FERRYING THE GODS:
MYTH, PERFORMANCE AND THE QUESTION OF 'INVENTED TRADITIONS' IN THE CITY OF BANARAS[1]

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ABSTRACT:

The mythological traditions of the 'native' populations of colonised countries have been a subject of fascination for both colonial officials and contemporary anthropologists. Myth is often conceived as a window into the lives, social practices and identities of subordinate people. In this paper I examine an episode from the Indian epic Ramayana, which juxtaposes colonial interpretations with a contemporary one, refracted through the narratives and living practices of the boatman community in the sacred city of Banaras. Following Sahlins (1999), I caution against the facile notion of the 'invention of tradition' as an inevitable project of resistance which is frequently attributed to oppressed populations. Rather, my analysis of myth illustrates the need to consider the cultural logic and practice associated with mythological narratives, storytelling and performance. I show the way boatmen creatively tap into a rich Hindu devotional tradition (bhakti), revealing the inherent tensions and ambiguities that inform their intentions, fears and desires as they are expressed in the course of everyday life in Banaras.

INTRODUCTION

When describing the caste of fishermen (Kewat) and detailing their various customs and myths, the colonial ethnographer R.V Russell observes the following:[2]

> The Kewats say that formerly the Hindus would not take water from them; but on one occasion during his exile Rama came to them and asked them to ferry him across the river; before doing so they washed his feet and drank the water, and since that time the Hindus have considered them pure and take water from their hands. This

story has no doubt been invented to explain the fact that Brahmans will take water from non-Aryan Kewats, the custom having in reality been adopted as a convenience on account of their employment as palanquin-bearers and indoor servants (Russell and Lal 1916, vol 3: 423–4).

Curiously, there is no further explanation apart from the inevitable conclusion that this so-called 'invented' tradition, drawn from the Indian epic Ramayana, offers an adequate explanation for the recent incorporation of non-Aryan, low caste communities, such as Kewats, into the social order. The Kewats were thus denied their agency, subservient to the cultural logic in which it is the upper caste Hindus who, for practical reasons, accommodated this myth as a matter of convenience. Importantly, the fact that the above was not explained or elaborated on further is suggestive of a broader pattern prevalent in colonial ethnographic accounts, whereby the customs and myths of the colonised were seen as relics of the past; serving to reaffirm existing social and moral conduct, and where the Brahmins continued to occupy a superior status, by virtue of their racial and religious attributes. Such views served to reinforce the notion that the 'natives' were bound by timeless beliefs, practices and rituals.

Identifying this pattern of colonial registry, Gloria Raheja (2002) persuasively argues that colonial ethnographers conveniently glossed over the potential critique embedded in myths, legends and proverbs, preferring to uphold the inviolability of caste hierarchy. She observes, for example, that some colonial officials 'refused to consider the possibility of dissent, the possibility that anyone, but perhaps particularly a person of low caste, might deploy a proverbial utterance to subvert or at least comment ironically upon notions of hierarchical ordering and the separation of castes' (Raheja 2002: 203).[3] Raheja then demonstrates how by de-contextualising and abstracting proverbs from their everyday usage the 'communicative and social functions in a speech community are often obscured' (Raheja 2002: 202). While Russell does not provide us with a context to investigate the myth further, its form, characterised by its anonymity and a transformative narrative, in which the boatman (Kewat) and his caste are purified by the divine prince Rama, does suggest at least the potential for fluidity, transformation and change within the caste system. Ironically, Russell seemed to prefigure what anthropologists, decades later, have come to identify as the 'invention of tradition'. But while recent anthropological work has tended to interrogate such 'invented' myths and rituals for what they can reveal about power relationships and resistance, Russell's view echoes a more 'traditional' functionalist interpretation of myth, with its practical faculties, as serving to maintain native customs and moral order.

This article examines the Kevat myth from the Ramayana to demonstrate the strategic and communicative uses of such myths in the discourse and every-day lives of the boatmen of Banaras. The paper has two main goals. The first is to highlight the role of myth in the broader struggle of low caste claims for recognition and equality, and to show how these castes dispute the low status assigned to them within the caste system as communities engaged in degraded and polluting occupations. As recent scholarship makes clear, the oppositional discourse, particularly employed by the dalit (ex-untouchable) castes in India, is often grounded in myth and religious practices, which offer a potent vehicle for low castes to creatively express their social and political needs and aspira-tions (Deliege 1993; Narayan 2001; Pai 2002). My aim, however, is to emphasise the usage of myth as it is embedded in everyday practice, rather than as part of an overarching project of caste upliftment asserting itself against the state or Brahminical domination. Hence, the second goal of the paper is to analyse modes of agency which cannot be explained solely on the basis of generic no-tions of resistance. To be sure, boatmen employ myths and stories to comment on, reinforce, manipulate, challenge and, at times, resist existing systems of power and to define and uphold their identity, dignity and place within Hindu society. At the same time, following Sahlins (1999), I want to caution against a somewhat reductive view of myth as governed and motivated exclusively by considerations of power and instrumental reason, effectively purging 'cultural forms of their specific properties'(1999: 406). For Sahlins, the recent slew of studies drawing on the 'invented traditions' argument has made many scholars lose sight of equally, if not more, important issues behind peoples' choice of certain forms of cultural expression to articulate their desires and interests over others (see also Ortner 1997). One way of avoiding this cultural reduc-tionism is to reintroduce the 'sense of meaningful orders', by recognising that people's wants, needs and fears 'depend on historical contexts of values, on existing or potential relationships of the culture, not only for their content but for their possible realizations' (Sahlins 1999: 407–409).

The paper begins with a brief exploration into the role of myth in a hierar-chically ordered society, such as India. The second part of the paper focuses on how boatmen use such myths drawn from 'authoritative texts' to enhance their dignity and self-worth, as well as to express criticism of existing power structures.[4] These myths are potent because, while they can be read as endors-ing the hegemonic view of power relations, they are ambiguous enough to warrant competing interpretations. This ambiguity, I argue, is largely derived from the dominant devotional theme present in the mythological narrative (cf. Lutgendorf 2000). I argue that the efficacy and subversive potential of the myths as vehicles for resisting and questioning authority is primarily found

in the context in which they are employed, that is, in the physical and cultural settings which inform both collective and individual acts of narration, appropriation, commentary and performance. The third part of this paper examines the way boatmen exercise agency and discover meaning in their lives by acting out their mythical role as devout and righteous boatmen, and through their occupation and ritual responsibilities. The knowledge produced through such story telling is thus validated in practice, and insofar as it constitutes part of the living experience of boatmen. Such an exercise of agency, I argue in the conclusion, must throw into question some of the more conventional views on agency as default mode of resistance.

THE POWER OF MYTH

The study of myths has occupied generations of anthropologists, with Malinowski's [2002 (1926)] notion of the 'mythical charter' remaining one of the most enduring interpretations. For Malinowski, myth was fundamentally a coping instrument, deployed in various, often strategic, ways to deal with the pragmatics of everyday existence. According to this view myth is best conceived as an 'active force', rather than simply a relic of the past, and as such, 'told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements…it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom' (Malinowski 2002: 177). Such functionalist interpretations render myth central to our understanding of meaning and power in society.

Malinowski's views on myths continue to resonate strongly in many recent studies that examine the origin myths/tales of low castes in India (Babb 2004; Deliege 1993; Narayan 2001). Such origin myths, as Gupta summarises, reflect the 'discrete character of caste and of individual caste ideologies…[and] make it possible for those belonging to the depressed subaltern castes to not see themselves as intrinsically impure and despicable. They regard their current, rather unenviable, position as an outcome of Brahman chicanery, or of some chance misdeed of their ancestors' (Gupta 2000: 117). Thus, by using tales of origin, low castes seek to explain and expose as unjustified the reasons for which their castes have been relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic and religious hierarchy, and at the same time elevate themselves by tracing their ancestry to Hindu gods or other well-known mythological figures. In addition, these studies also seem to agree that while low castes do vehemently contest their position within the caste hierarchy, the caste system itself, with its governing principles of purity and pollution, remains largely unchallenged – a point I shall come back to later in the article.

Another common feature identified in these studies suggests that low caste origin myths tend to be based on either vernacular texts (*puranas*) or distinct legends and oral traditions, pertaining to specific communities. As such, they seldom have the influence and circulation that authoritative texts do (cf. Richman 2000). Other studies, particularly those looking at the Ramayana tradition, offer rich insights into the way in which various episodes about low castes provide fertile ground for interrogating tensions, such as power inequalities and caste oppression (e.g., Lutgendorf 2000; Nilsson 2000). My own examination of the Kevat myth certainly reinforces such claims, but seeks to draw attention to how such stories figure within the realm of contemporary popular culture and the everyday practice of low caste communities.

The Kevat myth, which boatmen commonly refer to in their bid to construct their identity and assert their cultural rights, is drawn from the so-called 'great tradition'. This is partly because epic myths, like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, remain important authoritative references across Indian society, and particularly in Banaras. Indeed, such texts offer a treasure trove of symbols, images, names, geographies and incidents, enabling a range of interpretations. As Ramanujan (1991: 46) observed in his illuminating discussion of the Ramayana tradition: 'Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context'. In what follows I argue that by reinterpreting stories from authoritative renderings found in the Ramayana epic, boatmen and leading members of their caste inhabit a long-standing tradition of the love and devotion (*bhakti*) to God, which they articulate through oral exposition, textual exegesis, performance, and political appropriation.

NARRATIVES OF DEVOTION

In many Hindu devotional traditions it is through devotion to an object, guru or deity that any person, regardless of caste and gender, can be librated from the cycle of rebirth and gain salvation (*moksha*). As such, the theological foundations of *bhakti* are intrinsically linked to its social ideology, promising universal accessibility through a devotional path which is open to all, including low caste Shudras[5] and women. As Lutgendorf (1995) observes with regard to the devotional traditions associated with Ramayana epic: 'Of paramount importance to these texts is the universal accessibility of Ram, especially via his name, which is increasingly seen as a liberating mantra of greater power and efficacy than the Brahmin-mediated formulae of the Vedas' (1995: 260–261). In broad terms, the *bhakti* tradition can therefore be viewed as liberal, subversive and even revolutionary, providing an alternative to Brahminical ideology and

social order. This is especially the case when we consider some of the vernacular poems and songs emerging out of these traditions, which explicitly attack Hindu beliefs, customs and caste hierarchy (Mokashi-Punekar 2006; Ramanujan 1973; Martin 2003; Schaller 1995). At the same time, however, one should be wary of romanticising the *bhakti* tradition as inherently subversive. As several scholars have shown, the *bhakti* tradition tends to be inconsistent and ambiguous. Some of the leading *bhakti* movements and institutions retain hierarchical structures, while many well-known *bhakti* texts were composed and supported by the elites, who upheld traditional social ideology and religious doctrines (see Burghart 1996; Lutgendorf 1995; van der Veer 1988; Lorenzen 2005:194). Nevertheless, it is the ambiguity and tension inherent to the *bhakti* tradition that has generated subversive interpretations and appropriations, through which subordinate people demonstrate their resistance, both openly and covertly, to elite discrimination and structures of domination.

THE CONTEXT OF STRUGGLE

The city of Banaras is considered to be the paramount centre of pilgrimage in the subcontinent.[6] Located on the banks of the sacred River Ganges, the city stretches approximately seven kilometres along the river on its western bank. The riverfront is adorned with more than 80 ghats (landing areas with steps down the bank) from southernmost Assi ghat to Raj ghat in the North. Multitudes of pilgrims come to the ghats to bathe in the sacred river, which is said by Hindus to remove all sins past and present. The river is also worshiped as a mother goddess known as *Ganga Ma*.

Banaras has long been considered a Brahminical stronghold, as Parry observes: 'With its reputation for 'orthodox' Brahmanical Hinduism and its ancient tradition of Sanskritic learning, it is the Brahmans who set the dominant religious tone of the city… It is they who actually conduct the rituals prescribed by the texts, who expound their meaning, and who in this sense mediate between the textual tradition and the theologically untutored' (Parry 1994:33–34). This is not to say that the Brahmins of Banaras are a homogenous group. In fact, as Parry (1994:75–77) shows, the relative status of Brahmins differs quite markedly according to one's occupational status, both within the ritual economy of Banaras and outside of it. Within the ritual economy of Banaras, boatmen have a significant role: providing boating services to the many pilgrims arriving at the city. In addition, boatmen operate as ritual specialists, conducting some life cycle rituals for the local community (see Doron 2006). Traditionally castes have been hierarchically differentiated on the basis of occupation and dietary habits. Accordingly, the menial labour involved in plying boats and

fishing is considered ritually polluting and degrading, as is the consumption of fish. In addition, social stigmas attached to the boatman community derive from their caste being labelled under the ominous category of 'criminal castes' during colonial rule. Economically too, as detailed below, boatmen have faced increasing pressures, with restrictions of fishing and agricultural cultivation within the Banaras city limits. For boatmen then, history, social structure and economic dispossession all appear to firmly establish their marginalised position in society.

There are roughly 2000 boatmen who live along the River Ganges in Banaras. According to the boatmen there, only those belonging to the Mallah/Nishad caste are allowed to work as boatmen on the river and to take passengers for profit.[7] These passengers primarily include Hindu pilgrims and international tourists (Doron 2005). However, not all Mallahs are boatmen. The majority of Mallahs, in fact, work in other manual occupations, such as building, painting, sari weaving and other small industries. Although most of those Mallahs who do work as boatmen are primarily concerned with taking passengers, this is a recent phenomenon. Boatmen have traditionally worked in fishing, sandmining (i.e., extracting sand from the riverbank for use in construction) and cultivating fertile land on the riverbank, especially that on the eastern side of the river. Over the past three decades, primarily as a result of government policies to clean and manage the river, these occupations have all been under threat with some, like fishing and sandmining, being completely banned and others, such as agricultural cultivation, being markedly reduced (Doron 2008).[8] In addition, boatmen claim that the government yields to the lobbying of local priests (*pandas*), who see fishing as a degraded practice. For boatmen, the above policies represent another link in the ongoing historical chain of repression they experience under the domination of upper castes and state authority. In their day-to-day lives the overwhelming majority of boatmen plying boats in Banaras are involved in the ritual economy of Banaras, where they closely interact with Brahmin priests, earning their income from what is a transient population of tourists and pilgrims. It is against this historical context that interpretations of myth become particularly illuminating of a creative and meaningful cultural process, in which boatmen seek to assert their access to material resources and claim a more esteemed status in the Hindu socio-religious order.

BHAKTI AS DISCOURSE AND PERFORMANCE

In North India, and Banaras in particular, the most popular telling of the Ramayana epic is known as Ramcharitmanas (the lake of the acts of Ram).

Written by the sage-poet Tulsi Das of Banaras in the 16th century, the *Manas*, as it is commonly called, is widely seen as a devotional text, and has been the subject of numerous retellings, as Lutgendorf (1989) observes:

> Perhaps more than any other poem, the *Manas* functions as a script for cultural performance, reaching its largely illiterate audience through such genres as ceremonial recitation (*path*), storytelling and oral exegesis (*katha*), and annual cycle of pageant plays (*Ramlila*), all of which continue to flourish and indeed proliferate in distinctively contemporary variants. (1989: 272–3)

When discussing their caste and occupation, the first myth I was told by the boatmen was an episode from the Ramayana involving the propitious encounter between the boatman (Kevat) and the divine prince Rama. The following telling of the boatman episode is a fine example of the way in which a myth functions as a script for cultural performance. In this case the performative dimension is actualised in local settings, as boatmen consciously draw on the myth to reflect upon their social identity and everyday life in a meaningful way.

Let me first recount the story, as it was told to me by one boatman, which is roughly similar to many of the other tellings I heard during my fieldwork. Prince Rama (God incarnate), his brother Lakshman and wife Sita, recently banished into exile, arrive at the bank of the River Ganga:

> Upon arriving at the riverbank, Lord Ram summoned Kevat (the boatman), asking him to ferry them across to the other side. To Ram's surprise Kevat declines, unless Ram allows him to wash his feet. Kevat justifies his request by referring to the story of Ahalya, a beautiful woman, who was cursed by a sage and turned into a stone until she was restored to her human form by the sacred dust lacing the Lord's feet. The devoted Kevat realises that if Ram touches his boat and it turns into a woman he will lose his livelihood. As Ram witnesses the commitment and devotion of the boatman, he concedes. At the sight of Kevat washing God's feet all the gods of the Hindu pantheon shower flowers on the blessed boatman. Having washed God's feet with the sacred Ganga water, Kevat drinks it and distributes the rest of the water to his family. Kevat then ferries Lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman across the river. Upon arriving at the other side Sita wants to pay the boatman his fee with all she has, her ring. The latter rejects her offer, saying to Ram: we are of the same profession, you carry people across the river of life (*samsara*) to the

far shore of liberation (*moksha*) and I carry people from this bank
of the river to the other side. A washerman never charges a fellow
washerman. A barber does not take money from a fellow barber.
Ram you are also a boatman (tum bhi Kevat), how can I charge you?
When my day comes I ask only that you help me cross the river of
life (*bahusagar*) to the far shore of liberation.

The myth itself is replete with devotional themes, with love and devotion to
God, not knowledge or status, shown as the ultimate path to liberation. This
is further reinforced through the story of Ahalya, a woman who was graced
by God. As Ramanujan observes, 'her waking from the cold stone to fleshly
human warmth, becomes an occasion for a moving *bhakti* (devotional) medi-
tation on the soul waking to its form in god' (Ramanujan 1991: 31). Likewise,
the Kevat episode, portraying a low caste boatman's devotion to Lord Rama
is suggestive of inclusive themes commonly found in the devotional tradi-
tion. In the *Manas* such inclusion implies a purification of low castes incurred
through contact with Ram (cf. Lutgendorf 2000). Kevat's washing of God's
feet is symbolic, as it is considered to be a highly meritorious act. This was
manifestly recognised by the gods who subsequently showered flowers on the
devout boatman. Moreover, the act of the whole family drinking the water
(*charan amrit*) suggests that all members of the community were also blessed
and purified by God. Importantly, such an act of purification does not negate
the principle of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution of the hegemonic
dominant order; on the contrary, it draws its legitimacy from it, through an
act of cultural appropriation (cf. Dube 1992).

For the boatmen, the Kevat myth bears immense significance for their social
identity and everyday life. The collective legitimatisation of boatmen as a com-
munity engaged in a god-sanctioned profession is evident both in the way
boatmen retell the episode and their practice of the profession. Thus, as one
boatman concluded in his telling of the myth: 'We are of the same community/
caste (*biradry*) as Ram and one Mallah will not take money from a member
of his caste' (*hum ab ek biradry hei aur ek mallah dusra mallah se paisa nehi
leta hei*).[9] Another boatman added that the meeting took place during the
time of Ramraj, the mythical reign of Ram characterised by social justice and
plenitude.[10] For boatmen, moreover, the Kevat myth continues to bear co-
temporary relevance as it signifies the transgression of their caste, so that the
social degradation suffered under the caste system can no longer be justified
after this event. As another boatman went on to explain: 'Previously we were
considered a very low caste, people used to dig out the soil under which we sat
and replace it with fresh soil, now we are respected by society'. Thus, the auspi-

cious encounter with Rama marks a transformative event for their collective social identity and is evidence of their dignified roots and esteemed position within the Hindu social order and religious tradition.

Such assertions by boatmen of their dignified and valued profession are perhaps the most overt expression of their refusal to accept the low status imposed upon them by caste ideology and structures of domination. However, in order to further understand the subversive and manipulative potential that the Kevat myth holds, we must look at how it permeates the practice of everyday life and is articulated in the beliefs, ideas, attitudes and feelings of the boatman community in Banaras. I illustrate this primarily though an examination of the narrative surrounding the myth and its validation in practice, which is derived from people's understanding of Banaras: a pilgrimage centre where such discourse and symbolic order achieves a particular saliency.

TEA-STALL CONVERSATIONS: KEVAT AS CUNNING

The narration, interpretation and appropriation of the myth is not solely the jurisdiction of leading members of the community. For boatmen, the myth of Kevat permeates their everyday lives, imbuing it with meaning and giving them a sense of their place in the world. Interestingly, while Kevat may be fortunate to be blessed by Lord Rama, the way in which boatmen tell the story highlights Kevat's agency in the encounter. I heard the story numerous times in my conversations with boatmen, each time with slightly different inflections to suit specific contemporary sentiments. One of these tellings stood out when Kevat was referred to as *chalak*, a term which, according to McGregor's Hindi – English dictionary, means 'active, quick, dexterous, clever, astute, cunning; vigilant' (1993: 312). When asked why Kevat was considered to be *chalak*, one boatman elaborated that Kevat's mention of the Ahalya incident in the story was, in reality, a ploy to gain access to Rama's feet. Another added that, while Kevat may have had practical concerns in mind, that is, not losing his livelihood, he also wanted to fully exploit his encounter with God and please him (*Bhagwan ko khush karne ke liye*). While I understood what they meant by Kevat 'tricking' God, it was not until I heard the story of how Kevat had previously failed in his attempt to reach God's feet, that I appreciated the full meaning of his devotional aspirations, as Bayalal Nishad, a boatman from Shivala ghat, related to me:

> At that time Kevat was in his incarnation as a turtle. He wanted to reach the feet of lord Vishnu who was taking rest in the Ksheer Sagar (Ocean of Milk), lying on the Shesha Nag (the great Serpent god)

and being massaged by Lakshmi. However, every time the turtle tried to get close to Vishnu's lotus feet, the Shesha waved him off. Finally, Vishnu promised the turtle that he would meet him again during the incarnation of Ram. Now, Lakshman was, in fact, the Nag, and this is the reason why, when Kevat was summoned by Lakshman to ferry Ram, Sita and himself across the river, Kevat refused. He knew that Lakshman would try to prevent him from touching God's feet and so he had to devise a plan.

Once again, in this telling the boatman is depicted as clever and calculating, but his intentions and acts are clearly motivated by his love and devotion to God. This unpromising encounter with Lakshman can be found in a booklet about the Kevat episode (see Fig. 1), narrated in the form of a devotional song (*kirtan*), which is widely available in the Bazaar and on the ghats of Banaras. The following excerpt from the booklet follows an unpleasant standoff between Kevat and Lakshman, who calls the boatman a 'crazy low caste fool' for refusing to ferry Lord Rama.

> … Dear devotees! The Lord becomes very sad upon hearing such words from His devotee and His brother and begins to ponder in His heart.

Figure 1. Caption?

Kirtan
'Kevat and Lakshmana have fought each other.
Now I am at a loss as to whom I should make prevail.
Brother Lakhan is my Sahodar (born from the same womb as I),
(Yet) Kevat is also my devotee.
All said and done, a devotee's devotion is the highest (noblest) thing in
the world.
I shall say that which is right, after thinking it over first.
The love of one who serves (the Lord) is true
And love contains phenomenal truth inside itself.'
Thinking this the Lord kept pondering in His heart.
'Hear, Lakhan, my words carefully.'
Note–Dear devotees! The Lord, thinking thus, says to Lakhan as follows:
Kirtan
'This Kevat is not arrogant (Refrain)
I have nothing to do with caste; I am only interested in love.
Irrespective of what one's caste, he who chants my name (I am with him)
I neither seek out fools nor wise men'
Says the Lord to Lakshman:
'I take people across the Bhava-sindhu (the vast, 'oceanic' expanse of life
on earth),
Hence I am a Mallah too.
I see everyone without discrimination (and) I do not care
(about anyone's special qualities or privileges)
Brother, do not speak words that would leave a lasting hurt.'
Says the Lord to Lakshman:
'Love's greatness is eminent; love is the essence of this world.
I am unattainable without love (in one's heart),
And the whole world takes my name (calls out to me).'

In this *bhakti* saturated account, Lakshman's dismissal of Kevat serves to high-
light the upper caste view of ritual hierarchy as redundant and the true devotee
prevails. When discussing the episode with boatmen, I was told that because
Kevat refused Sita's ring, the Lord remained forever in his debt. Another boat-
man concluded with a proverb I consequently heard often in Banaras: 'God
resides in the devotee, and the devotee can even control God with his devotion'
(*bhagvan bhakt ke vash me rahte hai, aur bhakt bhagvan ko bhi vash me kar leta
hai*). Thus, the lowly boatman was able to manipulate and deploy clever tricks
to win over the all-powerful and the godly.

The trait of being clever or cunning (*chalak*) seems to enhance the character of Kevat. That is, boatmen refer to his cleverness in a positive sense, such that Kevat's intentions and actions are wholly consistent with the structural form, values and ethic of *bhakti* religiosity.[11] In other words, while such a telling brings the boatman and his community into the forefront as agents refusing degradation, it does not question the overall social hierarchy of caste. Likewise, boatmen do not read the story independently; their arguments are very much rooted in indigenous devotional tradition and vernacular interpretations of the Ramayana and Hindu theology. Nevertheless, by exploiting the theme of devotion, boatmen creatively appropriate the myth to elevate themselves in the caste hierarchy, inflecting it with their own aspirations, and eulogising the community and its morality. By recounting the story in this fashion, boatmen make a clear statement about the legitimacy of their profession as dignified, valuable, commendable and indispensable. As I will show in the following section, it is when we move from the discursive realm to that of performance and everyday practice that the myth assumes further communicative importance and potential for empowering boatmen in their struggle to assert their rights and enhance their socio-economic status.

PERFORMANCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN BANARAS

Nowadays, most pilgrims go on 'package tour' pilgrimages, visiting over 20 holy cities across the country in as many days. Most will perform such a pilgrimage only once in their lifetimes and bathing at the sacred ghats of Banaras is for many the climax of the trip. Because of their brief stay in the city pilgrims generally follow a tight itinerary, adhering to a commonly prescribed route consisting of worshiping at the major temples and bathing ghats. As such, boats provide the fastest and most convenient form of transport, and boatmen often serve as informal local guides for these groups of pilgrims (Doron 2005).

Apart from boatmen, pilgrims are most likely to engage the services of priests for various ritual activities. Many of these priests, who have long established connections with pilgrims (considered their *jajmani*), solicit the services of boatmen to ferry their groups and take them to specific temples and shops to purchase their souvenirs. Likewise, some boatmen bring pilgrims to specific priests to conduct their worship, thereafter receiving a commission from the priests. In fact, on the major ghats the priests and boatmen share an elaborate secret language to communicate information regarding the economic status of pilgrims, which enables them to gauge how much money they can exact from them. Thus, the relationship between boatmen and local priests is structured around the profitable pilgrimage industry.

This interdependence between priests and boatmen is cordial and one rarely hears of any overt conflict between the two groups. This means that, while many boatmen harbour resentment towards Brahminical domination and their own lowly place within the caste hierarchy, they do not challenge it overtly. Instead, as I will show below, it is through performance and strategic manipulation of the hegemonic symbolic order imposed upon them that the boatmen have progressively succeeded in carving themselves a secure niche within the ritual economy of Banaras.

THE SPECTRE OF KEVAT IN BANARAS

One of the largest boatman communities in Banaras resides at Raj ghat which is the city's largest terminus for arriving pilgrims. From this point many pilgrims are transported by boat to the various sites of worship along and near the River Ganga.

The first time I arrived at Raj ghat I was struck by a large wall painting near the bus park where many pilgrims arriving in the city alight, depicting the scene from the Ramayana where Kevat, Ram, Sita and Lakshman are seated on the boat (see figure 1). On the top left hand corner was written the sentence, 'sometimes even god depends on the services of devotees' (*kabhi kabhi bhagwan ko bhi bhakto se kam pare*).[12] A boatman explained that the painting serves as a reminder to the pilgrims of the role of the boatmen in their own pilgrimage to Banaras. The popular scene of the encounter between Kevat and Rama is also found in various posters, available throughout the city's bazaars, which boatmen paste onto their boats. While such explicit depictions of the role of Kevat provide the preamble for pilgrims to embark on their pilgrimage, it is in watching boatmen perform this role that one gets a sense of how they are able to manipulate the mythological narrative to their own advantage.

On several occasions I joined groups of pilgrims on their journey. This would begin with the boatmen charging the atmosphere, shouting familiar slogans, such as '*Ganga Ma ki Jay*' (Victory to Mother Ganges) or '*Hara Hara Mahadev*' (Hail Lord Shiva). The pilgrims followed suit, thus generating a feeling of excitement, elation and expectation. As the journey continued, the boatmen (as above) would generally provide a brief explanation about the various ghats and places along the riverfront they were passing. In some cases I saw boatmen interrupting the journey to point out the ghat from which Lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman departed on a boat to perform their pilgrimage (*yatra*). Thus, by drawing a parallel between the pilgrims' own journey and Lord Ram, boatmen retold the famous story. In their retelling they highlighted that through

his devotion, Kevat earned the Lord's blessing and donation (*dan*). The boatmen would then take a brass pot and, filling it with sacred river water (*Ganga jal*), would sprinkle the pilgrims and entreat them to make a similar offering themselves.

Boatmen thus draw on a shared tradition and shared values and practices, in an especially effective manner given the enhanced emotions and feelings of renewal characteristic to pilgrimage.[13] The boatmen's performance should not be viewed simply as a manipulative act; it holds further importance and efficacy for all those involved when the 'performance arena' is taken into consideration. Within the Hindu tradition Banaras is considered to be a paramount sacred place or *tirtha* (crossing place). Such *tirthas*, as Bhardwaj and Lochtefeld observe, 'are places where the boundaries between the everyday world and sacred become permeable and where one can more easily 'cross over' or communicate between the two' (2005: 479; see also Eck 1983). By acting out the role as Kevat, boatmen consciously draw on common images, metaphors, symbols and experiences consistent with Hindu tradition. Indeed, for the pilgrims themselves their own pilgrimage is perceived on one level as a re-enactment of a sacred journey. When I inquired amongst pilgrims as to why they perform the pilgrimage, common answers included: 'in the name/for the sake of Ram' (*Ram ke nam par*); 'to cross the ocean of life' (*bahosagar se par hone ke liye*); and 'for salvation' (*ud-dhar ke liye*).[14] Many added that they intended to bring *Ganga jal* home and that once they returned from the pilgrimage their children would wash their feet and drink the sacred water. This is not to say that all pilgrims express such lofty expectations from pilgrimage, nor that they are naïve. In fact, as Gold (1988) and Parry (1994) rightly point out, pilgrims expect this type of chicanery from ritual specialists (e.g., priests, boatmen and barbers) which is commonly practised in pilgrimage centres. As Parry (1994:121) observes 'giving away and using up surplus money' constitutes an essential part of the experience, as it is considered a meritorious act associated with the renunciative ideals and distant travel of pilgrimage.

Boatmen, for their part, invest the pilgrimage with an added meaning through their performance, reaffirming the view that the pilgrims are partaking in a divine journey and must therefore be treated with respect. This can be seen in the way boatmen take responsibility for, and pride in themselves for ensuring the pilgrims' safety and security while in their care. Aside from looking after their belongings and urging pilgrims to remain vigilant, boatmen have rescued numerous pilgrims from drowning as they performed *snan* (ritual bathing) in the sacred river.[15]

In other words, boatmen enact the part of Kevat on an everyday basis, investing meanings in the lives and occupation. Such performance is necessarily relational, and as such draws its currency from a shared fund of cultural references that pilgrims are familiar with, and duly reminded of, as they take a boat ride along the riverfront. The hegemonic tradition with its imagery, symbolic order and practice functions as a fertile ground for boatmen to exercise their agency and reposition themselves as indispensable actors in the ritual economy of Banaras.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate the strategic and communicative uses of myth. These retellings and uses are a far cry from colonial renditions of such native myths, which were seen as somehow possessing an incarcerating force over the native mind. For boatmen, Kevat's auspicious encounter with Lord Rama not only provides a comment on the working of the social hierarchy and their own elevated social status, but it also affirms their work as a vocation or calling (in the Weberian sense), highlighting themselves as a select group.

In the case of the boatmen of Banaras, the Kevat myth, with its devotional overtones, is liberating insofar as it offers a firm and productive ground for exercising agency and investing their lives with meaning. Nevertheless, the liberating effects are themselves constrained by certain limitations. Here, I am referring to the way in which boatmen are able to draw from a limited repertoire of symbols, values, practices, and meanings which are accessible to them in the realm of public culture, itself locally interpreted through social practice (Ortner 1997). In doing so they draw on the *bhakti* tradition, navigating between the two poles of rejecting the dominant social order, as some other groups have done (see, for example, on the Ravidasis, Schaller 1995; Narayan 2001), and fostering a hegemonic symbolic order. As I have shown, boatmen exercise their agency by inflecting the dominant tradition with their own aims, intentions and projects. Agency, in this instance, is not confined to an autonomous space of resistance. In fact, local Brahmins working on the ghats of Banaras recognise the boatmen's reading of the episode as significant. Indeed, it would be difficult for Brahmins to challenge the boatmen's interpretations without endangering their own interpretive cultures. The flipside of this is that by employing this type of hegemonic interpretative strategy, boatmen display a certain degree of acceptance, or selective adoption of a hegemonic symbolic order, thereby undermining any radical rejection of the ideological and cultural system which is largely controlled and dominated by upper castes.

In conclusion, my aim is to suggest a more nuanced rendition of agency which is not locked into the dichotomous grip resistance/accommodation. Sherry Ortner (2001) argues this point when she makes a heuristic distinction between two modalities of agency. According to Ortner (2001, 79)-, the first modality is 'the agency of (unequal) power', which is defined and takes shape within wider relations of domination and resistance. The second modality, described as the 'agency of intentions – of projects, purposes, desires' (2001, 79), accounts for the relative autonomy in the exercise of agency by marginalised people, emerging out of their own needs, wants and aspirations and articulated in culturally meaningful ways. Elsewhere I have argued (Doron 2006) that this first mode of agency is more pronounced in the way boatmen seek to assert their role as ritual specialists within the riverscape. My concern here was to highlight the latter form of agency, as one that emerges from mythological narratives and is validated through everyday practice: produced and reproduced as a result of an ongoing project to improve a group's social and economic position in relation to their own identity, and the broader symbolic and mythical order found in pilgrimage centers, such as Banaras. Such desires and actions *are* culturally constituted, insofar as they only make sense within a specific, historically grounded value system and cultural logic. This is not to say that such cultural logic determines the boatmen's behavior or the unfolding of events; nor that it is beyond the reach of power, suffusing all social systems. On the contrary, boatmen, like most people, revise and reshape their intentions and desires, identities and social relations throughout the course of their ordinary lives.

NOTES

1　This paper is based on ethnographic work carried out in Banaras between the years 2001–2003. I would like to thank La Trobe University (Melbourne) for funding the research. I am also grateful to the boatmen of Banaras for sharing their lives and stories with me. This paper has greatly benefited from comments made by Patrick Daly, Minnie Doron, Martin Fuchs, Evie Katz, Linda Malam, Kate Sullivan, Torsten Tschacher and Jessica Williams. Finally, I want to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and encouragment.

2　In the following article the name Kewat is used when employed in the colonial register, while the same name but written differently, Kevat, is used when employed in the contemporary context, since it reflects more closely its pronunciation.

3   Raheja argues that if such notions of subversion or resistance to caste hierarchy are acknowledged at all, then they are usually relegated to the past as 'survivals' from earlier evolutionary periods' (2002: 203).

4   Here I use Richman's formulation of the term 'authoritative texts' or telling, as she observes: 'authoritative tellings tend to affirm normative behaviour, cross geographical barriers and win privileged status' (Richman 2000: 10).

5   The Shudra caste is the lowest on the Hindu castes.

6   The official name of the city is Varanasi, while the name Banaras is also popular. The river is often referred to by its Indian name 'Ganga' rather than the anglicised 'Ganges'.

7   Boatmen use the caste title Mallah and Nishad interchangeably.

8   During the mid 1980s, the central government launched a waste management scheme designed to clean the river [Ganga Action Plan (GAP)]. As sandmining was considered to be an eyesore, along with other 'untidy' practices such as washing clothes on the ghats by washermen (dhobis), the transport of sand via the river was completely banned. Many boatmen not only lost their livelihood without compensation, but were also left with useless barges. Moreover, under the GAP, a ban on fishing was also introduced. According to the government, fish help with the decomposition of corpses and other organic material thrown into the river and thereby help reduce pollution. Finally, a controversial government 'scavenger turtle scheme', in which thousands of turtles were released into the river in order to consume the organic pollution, also meant restrictions were imposed on boatmen cultivating fields on the riverbanks.

9   The episode has been popularised in the *bhajan* (devotional song) sung by Anoop Jalota (lyrics by pt. Ramchandra Bagora) called: 'sometimes even God depends on the services of devotees' (*kabhi kabhi Bhagwan ko bhi bhakto se kaam pare*).

10 For an analysis of Ramraj and political mobilisation of the Nishad caste in Banaras, see Doron 2009.

11 I am indebted to Torsten Tschacher for this insight.

12 See also note 6.

13 This is not to say that pilgrims are not aware of the boatmen's tactics. In fact, the word *chalak* was often used during these times. Still, boatmen were able to collect a considerable sum, adding to the overall profit from the trip.

14 Other common answers were to fulfill a vow (*manoti*), or for the sake of the ancestors.

15 On one of my excursions with a pilgrimage group, the boatman forewarned his passengers before they left the boat about the overcrowded alleys leading to the Vishvanath Mandir (Shiva's Golden Temple), telling them to mind their belongings and walk in a straight line. He ended with a proverb: 'Remember, where there are crowds, you will find God and where God resides demons (*Rakshas*) also dwell'.

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