumra Bangra (a Muslim *pīr* and small-time ruler from Sindh) and refused to come back down to earth again until the Bhil played their drums. Another story traces the beginning of the *mātā* tradition to the time when Pabuji, upon receiving the mare Kalvi from Deval, ascended straight to heaven on his steed. In heaven, the horse was tied to Indra's throne and Pabuji could therefore not return to earth. Acting upon Deval's advice, Pabuji's seven Bhil archers then covered earthen pots with the Charani Sagati's shawl (*oraṇī*), converting them into drums (*mātā*) that they played while burning incense, and thus brought Pabuji and Kalvi down.

Only a few members of Kolu's Bhil community, said to consist of 80 to 90 houses or extended families, now perform the *mātā* epic. They are referred to as Bhopa (priestly-performers and devotees), Ganewalle Thore (singing Thori), *mātā* Bajane-walle (*mātā* players), and Bhagats (Bhaktas) or devotees of Pabuji and the Bhil archers. The *mātā* players identify themselves first as Bhil and secondly as Thori and Bhopas.⁴⁸⁵ It seems that the medieval designation Thori ("thief") is not translated in a derogative manner in Kolu, but is understood as the historical name for Pabuji's heroic Bhil comrades, especially the Thori Camda, Pabuji's faithful commander, whose deeds are remembered in terms of Rajput-like valour.⁴⁸⁶ The Rajput patrons of the Bhil Bhopas further define them as members of the *gāyāk jātī* (professional singers and performers) and as Pabuji's Sevaks or Pujaris (devotees and priests).

No oral tradition seems to exist which still contains legendary or other recollections of early Bhil history, at least none that could be shared with me. When asked about the initial stages of their history in Marwar, the Bhil of Kolu answer that their early history is "too long ago to remember". Some references to Bhopas are found in eighteenth-century temple inscriptions. In the white temple, for example, an inscription on a yellow *devalī* dates it to Samvat 1770 (1713 CE) when it was donated by one Bihari Das during the reign of Ajit Singh. In an unclear reference the name of one "Bhopā B(h)āgachamda" is also mentioned. It has remained unclear, however, whether this Bhopa was Bhil or, like today's priests, Rajput or other devotees who referred to themselves as Bhopa.

During my fieldwork, I became acquainted with two families of Bhil *mātā* players in Kolu: the brothers Asha Ram and Bonne Ram, and the brothers Khumbha Ram, Rupa Ram and Jetha Ram, all aged between 45 and 50 years, married and

⁴⁸⁵ Bhopa is a title, which can also be used for Pabuji's devotees of any social group, including Rajput priests and lay devotees from different caste backgrounds who call themselves Bhopa.

⁴⁸⁶ Thori was traditionally a term used for hunters. With the establishment of Rajput rule in the area, the title probably gained a derogatory meaning, namely 'thief'. The Bhopas of Kolu, however, appear to use the title as a honorific, along with titles like "Samat" (warrior) and "Samvala" (dark, black). The latter name is also used for the blue god Krishna, hero of the *Rāmāyaṇ* epic (cf. *Visvambhara* 1997: 25-29). The *par* Bhopas interviewed by Smith in 1991, on the other hand, seemed to prefer the title "Nayak" while this name is not used by the Bhil Bhopas of Kolu who think of Nayak as a title which the Banjaras started to use for themselves after they settled down to agriculture.

fathers. Asha Ram and Jetha Ram were considered the most able performers as they know more episodes than the others do. The two families Ram both listed four generations of male family-members who played the *mātās* at Pabuji's Kolu temple and who (like the present-day *mātā* players) learned their art from their fathers. Only male Bhil play the *mātā*, women are not allowed to touch the drum or sit next to it during performance. The extant *mātā* epic as performed in Kolu, does not seem to know any written text. All previous generations, like the present performers, were non-literate.⁴⁸⁷ Today the sons of the *mātā* players do learn how to read and write at school. Although Asha Ram still instructs his sons in the performance of the epic since Pabuji is their family's *iṣṭadev* (chosen deity), he would nevertheless prefer his offspring to find a job "in the city" and get on in life.

The *mātā* players keep Pabuji's tale and stories about their Thori ancestors alive through the oral transmission of *paravāraus* and explanatory stories that are not part of the *mātā* epic but are told to expound upon the meaning now attributed to Pabuji's tale.⁴⁸⁸ The Kolu Bhopas define "*paravārau*" ("great deed") as a narrative about Pabuji's heroic deeds on earth, when he was alive. Every Bhopa knows a different amount of (and different versions of) *paravāraus*.⁴⁸⁹ In theory, the *mātā* epic knows 24 *paravāraus*, but it is not clear how many episodes Pabuji's *mātā* epic in actual fact contains since the number of episodes listed by the Kolu *mātā* players most often referred to symbolic figures and not to the total of episodes that they could really perform. The *mātā* epic is "fully cultic", i.e. it is only performed in ritual settings.

The Ram brothers perform their *paravāraus* in pairs while seated next to the Thori-shrine opposite the main (red) temple. Each performer accompanies the sung poetry-text of the *paravāraus* by playing two *mātās*, drums made of earthen pots covered with goatskin. The *mātās* are bought from a potter's family in Kolu specialized in making them and then covered with hides acquired from goats that have been sacrificed to the Goddess. To underline the special qualities of their instruments, the *mātā* players stressed the fact that they do not use just any hide, like those that can be bought from the market. The drums are unique instruments, the Ram brothers explained, and indispensable for the performance of Pabuji's epic since Pabuji's epic can not be performed properly or brought to a propitious end without the *mātās*. Till today, the Bhopas' drums are said to "bring Pabuji down

⁴⁸⁷ The Ram brothers of both families hold that the *paravāraus* performed by them were composed by one Charan Napaji, a horse trader who composed a prayer to Pabuji during a period of famine. Pabuji came to his rescue and granted him (cattle) wealth. Whether Napaji composed the text in writing or orally seems to be no longer known.

⁴⁸⁸ The recordings of the *mātā* epic under review were made during the celebration of Navratri at Pabuji's temple in Kolu in the "great months" of Bhadavau (August-September) and Asoj (September-October). Subsequently, I regularly visited the Kolu temple to record *mātā* performances at the time of daily worship or as a patron of *mātā* concerts when the drums were played exclusively for the benefit of my research.

⁴⁸⁹ *Paravārau* is also defined as an episode, the characteristic "building block" of epic narrative cycles.

from heaven”, a reference to the legendary origin of the *mātā* tradition, which (as noted just now) is believed to have been born when the Thori brought Pabuji down from heaven by beating their *mātās*.

The drums are most commonly played in the course of daily *pūjās*, usually at daybreak and at sunset when the Rajput priests perform *āratī* (worship ceremony) at the main altar. Such performances include the occasional singing of (parts of) a *paravārau*.⁴⁹⁰ A comprehensive performance of more than a few *paravāraus* is usually staged during devotional ceremonies like the celebration of Navratri in Kolu when *jagran* (all-night performances) are staged.⁴⁹¹ The *jagran* recorded by me began at sunset and lasted until well after midnight. Before the performance began, oil-lamps were lit in front of Pabuji’s temples and the Thori shrines. The audience was primarily made up of men, village elders and the Rajput priests of the temple.⁴⁹² In addition, all night, male villagers, the herders of cattle and other passers-by kept dropping in to visit the shrines and listen to the *mātā* performance for a while.⁴⁹³

Contemporary paravāraus

To understand some aspects of contemporary worship practices at the Kolu temple, in particular the worship of Thori warriors by Bhil Bhopas, I will now briefly discuss the content of the four *mātā paravāraus* that I recorded (1999-2001) titled: *Jalama rau paravārau*, *Byāva rau paravārau*, *Vāhara rau paravārau* (also referred to as *Ḍhaimbā rai sūrāpaṃṇa rau*) and *Jhararājī rau paravārau*.⁴⁹⁴ I have not yet been able to undertake a comprehensive analysis of all the *paravāraus*’ content, form and performance context. What follows, therefore, is no more than a first attempt at describing the episodes’ content. The performance recorded by me began with the *Jalama rau paravārau*, dealing with Pabuji’s birth story. The first five verse-lines of this episode are an elaborate description of the celebrations surrounding Pabuji’s birth, during which auspicious songs resounded in Kolu, a

⁴⁹⁰ The Rajput temple priests do not take part in the *mātā* performance, but at sundown junior Rajput priests blow conch-shells, ring temple-bells and forcefully strike a large temple drum in unison with the Bhopas’ thunderous pounding of their *mātās*. Afterwards, the priests distribute *prasād* among the *mātā* players, villagers and temple staff present.

⁴⁹¹ The *mātā epic* is also performed at the request of Pabuji devotees in their homes in Kolu and surrounding villages, usually during Navratri. This aspect of the performance has not been part of my fieldwork.

⁴⁹² Women visit the temple during the day and are escorted by their husbands or other family members. The nightly performances witnessed by me were not attended by village women. At first, I sat on a carpet, far from the *mātā* players. The all-male audience politely ignored me. Later on, I was asked to take a seat nearer to the *mātā* players. My fellow audience continued to kindly ignore me.

⁴⁹³ Every so often, the nightly performance was interrupted when its audience and performers shared *prasād* and smoked *bīḍīs* or a *huqqā*. Around ten o’clock a long dinner break was held. After the performance had ended all the oil-lamps were extinguished, the doors to the main altars closed and the temple gate locked.

⁴⁹⁴ My understanding of the recorded *paravāraus* is for the most part based on their transcription and Hindi rendition by Subh Karan Deval. Their transliteration can be found in the appendix.

golden plate (*thāḷa*) was beaten, and women danced to its beat, while their ankle bells filled the air with a sound “sweet as nectar”. Then, pearls are offered to the infant prince to celebrate that “Pabuji has taken birth as a son in the house of Dhamdhal” (v. 1-5). The boy is bathed in a golden utensil and wrapped in yellow-coloured silk while his father Dhamdhal has brown and white sugar distributed throughout Kher,⁴⁹⁵ to the king, his feudal lords and all other inhabitants of the realm (v. 6-10). The Bhopas describe in some detail how the news about the “auspicious occasion of the birth of a son” is received (v. 11 to 15). The Raja rewards the bearer of the good news with dried fruits, golden earrings and, upon the messenger’s request, also gives him golden bangles. To Dhamdhal, the Raja sends a Brahmin messenger (Ravat) to convey “hundreds and hundreds” of good wishes.⁴⁹⁶ The assembly of the feudal lords also thank Dhamdhal’s messenger a “thousands times” for the happy news he brought and offer him dried fruits, a colourful turban and a gold-plated coconut.

In the next verse-lines (16 to 21), it is described how the messenger (now referred to as the astrologer Joshiji) returns home, visits Dhamdhal’s house and reads Pabuji’s horoscope. The *mātā* players start out by describing how Joshi takes a hasty bath, washes his clothes, ties his turban and worships the god Asutosh. “Looking very handsome”, Joshi then goes on his way taking along his horoscope book. When the royal priest (Rajapamdit) arrives at the house of Dhamdhal’s father Asthan, he finds him seated on a carpet surrounded by all his family members.⁴⁹⁷ Then Pabuji’s birth horoscope is read (v. 21 to 24). The Joshi proclaims that Pabuji has been born at a very auspicious time and enumerates the propitious omens surrounding Pabuji’s birth; the child was fed milk by a lioness and he was surrounded by fragrant Kesar trees, like a god. Upon being asked about the boy’s future, the astrologer tells the family that Pabuji is an incarnation of Lakshman and he predicts that Pabuji will ride a horse named Kalvi Ghorī and will be accompanied by Bhil heroes named Dhembo and Sonal.⁴⁹⁸ Joshi also foresees that Pabuji will attain martyrdom in the course of protecting cows. In the last verse-line (25), the *mātā* players dwell on Pabuji’s name-giving ceremony during which Joshi prophesies that the newborn will become famous under names like Pabu Bhalalau (Spearwielder Pabuji), Lakshman Avatar (Lakshman-incarnate), Kamlaputra Gaurakshak (Kamla’s son, the cow protector).

⁴⁹⁵ Kher, the name of early-medieval Rathaur territory.

⁴⁹⁶ During their performance, the *mātā* players referred to the “Brahmin messenger” as a Ravat (a *jajamān* of Charan poets), an astrologer (Joshi) and royal priest (Raj-pamdit).

⁴⁹⁷ Asthan asks Joshi to join the family and sit with them on the carpet, but the astrologer effusively declines, saying that for him a *bhājota* (a round, wooden slab covered with yellow-coloured cloth) would suffice. This verse-line may be read as the astrologer’s oblique refusal to share a carpet with Rajput warriors.

⁴⁹⁸ Sonal does not play any role in any of the *mātā paravāraus* recorded by me, while Camda, who does figure prominently in the *byāva rau paravārau*, has not been mentioned in this episode at all.

The next episode, the *byāva rau paravārau*, tells the tale of Pabuji's wedding. In the opening-lines, the Bhopas explain that the Thori heroes Camda and Dhembo are Pabuji's spiritual brothers because Dhembo embodies Bharat, and Camda embodies Shatrughan, Lakhsman's two brothers.⁴⁹⁹ Camda and Dhembo are portrayed as Pabuji's faithful bodyguards who always move one step ahead of their lord to assure that no harm will befall him (v. 2). In verse-lines 3 to 9, the preparations for Pabuji's wedding are elaborated upon. The *mātā* players recount how Camda distributes rice yellowed with *haldī* (tumeric) to invite people to Pabuji's marriage party. All gods, town-dwellers, brothers and relatives of the Rathaur dynasty (and their sisters and daughters) are invited. In the meantime, Pabuji is dressed as a groom and seated on a platform (*śrīngāra chowkī*). Dhembo helps Pabuji dress. The hero looks like a "full moon among stars".⁵⁰⁰ On Pabuji's request, Camda surveys the arrival of the guests. Durga arrives riding her lion and Sarasvati travelled to Kolu by goose. The great hermits Mehaji Mangaliya and Harbhu Shamkla have also come, as have the chieftains of all Rathaur clans. Only Pabuji's brother-in-law, Jayal's lord Jimda, is not present. But Jimda did dispatch a spy, a man in the disguise of a yogi, to satisfy his curiosity about Pabuji's marriage party. Camda recognises the "odd yogi" as a spy and brings him in front of Pabuji, proposing to pierce Jimda's scout with a spear and thus "send him to heaven". But the "great kind-hearted Pabuji" shows mercy and treats Jimda's emissary with "guest-like respect", offering him a horse to ride on and a golden ring, thus winning the spy's heart. Then, flags are hoisted, music instruments resound, women sing auspicious songs and Pabuji's marriage party sets out for the bride's house.

The following verse-lines of the *byāva rau paravārau* (v. 10-27) do not, as one may expect, deal with Pabuji's wedding but with a dialogue that unwinds between Pabuji and Charani Deval, who halts the hero's marriage party on the way to Umarkot. When Camda asks her what marriage-gift (*nega*) she has come to claim, wearing a black-coloured dress and thus representing a bad omen for the marriage party's progress, Deval ("who is Parvati incarnate") says that she has not come to claim a gift but to ask who will protect the fort in Pabuji's absence. When she hears that only Pabuji's elder brother Buro remains behind, Deval protests because Pabuji's marriage party will not be complete without his elder brother. The *mātā* players make it clear that the real reason behind Deval's objection is the fact that she has little faith in Buro since his and Jimda's cattle herds are grazed together, i.e. Buro is in league with Jimda. Deval therefore asks Pabuji to leave Dhembo behind to protect the fort. But Pabuji refuses, saying that without Dhembo, there will be no

⁴⁹⁹ This renders the Thori heroes Pabuji's mythical blood relations since Pabuji is seen as Lakshman incarnate. Likewise, the folk-god Baba Ramdev and Pabuji are at times also presented as brothers, when Ramdev is identified as an incarnation of Ram and Pabuji-Lakhsman as Ramdev's younger brother.

⁵⁰⁰ A phrase also used in *chamd* II (v. 47): "47. suhaṛām camḍīyau iṇa rūpa saḥje, mila pūnima camḍa nikṣatra majhai", where it applied to Camda.

one able to consume the huge quantity of opium with which the bride's party will welcome them.

Deval then insists that Pabuji leaves behind the warrior Camda, or Salkha, or the Rebari Harmal. Pabuji again protests and says that he cannot possibly leave those three warriors behind either. Camda is needed to distribute the presents among the bridal party and Salkha has to interpret the omens they will meet on the way. And Harmal cannot be dispensed with since he will guide the marriage party to Umarkot. When Deval inquires how Harmal, who is still a boy, can guide the party, Pabuji answers that it was Harmal who showed him the way when he went to Lankitale to rob camels and that Harmal has been his "path-leader" ever since. Finally, Deval asks Pabuji to return the mare Kalvi to her, so that the horse can protect the fort. Pabuji turns her down once more. He cannot give her the mare, says he, since he has pledged to protect the cattle of his protégés with his life and he needs the mare to do so. Then who will protect her, Deval asks, after Pabuji has taken along everybody to Umarkot? Pabuji assures her that he will protect her himself. Deval just has to climb on top of Kolugarh's Gunjave well and call out for help and he will immediately come to her rescue. When Deval doubts whether her voice will bridge the distance between Gumjave and Umarkot, Pabuji tells her to take on the form of a bird and fly to Umarkot to ask for his help herself. Thus, after Jimda robs Deval's cows, she takes on the form of a bird and flies to Umarkot where she perches on the fort and calls out for help. The *mātā* players concluded this part of their performance by describing how Pabuji, on hearing the bird cry, leaves his bride without completing the prescribed rounds around the ceremonial fire and sets out to protect Deval's cows (v. 27).

The third *paravārau* recorded by me, *vāhara rau paravārau* (also referred to as *ḍhaiṃbā rai sūrāpaṃṇa rau*) tells the story of Thori Dhembo and his battle with Jimda. To begin with, it becomes apparent that Dhembo, who (it appears in this *paravārau*) did get left behind to guard the fort despite Pabuji's protestations in the previous *paravārau*, grinds and consumes large quantities of opium (v. 1 to 8). Upon becoming fully intoxicated, Dhembo decides to leave for the battlefield. First, however, he pays a visit to Pabuji's stepmother Kamladevi and asks her for her blessings. Kamladevi, gauging Dhembo's intoxicated and belligerent mood (he is "overflowing with *vīraras*") begs him to spare Jimda and thus save her daughter Pemal the sad fate of widowhood. "Vir Dhembo" rides his horse and joins Pabuji's army, "roaring like a bull". Pabuji scolds Dhembo for joining him in battle instead of staying behind and guarding the fort like he had been instructed to do. Dhembo answers that he is more worried about Pabuji's wellbeing than about the safety of a stone fort. Dhembo asserts that Pabuji needs his help to win the battle since it was only with Dhembo's help that Pabuji could protect Hindu religion by punishing the Yavans of Kacch and Multan who had killed cows and peacocks.

Verse-lines 9 to 18 relate how Dhembo (and not Pabuji) rescues Deval's cows and single-handedly challenges and eventually conquers "cow-robber Jimda".

Dhembo challenges Jimda saying: “O Jimda! You have brought these cows this far, but now this hero will not let you take them any further”. On hearing Dhembo’s challenge, Jimda halts the herd and sits down to take rest, he then says to Dhembo: “O Hero Dhembo! You people brought back your own lord, the incarnation of Lakshman, unmarried. This is a great injustice!”. Dhembo answers: “O Jimda! Your dynasty knows bachelors. We, however, accomplished our lord’s marriage in great happiness”. Jimda then warns Dhembo to turn back for Jimda’s army is too big for Dhembo to tackle it alone. Dhembo is not impressed and warns Jimda that he is only alive because Dhembo’s promised Kamladevi not to render Pemal a widow. But the promise does not forbid Dhembo to kill all Jimda’s soldiers. The Thori warrior chivalrously gives Jimda a chance to attack first but Jimda’s “bullets and arrows” cannot touch Dhembo for he has gained special powers through meditation. Then it is Dhembo’s turn to attack and he kills Jimda’s younger brother Maimdarava,⁵⁰¹ and wipes out the Khici army. Only Jimda is left standing. Dhembo returns Deval’s cows to Kolu, saying: “O Cow-mothers! You should be like arrows and move fast. Do hurry up. I will take you to Kolu *maḍh* and offer you water from the Gunjave well”.

In the last three verse-lines (19-21) of the *vāhara rau paravāṛrau*, Dhembo no longer has any part to play. The Bhopas instead evoke Pabuji’s battle with Jimda’s uncle Bhut Bhati from Thanot (near Jaisalmer). Bhut Bhati has marched upon Kolu with “900 hero soldiers” in answer to Jimda’s call for help. The Dhamdhal and Bhati armies clash at the Gunjave well. In the meantime, Deval (“who is the cause of the origin and obliteration of this universe”) takes the form of a musk shrew (*chūchūmdara*).⁵⁰² With her sharp teeth, she cuts the bowstrings of the soldiers in both armies, a subterfuge Deval employs because she wants all soldiers to take up their swords and lacerate each other. And thus it happens: all soldiers die. The only survivors are Pabuji, Jimda and Deval. Pabuji then asks Deval (who is again acknowledged as Shakti incarnate by the *mātā* players) for four boons: [1] he does not want to remain a boy, nor does he want to become an old man; [2] he wishes for divinity that will last as long as the earth and sky continue to exist; [3] he wants to become invisible and thus be able to “see the world” without “earth-dwellers” being able to see him; and [4] he asks for the ability to come to the immediate rescue of his devotees when they find themselves in need of him. With these boons, Pabuji hopes to become a man who can “influence Maya”, i.e. a man who can see through the illusory character of the world as perceived by the senses.

The last episode discussed here is the *jhararājī rau paravāṛrau* about Pabuji’s nephew, the child-yogi (*bālayogī*) Jhararo. In this episode, the *mātā* players portray the boy’s initiation into Gorakhnath’s Kanpathi Nath sect (v. 1-48). Upon meeting Gorakhnath and his caravan of disciples, Jhararo ignores the disciples warnings

⁵⁰¹ Also referred to as “Maimda” and “Mayamda”.

⁵⁰² Hindi *chūchūmdar* refers to the Grey Musk Shrew (*Suncus murinus*) but is at times also rendered as “Musk Rat” (personal communication A. van der Geer).

about the fact that meeting a caravan of Sadhu's is an ill-fated omen. Jhararo is not frightened and expresses his wish to join the Nath travellers and learn more about their Guru. The travellers tell him that Goraknath is a yogi with special powers. When Goraknath performs a fire ritual, fire emanates from his ascetic hearth and not clouds of smoke, like from other yogic hearths. And Goraknath does not wear a red coloured loincloth, like other yogis do, but a yellow one. After the caravan has come to a halt and Goraknath's tent has been put up, Jhararo shakes the tent strings and is brought in front of Goraknath. The boy then expresses his wish to become the Guru's disciple. Goraknath tries to make the boy realize that it is not simple to become a Nath's disciple. In order to wear the Nath earrings as a mark of initiation into the sect, one's earlobes have to be pierced with a dagger. And one also has to strip naked in order to perform the Nath's fire ritual. Jhararo is undeterred and assures Goraknath that he will not feel any pain. He requests the Guru to pierce his ears and to let him perform a fire ritual. Upon seeing the child's determination, Goraknath pats his head and makes him his disciple. When Jhararo's ears are pierced, not blood but milk flows from his lobes. Thus Jhararo proves that he is a remarkable disciple, worthy of his Guru's stature.

After his initiation, Jhararo (now named Rupnath) continues on his way to Jayal to meet his aunt and take revenge on her husband (and Rupnath's uncle) Jimda Khici. This part of the *paravārau* (v. 48-57) provides a (to my mind) illustrative example of the details with which the *mātā* players narrate Pabuji's epic. In verse-lines 48 to 51, the *mātā* players describe how Rupnath enters Jayal and camps in an orchard which, after having remaining dry for 12 years, suddenly becomes green. We learn that it is because of the boy's "pious foot-dust" that the orchard revives and bumblebees begin to circle its flowers. On hearing how the orchid has become green again, Rupnath's aunt ("Bua") thinks: "A person of the Rathaur dynasty must have entered the orchard, or else it could not have become green". Verse-lines 52 to 57 portray the meeting between Rupnath and his Bua. When the two come eye to eye, Rupnath turns his back on his aunt who then "lets a milk-stream from her breasts flow towards Rupnath". For, the *mātā* players explain, Rupnath's aunt knows that "if the boy belongs to her parent's family, her breast-milk will flow towards the boy and touch him. But if the boy proves to be unrelated, her milk-stream will come to a halt before touching him". The moment his Bua's milkstream touches Rupnath's back, he turns to face his aunt and looks at her. Then Bua understood that this boy was indeed a member of her father Buro's dynasty and that he had come to take revenge for the death of Buro and Pabuji at the hands of Jimda Khici.

In verse-lines 58 to 75, the *mātā* players continue with the story of Jhararo's revenge. We learn how his aunt leads Rupnath to where Jimda lays sleeping. The *bālayogī* seats himself on top of his sleeping uncle's breast. When Jimda wakes up, he at first ridicules the boy but soon discovers that Rupnath has miraculous powers. Jimda then begs for mercy and promises to arrange Rupnath's marriage with his elder brother's daughter if his life be spared. The boy pays no heed to Jimda's words

and beheads his uncle, spurred on by his aunt. When his aunt asks Rupnath for her husband's head (since she wants to become *satī* with it), Rupnath implores her to become *satī* with Jimda's headless body because he wants to take his uncle's head along to Kolu. The end of this episode, as told by the *mātā* players, differs rather a lot from the final events of the story about Jhararo as told in *duha* I. The child-yogi sets out for Kolu carrying his uncle's head and riding Buroji's mare Dhela. But before their destination is reached, Dhela gives birth to a foal at the site which is now known as Rupnath's *bhākhari*. In the last verse-lines (76-77), the *mātā* players remind their audience that Dhela's footprints (and those of her foal) still mark the rocks where Rupnath's open-air altar is found today.



Geo-myth: the footmark of Rupnath at his bhākhari.

Attributed meaning

When asked about the meaning one may attribute to their performance, the *mātā* players recounted several additional, explanatory stories to shed light on the significance of the above-described events. First of all, the Ram brothers, their patrons and audiences, expand upon the importance of Pabuji's battle with Jimda.⁵⁰³ The brothers do not, however, highlight the battle between the two protagonists but instead accentuate the fact that Pabuji gave his word to Deval and kept it.⁵⁰⁴ Most

⁵⁰³ Like most conversations that took place during fieldwork, the talks I had with the Ram families in Kolu were "group talks". The recording of interviews invariably aroused the interest of villagers who happened to pass by. The assembled audience would all contribute to the interviews, giving their opinion on matters they felt strongly about.

⁵⁰⁴ The importance of keeping one's promise is also accorded special significance in Tulsi Singh Rathaur's version of Pabuji's birth story (Kolu, June 2001). He relates how it is Pabuji's mother, the nymph, who vouches to return to Pabuji in the form of a horse in the herd of Charani Deval. In this tale the fact that Pabuji's mother gave her word is emphasized; the nymph incarnates as the mare Kalvi because she "gave her word from her own mouth". By becoming Kalvi, she was, moreover, instrumental in securing Pabuji's fame since Pabuji could not have embarked on his heroic enterprises without a steed. Yet another reading was suggested by some bystanders, who held that the nymph's incarnation as Pabuji's horse was in the first place motivated by a mother's wish to be with her son and, secondly, by her desire to see her son earn eternal fame in the world by protecting the poor and weak.

significant, the devotees said, is the fact that the Rathaur hero died to keep his promise. According to his devotees, it is this fact which sets Pabuji apart from all other divine beings, whether classical Gods or folk-gods.⁵⁰⁵ Till today, the people of Kolu feel, it is Pabuji they can trust upon in times of need. There is no other god who comes to the rescue of his followers as swiftly as Pabuji does as is illustrated with tales about the hero-god's present-day miracles, commemorating the help Pabuji extended to a brother, neighbour, uncle's wife or niece's husband. When, for example, the brother of farmer Bhannai Singh fell into a well and could not get out again, he only needed to recite Pabuji's name for Bhannai Singh to happen to pass near the well and hear his brother. The well was dug out and Bhannai Singh's brother, who had remained miraculously unscratched, was rescued.⁵⁰⁶

The Ram brothers stress the selfless character of Pabuji's deeds. Pabuji did not (they say) battle or rob for his own sake to enrich himself or to acquire status, but, on the contrary, fought solely for the benefit of others. He died to protect Deval's cattle, not his own. Evidence for his selflessness is also found in the idea that Pabuji did not fight wars to conquer territory. The *mātā* players relate how Pabuji after defeating Rajput enemies re-installed them on the throne and gave them back their land. Likewise, when the hero-god stole camels from Lankitale, he did so out of altruism, i.e. to present the camels as part of the dowry he gave to his niece.⁵⁰⁷ The hero-god's selfless sacrifice is also key to the Ram brothers' understanding of the *vāhara rau paravāṛau*, notwithstanding the fact that this episode deals mainly with the bravery of Dhembo and not with Pabuji's heroic deeds. The Ram brothers nonetheless feel that it was Pabuji who protected his half-sister from widowhood by refusing to kill her husband Jimda. Thus the Rathaur warrior gained everlasting fame and became a hero-god, say the Ram brothers, because he died to fulfil his promise. The fact that Pabuji's demise is not actually mentioned in any of the performed *paravāṛaus* does nothing to diminish the significance the *mātā* players attribute to it.

⁵⁰⁵ See Smith (1980: 70) who points out that the importance attributed to giving one's word or making a vow is a common feature of South-Asian epic. In the *Mahābhārat*, for example, the making and keeping of promises can confer power to the person who undertakes such a task, as is the case with Bhishma's vow to remain celibate.

⁵⁰⁶ Similar stories are connected to individual hero stones at house altars in Kolu village. The middle-aged Rajput farmer Bonne Singh relates how his grandfather found a Pabuji Devali and brought it home to worship it. When a thief came to steal his grandfather's solid-golden ring, Pabuji retrieved it and punished the wrongdoer. Likewise, Pabuji is believed to offer a helping hand when someone is about to arrive late for an important meeting, by speeding up his scooter or car. And the hero-god is also known to appear when someone's store of opium threatens to be finished, granting his devotees a fresh supply. These and similar stories are told with much good-humour, so much so that I at times wondered whether some stories were perhaps told to test my credulity.

⁵⁰⁷ According to Pabuji's devotees, the medieval ideal of selfless sacrifice still informs present realities though it is also clear that, in these days of Kaliyuga, it is no longer an ideal that many people aspire to fulfil. The Ram brothers and their audience commonly agreed that it is rare today for any one, including Rajput men, to act selflessly or to keep a promise. But if any one were to undertake a "big promise" today, and manages to keep it, he or she will certainly become divine like Pabuji.

The heroic roles attributed to Pabuji's Thori warriors in the different *paravāṛaus* do, in addition, function as a way to highlight the martial, Rajput-like characteristics of the Thori whom the present-day *mātā* players think of as their forefathers. The warrior status ascribed to the Thori warriors (and consequently to the *mātā* players) serves to assert contemporary Rajput status, a claim that is underscored by tales that illustrate that Pabuji saw his Rajput, Bhil and Rebari companions as equals.⁵⁰⁸ One such tale details the selfless sacrifice of seven Thori grooms and their marriage parties who on their way to their brides' houses happened to pass by the battlefield where Pabuji battled with Jimda. Pabuji, according to the custom which prescribes that one should feed one's guests, fed all the Thori and their parties and then sent them on their way. But the Thori grooms and their guests insisted on joining Pabuji in battle, saying that they could also fight in their marriage attire, just like Pabuji. I was told that it is because of this legend that Bhil devotees are ceremonially fed near the Thori shrines in the Kolu temple till date.

Another story told to confer high status to the Thori warriors and their devotees recounts how, after Pabuji's defeat, the blood-streams of warriors from different social backgrounds began to mingle on the battlefield. When Charani Deval tried to prevent the intermingling of blood by building small earthen dams between the different streams, Pabuji's voice was heard from heaven. He summoned Deval to stop damming up the blood, since all who had fought with him had thus demonstrated their martial valour, and were Rajput warriors. Hence their blood should be allowed to mingle. This tale was explained to me in almost similar versions by people of different castes, including Pabuji's Rajput and Bhil devotees. From the interpretations of these stories by different narrators, I gained the impression that Bhil devotees told the tale to underscore Pabuji's egalitarian outlook on caste, while some of the Rajput who told the tale evoked Pabuji's gallantry to underline another aspect of the tale, i.e. the "glorious Rajput past" but not the egalitarian implications of the story.

The Rajput priests and *mātā* players in Kolu, upon being asked, also elaborated upon whether narrative details of the medieval and present day poetry and prose stories should be considered "true". Especially Tulsi Singh Rathaur's viewpoint clearly illustrated the distinction made between what people hold to be factually true and potentially true. The first category of truth includes anything written in stone, like temple pillars' inscriptions or other edicts in stone, since it is held that their data cannot be changed easily and they therefore preserve what was true in the past and is regarded nowadays as fact. Tulsi Singh Rathaur also put great stress on the accuracy of the written word, especially prose chronicles, but did not

⁵⁰⁸ Some Kolu Bhil families claim Bhati Rajput origin and trace their family to the Bhati of Pokaran and Jaisalmer but these claims are generally refuted by the priests of the Kolu temple. Though they do grant that the Bhil are *like* Rajput (since they fought bravely at Pabuji's side), and that the medieval Thori were of Vaghela Rajput extraction, they at the same time doubt that today's Bhil could be in any way related to Rajput lineages.

class the manuscript tradition of written Dimgal poetry among this category.⁵⁰⁹ Dimgal poetry about Pabuji, like today's *mātā* epic, is considered part of orally transmitted traditions. And oral data, the priests of the Kolu temple say, retain symbolic meaning, not factual messages. This does not mean that oral transmissions of either poetry or prose are held to be untrue. It means that the authenticity of the tradition is not defined according to what people *believe* to be true. Accordingly, the validity of tales told about Pabuji is assessed according to whom tells a story. In this context, Tulsi Singh Rathaur put forward that the different stories about Pabuji constitute different truths. There is the truth of Bhil devotees, who will elaborate on the role of Thori Camda and his companions when they tell Pabuji's story, but there is also the truth of Rebari devotees, who will want to emphasise the role of Rebari Harmal when they tell Pabuji's tale. Likewise, Rajput renditions of the story will stress the heroic example for their community set by Pabuji. And Charan poets will highlight Pabuji's protection of Deval and her role in the events of his life.

Avatār-linkage

An outstanding feature of the contemporary *mātā paravāraus*, as compared to the medieval Pabuji tradition is, of course, the manner in which Pabuji's story is connected to the *Rāmāyaṇ*. In contemporary tales about Pabuji, he has come to embody Ram's brother Lakshman, an example of *avatār*-linkage that, as noted earlier, cannot be read from the medieval Pabuji tradition. In the *jalama rau paravārau*, Pabuji and Lakshman are linked in a rather straightforward manner. The *mātā* players name "Lakshman Avatar" as one of Pabuji's titles together with names like Pabu Bhalalau, Kamlaputra and Gau-Rakshaka. *Avatār*-linkage also serves to relate other protagonists of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and Pabuji's story to each other, like in the *byāva rau paravārau*, where the Thori warriors Camda and Dhembo are explicitly identified as incarnations of (respectively) Ram and Lakshman's younger brothers Bharat and Shatrughan. In this context, the *mātā* players explain that Pabuji and his Thori companion are brothers in Pabuji's story, just like they are in the *Rāmāyaṇ*. The *par* Bhopas reportedly consider Dhembo an *avatār* of either classical epic hero Bhīm or Hanuman but the *mātā* players do not make such a link. They see Dhembo as an incarnation of Bharat. Their portrayal of Dhembo does, even so, evoke physical aspects ascribed to Bhīm, the insatiable and reckless *Mahābhārat*

⁵⁰⁹ Manuscript versions of medieval poetry dedicated to Pabuji seem to play no part in Kolu. Smith's (1991: 18) information that a printed copy of a twentieth-century version of Pabuji's tale is kept at Kolu temple appears to be accurate no longer since neither the Bhil nor the Rajput priests had heard of this poem. They had, however, heard of Nainsi's sixteenth-century chronicle in which a prose-version of Pabuji's story has been recorded. On reading one of my copies of this tale Tulsi Singh Rathaur declared himself to be rather disappointed since he had expected Nainsi's written account to contain factual information about the life and times of Pabuji. But Nainsi's version of Pabuji's story contained no details that he did not know already through contemporary oral renditions. Therefore, Tulsi Singh Rathaur assumed that Nainsi must have recorded in writing a prose version of a medieval oral poem.

protagonist, who symbolizes “heroic excesses” as well as the physique of Hanuman, Ram’s “immense and impetuous” associate (Smith 1980: 48-78). Dhembo (“the Fat”) resembles this hero type because of his enormous appetite, in particular for opium, and because of his physical strength; he single-handedly defeats Jimda’s army. Along these lines, Dhembo’s martial valour could be characterized as irrepressible, like the bravado displayed by Bhim and Hanuman. It seems to me, however, that the *mātā* players did not mean to portray Dhembo as a irrepressible in the sense of recklessly irresponsible all the time for Dhembo does remain true to the promise he gave Kamlade and did not kill Jimda thus sparing Pema the fate of a widow. However, if the quoted similarities in the physical aspects of the two heroes are sufficiently meaningful, we may think of these likenesses as possible narrative links between Dhembo and Bhim which (as far as I can see) would be the only straightforward allusion to the *Mahābhārat* in the *paravāraus*. Unlike the poets of the medieval Pabuji tradition, the *mātā* players appear to have been more inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇ* than by the *Mahābhārat*.

The relation between the protagonist of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and Pabuji’s epic is also elaborated upon with explanatory stories that are not part of the *mātā* performance, relating the “unfinished business” of the *Rāmāyaṇ* with the events that unfold in the *paravāraus*. One of these stories connects Pabuji’s wedding to the promise Ram is thought to have given in jest to the demoness Supriyamkha (Shurapanakha) pledging that she will marry Lakshman in a subsequent incarnation. Again, the fact that Ram made a promise is given central importance. It is because of his pledge, the *mātā* players say, that Pabuji and Phulvanti take three rounds to complete the prescribed four rounds necessary to wed Lakshman to Supriyamkha. This is so because Supriyamkha had walked around Lakshman only once (instead of the prescribed four rounds) when it became clear to her that he did not intend to marry her. When she reminded Ram of his promise, Ram promised her Lakshman in marriage in a next life. Hence, Lakshman incarnates as Pabuji and Supriyamkha takes birth as Phulvanti, and together they complete the unfinished wedding ritual.

Avatār-linkage in classical epic and in Pabuji’s epic can be thought of, following Smith (1980: 69), as an “apparatus of myth-making” that assists in establishing causal links between events. From this angle, incarnations together with curses, vows and the workings of fate can be seen as “narrative tools” employed to create connections between protagonists and events in one epic or between the protagonists and events of two different epics. The *mātā* players use this tool to connect the protagonists of Lakshman’s and Pabuji’s tales by making the hero-god wed Phulvanti, thus picking up where Ram left off when he promised Lakshman’s hand to Supriyamkha. Such heterodox versions offer new interpretations of the old facts of classical epic. As an example, Smith (1980: 68f) quotes heterodox readings which propose that the goddess by incarnating as Sita who is then abducted by Ravana did so to prompt Ram to act according to dharma and thus bring into being the result required by fate, e.g. Ravana’s defeat. In this way, the goddess becomes

fate's representative, or the "divine arbiter" of epic tales; she is the one who ensures that fate can take its course. Smith (1980: 73) also interprets the role accorded to Deval in Pabuji's *paṛ* epic thus and it seems to me that the *mātā* players' portrayal of Deval can be understood likewise. The Ram brothers do unambiguously refer to Deval as "the cause of the origin and destruction of the universe", and portray her as an incarnation of Shakti and of Shiva's consort, Parvati. Deval can also be seen as fate's representative since it is Pabuji's promise to protect Deval which eventually sets all events in motion; if Deval had not given the horse Kalvi to Pabuji, Jimda would not have stolen Deval's cattle, Pabuji would not have come to her rescue and he would not have been killed in battle. This interpretation also presents itself upon reading in the *byāva rau paravāṛau* how Deval's intervention leads to Pabuji's and Jimda's armies' defeat after she has taken on the form of a musk shrew to break both armies' bowstrings. The goddess perhaps also chose this course of action to bring about Pabuji's death. Though this cannot be perused from the *paravāṛaus*, Pabuji's death does seem to come about through Deval's help as may perhaps be gauged from the four boons Pabuji requests from Deval. In particular his wish to attain divinity and to become invisible could be understood as one way of saying that Pabuji reaches heaven, i.e. dies.

Looking at *avatār*-linkage from a socio-political point of view, it becomes clear that the mythical family ties between the main protagonists of the *paravāṛaus* and some *Rāmāyaṇ* protagonists and their incarnations are, in the first place, meant to enhance the status of Pabuji's cult and the Thori and *mātā* players' eminence. This can be construed from Pabuji's identification as Lakhsman, thus linking his tradition with classical mythology, and the *byāva rau paravāṛau*'s portrayal of Camda and Dhembo as Pabuji-Lakhsman's mythical "blood relations": the embodiment of Bharat and Shatrughan. In this context, *avatār*-linkage serves to underline the status of the Thori companions in Pabuji's retinue and, more importantly, their Bhil descendants, who are in this way "written into" a mythical genealogy and trace their ancestry to *Rāmāyaṇ* protagonists. In addition, Camda and Dhembo's Rajput-like roles in the *paravāṛaus* and the heroism ascribed to Thori in explanatory stories (like the one about the seven Bhil grooms who fought at Pabuji's side) also serve to ascribe status to the Bhil, not in mythical terms but by referring to medieval martial ideals. The *mātā* players not only recount how bravely the Thori warriors fight, but render Dhembo's actions the central concern of their narrative in the *vāhara rau paravāṛau*. It is Dhembo, not Pabuji, whom the *mātā* players portray as the main hero by ascribing deeds to him that are more commonly attributed to Pabuji in other, medieval and contemporary, versions of the story. In the *vāhara rau paravāṛau*, it is Dhembo who rescues Deval's cows, returns them to her, and promises to water them. It is, moreover, Dhembo and not Pabuji who kills Jimda's brother Maihadrav and defeats Jimda's army. Dhembo moreover reminds Pabuji that it is only with his help that he can win battles, for it was he who helped Pabuji to "protect Hindu religion".

Though the active role attributed to Dhembo could, as Smith (1980: 63) does, be understood as an attempt to render Pabuji a truly ascetic hero, comparable to Ram, i.e. a passive hero who does not act and thus does not get involved in the cycle of *samsār*, it seems that, from a historical perspective, the heroism ascribed to Dhembo is chiefly meant to enhance the Rajput-like warrior status claimed by the *mātā* players. This, I think, is the *mātā paravāraus* main function today: forwarding Bhil Bhopa claims to Rajput status in a way that resembles medieval claims to ascribed Rajputhood. It is, however, also clear that it is no longer enough to claim Rajput-like status, or to enumerate the heroic deeds of warrior forefathers, be they Thori or Rajput. To be truly upwardly mobile in contemporary Kolu society, one's history also needs to be linked to protagonists from the *Rāmāyaṇ*, a link which, for some of Pabuji's devotees, serves to establish themselves and their story-telling tradition as part of modern definitions of what "mainstream Hinduism" is or (rather) ought to be.

Ritual function

Contemporary *avatār*-linkage, the assertion and/or attribution of Rajput status, and their place in prevailing definitions of "mainstream Hinduism" are instrumental in voicing competing claims to status, articulated by different groups like Rajput or Bhil, rendering the performance of Pabuji's *mātā*-epic part of an on-going "battle of words" which serves to settle matters of socio-political power, caste status and divine hierarchies. The contemporary battle of words, as I see it, will be outlined below by discussing the ritual function of the *mātā* performance in Kolu, and the way in which different people talk about the Pabuji tradition and its worship practices, in particular the status presently claimed by the *mātā* players.

Bhopa, one of the titles the *mātā*-players use to identify themselves as the priestly performers of Pabuji's epic, is most commonly used as a title for religious specialists from different backgrounds.⁵¹⁰ In Rajasthan, in general, the title "Bhopa" is used most as a designation for priests, healers, mediums and other esoteric specialists who perform curative rituals, and channel the soul of deceased warriors or other wandering spirits. Bhopas render religious services to many groups including Rajput, Bhil, Charan, Rebari and Bhat.⁵¹¹ Anthropological studies of contemporary Bhopa traditions make clear that their epic performances and worship practices are part of trance traditions that serve to channel the souls of forefathers and other (semi) divine beings. In Rajasthan, spirit possession is generally referred to as *chāyā* or *bhāv āṇo*, when the "shadow", "sensation" or "feeling" of a spirit's or

⁵¹⁰ Bhopa is at times also defined as an "honorific cognomen" especially used for Bhil Bhopas (Lalas: 1962-1988) or as a derogative term.

⁵¹¹ We can further distinguish between the occupational traits and patrons of different Bhopas. Thus, the *mātā* Bhopas, patronized by Rajput priests and other devotees of Pabuji, perform episodes of Pabuji's epic accompanied by drums. The *par* Bhopas, chiefly patronized by Rebari and Rajput devotees of Pabuji, perform the epic in front of a story-cloth (*par*) to the tune of string-instrument.

god's presence overwhelms a medium. In Gujarat, the present Bhopas of the Rebari of Kacch render their title as "the one through whom the goddess speaks" (Frater 1989: 96). Spirits are thought to have many forms. The Rebari ascetic and Bhil Bhopa mediums, who today live in the Aravallis, are known to feel the presence of different kinds of divine beings, including folk-gods, goddesses, and spirits and ghosts like Jhumjhars, Bhomiyas and Mamas.⁵¹² Such otherworldly beings are not solely made up of family-spirits but are also believed to be the souls of warriors who (like Pabuji) died a violent death, most often in the course of protecting cattle against robbers. The latter class of beings is worshipped by people from many different social groups within one village or region.

All the aforementioned spirits have one thing in common: they cannot find peace after death and need to be appeased through worship by Bhopas. Especially those spirits who are believed to be malevolent and set on haunting a person, family or village need to be pacified in this way. When properly worshipped, by singing or re-enacting a warrior's heroic deeds, his spirits, it is believed, can be assuaged and may become a benign being who can manifest itself to or in a Bhopa and may help finding solutions for his devotees' problems, by answering questions or assisting in cures through a medium. In this way, Kothari (1989: 104, 110) proposes, the worship of dead ancestors and/or warriors can be connected over time to traditions centred on the worship of folk-gods like Pabuji's and, accordingly, defines Pabuji's epic as an elaboration of a Bhomiya story, which is performed to appease the warrior's spirit.⁵¹³

It seems, however, that the curative function of the Kolu *mātā* epic performance is no longer connected to a trance tradition, since the *mātā* players are rather uncommunicative about this aspect of the contemporary Pabuji tradition. In the past, they say, some *mātā* players used to experience the *chāyā* (shadow) of their medieval Thori forefathers, usually when the Rajput temple priests donated meals to the *mātā* players in Pabuji's name to commemorate the battle that the seven Thori and their marriage parties waged at Pabuji's side. Today, the *mātā* players are still ritually feasted at the temple but no longer practise possession as part of this ceremony. The Ram brothers define their *mātā* performance chiefly as a summons or a prayer, a way to obtain Pabuji's blessings and secure his help and protection or to enlist Pabuji's assistance in healing sick people and animals, not through trance, but through performance. The Bhopas do, however, continue to quote stories about the Thori who, with Deval's help, brought Pabuji and his mare down from heaven by playing the *mātās*. This story underlines the special qualities attributed to the *mātās* and commemorates how the first *mātās* were made according to the instructions of the goddess Deval, and it also brings to mind trance traditions like those of the Gujarati Bharwo who hold that the goddess Sawan *Mātā* had their magical trance-

⁵¹² Kothari (1989: 109f), in addition, also distinguishes Pitras and Pitranis (malicious family-spirits).

⁵¹³ Srivastava (1994: 70f) describes forefather worship and "shamanic" rituals of trance as part of the Rebari Bhopa tradition and links these customs to Pabuji's cult.

inducing drums made for them (cf. Werz-Kovacs 1984: 138, 152). When asked about the meaning of these stories, the *mātā* players emphasized that it is not the practice of trance that their stories document but the above-mentioned ritual function of playing the *mātās* to gain Pabuji's attention and blessings by performing his *paravāraus* and thus bringing Pabuji down to earth in an altogether symbolic sense.

Animal sacrifice

It is my feeling that the Bhopa's reservation when talking about past rituals of possession is rather understandable when seen in the light of present-day definitions of what "pure" "mainstream" Hinduism is considered to be. This feeling was strengthened by the answers elicited by questions about ritual animal sacrifices at Kolu. While, I was told, buffaloes and goats used to be sacrificed to Pabuji at the Kolu temple "a long time ago", now (it was made very clear to me) this ritual is no longer part of the ceremonies conducted by Pabuji's Rajput priests. Though *mātā* players and other Bhil devotees do continue to sacrifice goats in front of the shrines of their Thori ancestors, this practice appears to be an exclusively Bhil affair. During the ritual, the Rajput priests are careful not to "offend Pabuji's sensibilities" by hanging a cloth in front of Pabuji's temples' entrances before the Bhil Bhopas lead a sacrificial goat into the temple. And though Bhil Bhopas are still allowed to bring a living goat into the temple compound and lead it in front of the Thori shrines to ascertain whether their forefathers will accept the offering, the Bhil are not allowed to slaughter the animal inside the temple courtyard.⁵¹⁴

During discussions about trance traditions, animal sacrifice and the position of formerly untouchables like Meghwals in Kolu, people emphasized that the Bhil *mātā* players are part of a "pure" community, on a par with Rajput warriors but, all the same, a separate community, and not of Rajput parentage. The *mātā* players' main patron, Tulsi Singh Rathaur, also brought up the Bhil's prolonged association with Pabuji as his chosen performers, the only ones who may play the *mātā* and sing Pabuji's epic. He explicitly portrayed the Bhil as Hindus, thus further advancing the Bhil's ritually pure status, by recounting how Pabuji saved the Thori, who were very poor and open to conversion, from becoming Muslim by enlisting them in his army. Ever since, it is said, the Bhil of Marwar remained within the folds of Hinduism. The Rajput priests also underscored the comparatively high status ascribed to present-day Bhil and their Thori forefathers by referring to them as a very loyal and

⁵¹⁴ If a goat (or in earlier days, a buffalo) begins to shiver in front of the Thori shrines, it is taken to mean that the Thori accept it as an offering and the animal is slaughtered. Wetsphall-Helbusch (1974: 181) has also remarked on this custom and describes how Charan graziers used to only sacrifice those goats which started trembling in front of the altar or bulls who pointed their head in the direction of the altar, as a sign that they were accepted by the goddess.

brave people (*wafadara kaum*) who at times matched their Rajput patron's bravery and martial prowess.⁵¹⁵

The stress put on the status ascribed to Bhil Bhopas by Rajput priests perhaps served to avoid association with unwelcome aspects of devotional practices in Kolu, in particular traditions of trance and animal sacrifice. It proved difficult to ascertain since when these aspects of Pabuji worship were disassociated from the contemporary cult. Though the "purification" of Shaktik and Tantric sacrificial rites in Rajasthan is commonly dated to early medieval times, when Jains started preaching the sacredness of all life, the reported practice of contemporary animal sacrifice in Rajasthan does suggest that not all social groups were swayed by Jain ideals, whether in the past or in more recent times (cf. Dominique-Sila Khan 2003: 15). Perhaps the attempts to standardize or "purify" Pabuji's cult can best be dated to nineteenth-century attempts at defining a homogenous, communal Hindu identity as a means to politically mobilise Hindus and thus gain access to power and economic resources.⁵¹⁶ Or maybe the attempts of some of Pabuji's devotees to secure a "mainstream" Hindu image for his cult are inspired by contemporary Hindu nationalist politics as propagated by the Bharatiya Janta Party in Rajasthan (cf. Tambs-Lyche 1997: 127). Though I have not been able to study this aspect of contemporary identity politics in any detail, I do think that the "cleansing" of the cult can be dated to historically rather recent times considering the fact that the ritual sacrifice of goats is still practiced in Kolu, even if it is not officially approved of by some Rajput priests.

Present-day ambitions to become part of "mainstream Hinduism" which seem to account for current efforts to sever connections between Pabuji worship and aspects of forefather's worship by Bhil Bhopas, perhaps also help in explaining the nearly complete absence of iconography or devotional practices dedicated to Shakti or Charani goddesses and the hesitation with which some priests talked about Jhararo-Rupnath's worship by Kanpathi Nath yogis in Kolu and at Rupnath's open-air altar. The relative dearth of evidence for the worship of Shakti or Charani Sagatis at the Kolu temple seems all the more remarkable since, in the present-day *mātā* epic, Deval has been accorded an important role. Today's definition of mainstream Hinduism evidently does not combine very well with the non-vegetarian image and association of some Shakti and Nath cults with animal sacrifices, meat-eating, eroticism and the use of opium and alcohol. But the enthusiasm displayed for the new imago seems rather lukewarm. Even the move away from animal sacrifices as practised by Bhil Bhopas, by putting up a cloth in front of Pabuji's temple to allow him to "close his eyes" to the sacrifice, does appear rather half-hearted and more

⁵¹⁵ This point was further supported by equating the seven Thori warriors in Pabuji's retinue with the seventeen Samat (warrior-heroes) who are believed to have fought at the side of the renowned Rajput ruler Prithvi Raj.

⁵¹⁶ Peabody (2001: 819f) argues that the enumeration of group identities, "in which caste defined the privileged "site" for articulating data on people" became of prime importance for identity politics as part of the strategies of colonial rule during the 1860s and 1870s, a period of "high colonialism".

inspired by keeping up outward appearances than by any fundamental understanding of, or adherence to, the concept of ritual purity. Likewise, the “banishing” of the worship of the goddess or images of Charani Deval, if that is indeed what happened, also has a rather *laissez-faire* feeling to it since Deval continues to be worshipped by the Bhopas through the performance of their *mātā* epic. Besides, the goddess’s trident is still worshipped at the temple altar where it has been given a place among Pabuji’s hero stones.

Rival codes

The various beliefs, architectural forms, worship practices and attributed meanings that exist side-by-side in Kolu reflect different self-images which give rise to different perceptions of the divine, but are, nevertheless, all part of similar attempts made by different people in different times to enhance their status. As Tulsi Singh Rathaur put forward, all the different stories about Pabuji constitute different “truths”. Socio-political circumstances do, of course, determine the amount of truth or authority people claim for and/or ascribe to a tradition, characterising one strand of worship as more true (or some practices as purer) than others. This is underlined by the apparent frictions between, for instance, Bhil Bhopa sacrificial rites and the way some Rajput devotees and priests value these rites. But, as the somewhat awkward, at least when seen from outside, co-existence of Rajput, Bhil, Shaktik and Nath forms of worship in Kolu illustrates how different strands of worship do, all the same, continue to exist alongside each other. Thus, the history of the Pabuji tradition and its present-day practices, like Charani Sagati cults, can best be seen as resulting from “several competing principles of organisation” or rival codes forwarded by different groups, in different socio-political, religious and historical circumstances (cf. Peabody 2003: 78-79). By seeing this process as an ongoing battle of words, a battle which is never wholly settled but which continues to enhance long-established and at times “new” identities, it becomes easier to appraise how the different medieval and contemporary genres of the Pabuji tradition took shape by assuming various narrative and stylistic features. As I will argue in the next and last chapter of this study, this is a process which is best gauged by looking at the importance attributed by the poets to the different protagonists of the medieval as well as the contemporary traditions.



Abandoned well with an undated hero stone dedicated to Pabuji and one of his Bhil archers (Kolu orhan).