

Work and Play in Gamshahi Performing the Indigenous Village in Eastern Gujarat

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Abstract

Adivasis in eastern Chhotaudepur District, Gujarat, celebrate a whole-village festival known as Gamshahi or Gamgondriyo ideally once every five years, but usually at longer intervals. This article concentrates on the central ceremony, which takes place from Wednesday afternoon to roughly Thursday noon, traditionally between Divali and Holi, as determined by village leaders in consultation with a ritualist known as a *badvo*. It first describes Gamshahi as a realization of ritual scripts, then it analyses the celebration as ritual work nested within ritual play, both constituting a ritual spectacle. It does so in preparation for noting contrasts with another periodic festival that exhibits a similar nested structure, the Olympic Games. The contrast marks distinctive features of contemporary indigenous culture in India, at least of this indigenous culture, as distinct from globalizing modernity. The ultimate, as yet unanswerable question that it poses is, as Adivasis increasingly participate in this global culture, will they adapt, reassert, or relinquish traditional celebrations such as Gamshahi?

Keywords

Rathvas, Gamshahi, Ind Puja, Olympics, spectacle, ritual play, ritual work

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Introduction

Gamshahi is a festival celebrated at infrequent intervals by Adivasis – indigenous people, mostly Rathvas – primarily in Chhotaudepur and Kavant *talukas*, the two easternmost *talukas* of Chhotaudepur district in central Gujarat.¹ It belongs to a type of celebration known locally as Ind Puja or simply Ind. In the literature, Ind Puja has been discussed as one component of a broader complex often called Pangu (it has several names) which comprises the rituals performed at the dedication of a wall-painting known as a Pithora (see Shah 1980; Jain 1984; Pandya 2004; Ishai 2008, 2015; Tilche 2011, 2015). Gamshahi is, however, different from this better known celebration of Ind in a couple of important respects. First, whereas in Pangu Ind Puja is only one part – and a subsidiary one – of a more complex ritual, in Gamshahi it is the central ritual. Furthermore, because the painting of Pithoras is sponsored by households, Pangu is a ritual celebrated by a household and its guests. By contrast, Gamshahi is the celebration of an entire village, in both the subjective and objective senses of the preposition: in theory, the entire village takes part in Gamshahi, and the recipients of ritual attention, to the extent that there are recipients, are the village *dev* (goddess or god) and its ancestors, all of whom can be taken in a loose Durkheimian sense to be collective representations of the village itself.

My contention here is that Gamshahi provides an opportunity to examine indigenous cultural practice in a world increasingly defined by a globalizing modernity.² On the one hand, the people who practice Gamshahi consider themselves to be indigenous or, to be more precise, Adivasi. On the

¹ As far as I know, there is no literature specifically devoted to Gamshahi per se, either endogenous or exogenous. The festival is also known as Gamgondriyo, but I will refer to it consistently as Gamshahi, the name under which I first learned about it. A *taluka* is a political administrative unit. Indian states are divided into districts, which are subdivided into *talukas*. Until January 2013 Chhotaudepur and Kavant *talukas* formed the easternmost *talukas* of Vadodara district and, before that, the heart of the Chhotaudepur princely state.

² It seems clear that there is no global monoculture, but it seems just as clear that indigenous cultures in many parts of the world are – from the perspective of preservationists – under threat from widespread outside forces that are often subsumed under the label of modernity or some variant of the term. People in Gujarat have sometimes talked in vague terms of globalization, privatization, and liberalization, but in the area under consideration in this article we might identify the following more concrete features, most of which have emerged within the last five to ten years, as being particularly salient: technologies of communication, of transportation and agriculture, energy technologies, education, medicine, bodily adornment (e.g. Western clothing), housing, entertainment (e.g. CDs, video recordings), religion (e.g. increasing number of Hindu temples). I have discussed some of these changes in more detail in Alles 2012.

other, like most people, they are powerfully experiencing forces of globalization and modernity, in their case emanating from at least four sources: Hinduizing movements based mostly in the Charotar region of central Gujarat that aim to reform – from an Adivasi view, modernize – their religious and social practices; various national organizations, especially political and parapolitical ones; non-governmental organizations, international as well as national; and increasingly the contemporary monetary economy and globalized media of communications, epitomized perhaps above all by the omnipresent mobile phones and DVDs of weddings. As one would expect, these movements are interrelated, and they affect several different domains (see footnote 2). My interests center on the cultural or religious domain³, of which I take Gamshahi to be an important component. In what follows I will eventually contrast the performance of the Adivasi village in the celebration of Gamshahi with a manner in which globalizing modernity has performed its own collective existence by celebrating an infrequent ritual, namely, the Olympic Games.⁴

In doing so, I aim to highlight some of the tensions and temptations implicit in the Adivasi confrontation with globalizing modernity today. Several theoretical commitments underlie my analysis: At the highest level of abstraction, I consider it necessary to steer a course between cognitive science and cultural analysis. That is, I presume that even though there are slight variations from brain to brain, the human brain (or, if you will, the mind) operates according to certain generally shared structures that pose constraints and favour specific forms. At the same time, within these constraints and forms there is room for variation and creative activity in response to a variety

³ The uncertainty concerning what to call this domain is *emic* as well as *etic*. Some Adivasis consider Gamshahi to be *dharmā* (religion); others consider it to be *samskruti* (culture); see Alles 2013.

⁴ I have gathered the data about Gamshahi through sustained participant observation and extensive interviews. My first contact with the area was during a day-trip in July 1998. I first observed Gamshahi in Gabadiya village in January 2006, although it took some years before I realized what I had seen. Intensive contact with Rathva rituals began in January 2009, and continued through on-site fieldwork in 2010, 2012, and 2013. Starting in 2009 I have observed Gamshahi and other instances of Ind Puja in Bordha (Pavi-Jetpur *taluka*), Gungaliya (Kavant *taluka*), Chisadiya, Gabadiya, Lehvant, Manka, and Sursi (all Chhotaudepur *taluka*), all virtually 100 per cent Adivasi in population. Rathvas have also shared verbal accounts and photos of Gamshahi celebrations that I was not able to attend. In addition, I have remained in weekly and sometimes daily contact with people in Chhotaudepur and Kavant *talukas* via telephone, Skype, email, and social media, especially WhatsApp. In addition, over the last several months I have been helping Subhash Ishai of S.N. College, Chhotaudepur, with the English version of the report on his current research project on Pithoras, sponsored by the University Grants Commission, Government of India.

of factors. In this commitment I follow the example of both Thomas Tweed (2006) and Ann Taves (2009), although Tweed emphasizes the cultural over the cognitive while Taves emphasizes the cognitive over the cultural. At a lower level of abstraction, I tend to theorize religious ritual (ritual involving gods and ancestors) in terms of relations of exchange. Although the distinction is not particularly relevant in this context, my metatheoretical stance requires a negotiation between formalism, which thinks in terms of universal abstract models, and substantivism, which stresses cultural variability.⁵ More relevant here is the endogenous view that engaging in various forms of exchange with *devs* and ancestors, as in Gamshahi, is crucial to maintaining and increasing the quality of village life.⁶ Finally, loosely in the manner of articulation theory⁷, I presume here that cultural practices “articulate” with their environments, with the result that different practices fit and address different social and material environments (Hall talks about ideologies rather than practices). This should not, however, be taken as postulating an iron-clad holism in which the ritual practices are necessary concomitants of specific environmental configurations; the relationship between them retains a certain degree of contingency (Grossberg 1986: 53). This theoretical commitment underlies the contrast that I draw between Gamshahi and the Olympics, and leads to the question of the extent to which a celebration like Gamshahi can and will articulate with the circumstances of increasing global modernity, an articulation that the Olympics as global communal celebration epitomize. Given that there is no necessary holistic coherence, the answer to this question can only come from actual future practice, not from theory. First, however, I must introduce Gamshahi and, before that, the villages it celebrates.

The ritual context

The area where Gamshahi is celebrated is predominantly tribal and rural. In the Census of 2011, Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) made up 87.6 per cent and 93.5 per cent of the population of Chhotaudepur and Kavant *talukas*, respectively; of these tribals, 97 per cent and 98 per cent lived in rural villages. Indeed, tribals accounted for 95.2 per cent and 96 per cent of the total rural

⁵ On these two see Gregory D. Alles (forthcoming): Exchange. In: Robert A. Segal / Kocku von Stuckrad (eds): *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill.

⁶ For such an account in a very different location, cf. Sandstrom 2008.

⁷ See for example, Grossberg 1986; Clifford 2013: 38–41, 50–67, 300–306.

population of the two *talukas*, respectively.⁸ Gamshahi, then, is celebrated in villages that are rural and whose Adivasi population often approaches 100 per cent.⁹ Village populations are not always so homogenous, and there are cases in which villages with mixed populations – tribals, scheduled castes, and others – have celebrated Gamshahi.¹⁰ These cases notwithstanding, the instances of Ind Puja with which I am personally familiar have all taken place in villages where the vast majority of the population were Adivasis, as is the case with the vast majority of villages in the area.¹¹

In each of these villages the dominant tribal group, politically, culturally, and numerically, is Rathva, although the degree of dominance is difficult to quantify. Below the district level, Census statistics for the various *adijatis* (individual tribal groups) are not available. To complicate matters further, in 2013 what had been the single district of Vadodara was divided into two: Vadodara district in the west and Chhotaudepur district in the east. In any case, according to the 2011 Census, the four most populous tribal groups in Vadodara district were Rathvas (44.5 per cent), Bhils (26.6 per cent), Dhankas (12 per cent), and Naykas (10.9 per cent). Certainly the vast majority of the people with whom I have interacted are Rathvas. Recently questions were raised about whether Rathvas should be considered a Scheduled Tribe, but the people themselves insist upon their status as Adivasi and – when they know the word – indigenous (Rathva et al. 2014). At the risk of slighting other populations, I instinctively refer to the culture of the area as Rathva, as do others.

⁸ Figures calculated from the Primary Census Abstract Data Tables for Vadodara district, Gujarat, from the 2011 Census, <http://censusindia.gov.in/pca/pcadata/Houselisting-housing-Gujarat.html> (accessed 5 June 2015). There is a technical distinction between Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes, but it is not relevant here.

⁹ For example, Manka (Chhotaudepur *taluka*), which celebrated Gamshahi at the beginning of January 2009, numbered 538 people in 2011, all but two of whom were tribals. Gungaliya (Kavant *taluka*), which celebrated Gamshahi in February 2009, numbered 1,545 people in 2011, all but one of them tribals.

¹⁰ For example, the population of Kanalva (Kavant *taluka*), which celebrated Gamshahi around the year 2000 (memories differ), numbered 5,835 people in 2011, of whom 44 were not tribals (no Scheduled Castes), but that is still a non-tribal population of less than 1 per cent. The village of Ambala (Chhotaudepur *taluka*), which celebrated Gamshahi in 2002 or 2003 (memories are approximate), is much more heterogeneous. It numbered 2,934 people in 2011, of whom 77.4 per cent belonged to Scheduled Tribes, 10.6 per cent to Scheduled Castes, and 12 per cent to other groups. Khuntaliya, which borders on Chhotaudepur town, celebrated Gamshahi in February 2015, and it also reported a mixed population in the 2011 Census: 80.9 per cent tribal, 3.6 per cent Scheduled Castes, and 15.5 per cent others.

¹¹ According to 2011 Census figures, 90.3 per cent of the villages in Chhotaudepur *taluka* have a population that is more than 99 per cent ST, as do 93.1 per cent of the villages in Kavant *taluka*.

Rathva villages are not nucleated but are organized into two or more *faliya* (streets; cf. Ratnagar 2010). The name may be somewhat misleading, because *faliya* are as much areas as streets, and households may or may not be concentrated along a single main road. Traditionally, each *faliya* is inhabited by members of an exogamous *nat*¹², also referred to locally as a *gotar* or *gotra*. Rathva *nat* are further classified as being either *moti* (big) or *nani* (little), members of Moti Nats living principally in the northern and those of Nani Nats principally in the southern part of the region. Some religious and cultural differences distinguish these two groups. For example, they are traditionally endogamous, although some unions between a Moti and a Nani Nat have now occurred. Also by tradition, only the houses of Moti Nats contain the Pithora wall-paintings for which Rathvas are best known. To the best of my knowledge, however, these differences do not affect Gamshahi. By custom specific male functionaries conduct village affairs: a *patel* (village head), a *pujaro* (a kind of ritualist), and a *kotwal* (basically a village messenger). The principal ritual functionary and healer, however, known as a *badvo*, is not limited in his sphere of activity to his own village. He performs his services for whatever individuals or collectivities seek him out. As a result, although Gamshahi celebrates the village, the *badva* who supervise and perform at it may actually be hired outside experts.

Rathva religious practice centers on exchange relations with *devs* and ancestors, who receive offerings and in return help persons, households, and villages to thrive. These practices may be as simple as putting aside a little food and pouring a few drops of liquid for the ancestors before one begins to eat and drink, a practice that some Rathva friends often scold me for forgetting. They may also be more formal and elaborate, as in the celebration of festivals such as Holi, Divaso, Pangu, or Gamshahi. Households generally have a post in the kitchen for worshiping the family *devs* and ancestors, and a *khattris*, a row of *khunta*¹³ at the edge of a field as a shrine for the ancestors. Each village also has a *devsthan* (“god-place”), which contains at least one *khunto* but usually more. Around the foot of *khunta* it is customary to place as offerings glazed or unglazed terracotta horses along with terracotta structures known as *dhaba*, small, stupa-shaped pieces with an opening for *devs* to reside. In addition to the horses and *dhaba*, typical offerings include *kodri* (cooked red rice), *dhebara* (for Rathvas a deep-fried disc made from *arad dal*), coconut, chickens, goats, and *mahua* liquor. Houseposts, *khattris*, and *devsthan* – all

¹² Although Rathvas do not constitute a caste, a *nat* is sometimes described as “sub-caste.” It constitutes an exogamous unit whose male members are all thought to be descended from a common patrilineal ancestor.

¹³ Relatively thick, carved wooden posts, two and a half to three feet tall.

permanent structures – are not, however, the principal location for the celebration of Gamshahi. Like all forms of Ind Puja, Gamshahi takes place at a row of branches temporarily erected in a fallow field.

Describing Gamshahi

The vast majority of Rathvas are farmers, and Rathvas generally say that they celebrate Gamshahi to ensure the well-being of the village: freedom from illness, flourishing crops, thriving animals, and social harmony. A commonly expressed ideal, also found in the literature (Tadavi 1977: 138), is that a village should celebrate Gamshahi every five years, but for practical reasons the interval between celebrations is usually longer. In order to celebrate Gamshahi, village leaders must levy contributions from each household, and not every household is always in a position to contribute its share. Ideally, the festival takes place in the time from Divali to Holi, when agricultural labour is relatively light and conditions for travel are relatively favourable. The central events, on which I will concentrate, take place from Wednesday afternoon to Thursday noon, but they do not take place on any particular Wednesday and Thursday. The date is chosen by village leaders in consultation with a *badvo* or several *badva*.

Describing any ritual, Gamshahi included, is challenging, first of all because of the problem of variation. Even highly formalized rituals are performed in different ways on different occasions, but attempting to preserve that diversity quickly leads to an excess of complexity.¹⁴ One way around this difficulty is to concentrate on single performances (cf. Shah 1980). Written with literary skill, such accounts preserve some of the emotion and attraction of the festival, but they also risk losing the manner in which a ritual occupies cultural space. Josef Haekel and Engelbert Stiglmayr, the first European anthropologists to visit the area, noted in their first report (Haekel / Stiglmayr 1961: 39): “So far as we could determine, recitations and actions performed mechanically according to fixed schemata dominate cultic activity.” Language aside, their observation contains a kernel of truth. Taking my cue from classic work in artificial intelligence and the psychology of memory (e.g. Tulving 1972; Schank / Abelson 1977; Baddeley et al. 2015: 282–288), I present Gamshahi as realizing various “schemata” that I call routines and scripts – action-programs, if you will. But these schemata should not be thought of as rigidly fixed.

¹⁴ A good attempt to get at this complexity in the study of Adivasi narrative and ritual is Ghosh 2006.

It would be simplistic to claim that everyone in any community shared all the same scripts, although we often talk as if they do. Precisely what scripts individual people bring with them to the performance of a ritual, how those scripts are encoded, how much variation there is from person to person, and how the variation is negotiated in an actual performance – all of these are questions for empirical research.¹⁵ In the case of Gamshahi this is research that I have not done. In the interests of seeing how the ceremony was encoded in memory, I did try to recover – after the fact – the scripts of some of the participants in the Manka Gamshahi that I observed in January 2009.¹⁶ Almost four months to the day after the ritual, I interviewed the main religious functionary, Narsing *badvo* of Ganthiya village. Perhaps because of his advanced age (he died the following spring), perhaps because he performed Ind Puja at least once a month, perhaps because I was meeting him personally for the first time, or perhaps even because of rather extreme intoxication, Narsing had very little to say about the Gamshahi at Manka. Bystanders who had not been present prompted him continually. Later, walking through Manka, I interviewed at random several villagers who had been there. They seemed simply to encode their memories in terms of action-patterns defined by single words, such as *puja*, dancing, killing, and so forth. Such encoding leaves considerable room for innovation and improvisation.

Gamshahi joins together what I call “basic routines” – scripts found widely in Rathva ceremonies – and a few scripts peculiar to Ind Puja (see Table 1). Its identity as Gamshahi derives from the few Ind Puja scripts, the range of persons involved, and the alleged purposes of the ceremony. Its basic structure provides little opportunity for variation. People plan the ritual, set it up, perform it, and take it down. On the level of individual scripts, however, considerable variation does occur. For example, the basic routine for performing *puja* with the sacrifice of a chicken follows a general pattern: the assembling and setting up of materials, the “consecration” of the object

¹⁵ One way to flesh out these scripts would be in terms of various combinations of what David Bailey and Srinii Narayanan have called “executing schemas” (summarized in Johnson 2007: 171–174). These schemas are organized according to a control structure – readiness, starting phase, transition, central process, postcentral state, end phase transition, and final state – by means of several processes: iteration, sequences, embedding, and conditional relations.

¹⁶ Since Gamshahi is an infrequent ritual, I was curious to see whether it corresponded to claims made by Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2004) about semantic and episodic memory and doctrinal and imagistic religion. It does not. The only person I know who has episodic memories of the Manka Gamshahi is me, and these memories are reinforced by consulting photographs and videos. Partly because Gamshahi is a variety of Ind Puja, and partly because it depends upon routines that are even more widely prevalent, people’s memories are semantic, when present at all. At the same time, religion among the Rathvas is not doctrinal. Most Rathvas show very little interest in teachings and narratives.

TABLE 1: Central ritual of Gamshahi

 SETTING UP

Wednesday afternoon

- Ind Puja Script: prepare area for branches

Wednesday at twilight: get branches

- Basic Routine: process (to forest)
- Basic Routine: *puja* with chicken (directed to tree)
- Ind Puja Script: cut branches
- Basic Routine: process (to village with branches)

Wednesday evening (upon return)

- Basic Routine: reverence with *arati* and *tipna* (to branches)
- Basic Routine: group dancing (carrying branches)
- Ind Puja Script: set up branches
- Basic Routine: set up implements for *puja*

PERFORMING

Wednesday night – Thursday morning

- Basic Routine: group dancing (around branches)
- Basic Routine: tend *puja* implements

During the night

- Basic Routine: sing *gayna/bhajan* (*badvo* and assistants in front of branches)

Thursday – beginning around dawn

- Basic Routine: *badvo*'s possession
- Basic Routine: *puja* with sacrifice of goats and chickens

TAKING DOWN

Thursday after sacrifice of goats and chickens

- Ind Puja Script: “uproot” branches
 - Basic Routine: reverence with *arati* and *tipna* (to branches)
 - Basic Routine: group dancing (carrying branches)
 - Basic Routine: process (to water with branches)
 - Basic Routine: *puja* with chicken (at edge of water)
 - Basic Routine: dispose (branches in water)
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Note: Routines and scripts are action-programs – sequences of action done in a particular order according to specific rules. “Basic Routines” are action programs that are widely used in Rathva rituals (a good example is performing *puja* with the sacrifice of a chicken). “Ind Puja Scripts” are action programs that are only used in the performance of Ind Puja.

before which the chicken will be presented, the killing and presenting of the chicken, the distribution of *prasad* (food offerings to those present), and cleaning up. But the details vary considerably. For example, at the Manka Gamshahi the *badvo* and his assistants performed this routine when fetching the branches. They first tied a thread around the tree, put *tipna* (orange-red dots) on its trunk, piled rice in front of it, placed a lamp on the rice, did *arati*, that is, waved a lighted lamp on a *thali* (a metal plate) in front of the trunk, dedicated and decapitated the chicken, cooked its liver, placed offerings of cooked rice, *dhebara* and crumbled up chicken liver on leaves before the tree, and then dripped *mahua* liquor on the ground.

A month later, a *badvo* from the neighboring village of Gabadiya performed the same routine before a post in a neighboring house. He first made piles of rice and put lamps on top of them. Next he put a thread through a lime and tied it to the post, and then put *tipna* on the lime, on the ground in front of the lamps, on a pot covered with a leaf (which he then placed near the post), on a coconut that he placed beside the pot, on a *mahua* bottle similarly placed, and finally on the post. Then two chickens were dedicated and decapitated. A year and a half later I watched this *badvo*'s son do the same routine at a post in the *badvo*'s own house. Once again the objects placed in front of the post and the order of their placement were different. Such variation never calls the performance of the routine into question. At the level of fine detail, the scripts are more like general rules of thumb.

Keeping this kind of micro-level variation in mind, we can describe the central ritual of Gamshahi as follows.¹⁷ On Wednesday afternoon a smooth area in a vacant field is prepared, and a line of holes is dug to receive the branches. The holes are perhaps three inches in diameter and six to twelve inches deep. At twilight, a procession heads off into the *jangal* (forest) to fetch branches from a tree, preferably a tree known as *kalam* in Rathvi and *haldarvo* in Gujarati (*Haldina cordifolia*). The procession consists of ritual functionaries and male musicians at the head, followed by whatever members of the community wish to come along. Women in the group may sing along the way and during the events at the tree. When the procession arrives at the tree, the *badvo* reverences it, consecrates a chicken (which is killed by someone else), and presents foodstuffs such as cooked rice, *dhebara* cakes, coconut pieces, and chicken liver to the tree. Then an adult male climbs the tree, cuts the requisite number of branches, and the procession returns to the field that has been prepared, dancing clockwise and counterclockwise at intervals along the way. At the field the *badvo* along with representatives of the community, male and

¹⁷ Anyone wishing a more detailed description of the ritual in terms of basic routines and Ind Puja scripts should contact the author personally.

female, reverences the branches and other ritual accoutrements, such as *patla* (small benches), *matla* (clay water pots), and oil lamps, by performing *arati* and symbolically, if not literally, placing *tipna* on them. The branches are planted in the holes in the field, held in place by paddy poured around them. The various accoutrements – *patla*, *matla*, and so on – are arranged in parallel lines in front of the branches (Figure 1).¹⁸ Oil lamps burning in front of the branches transform the whole into a very impressive night-time display.

FIGURE 1: Offerings at Gamshahi Manka (8 January 2009)



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Once the branches are in place, two sets of activities follow. All night long people, mostly men, dance in boisterous groups counterclockwise around the branches. They are led by men playing *dhol* (large drums suspended at the waist), *sharnai* (a reed instrument), and transverse bamboo flutes known as *vansli*. A few brandish weapons as they dance: bows and arrows, sickles, and even an occasional rifle. As the night wears on, the dancing diminishes, but

¹⁸ It is worth noting that two accoutrements that are otherwise quite common in Rathva ritual are never present in front of the branches: terracotta horses and *dhaba*. These represent an alternate manner of encountering the deity.

it never really ceases. Others, mostly women, children, and older men, but also dancers taking a break, stand and watch. The general effect is energetic, noisy, and generally joyous. Although Gujarat is a dry state, home-made liquor flows freely, and a few men become so intoxicated that they cannot dance, walk, or even stand. At times violence breaks out. On rare occasions it even leads to murder.

As dancers circle the branches, one or more *badva* gather and sit with their assistants in front of the branches. At intervals they beat *dhak* (small drums) and sing *gayna* (*bhajan*, religious songs). Toward dawn, while singing and beating his drum, the main *badvo* becomes entranced by the village *dev*, often a goddess. His limbs start to shake, he removes his turban so that his long hair can fly in the open air, and he moves his head vigorously up and down in an action called “dhuning”, from the Gujarati verb *dhunvum*.¹⁹ In this state he squats with groups of one, two, or three people, men, women, and sometimes children, giving advice and instructions. Consultations done, he may join the dancers for a round or two, perhaps brandishing a sword. Eventually, standing in front of the branches, he is sprinkled with water and convulses, and the deity leaves him.

After some time has passed, people bring goats and chickens to be killed, one by one, in front of the branches. The *badvo* consecrates each animal in turn by reciting *mantras* as he sprinkles water on its head. The animal signals its agreement to be killed by shaking its head, then someone else decapitates it, ideally with a single stroke. The severed heads and bodies are lined up in front of the branches, the heads closer, the bodies farther away and perpendicular to the branches, with severed necks facing them.

Again after some time, the display is dismantled. First, the branches are lifted from their holes and, along with various accoutrements such as *patla* and *matla*, they are paraded in circles around the empty holes, clockwise as well as counterclockwise. Then the branches and accoutrements are lined up and revered with *arati* and *tipna* (symbolic if not literal) by a *badvo* and representatives of the community. Following this the assembly processes to a body of water, where the branches are disposed of. Along the way, it may stop at various places, most notably the house of the *patel*, where the branches are again revered with *arati* and *tipna*. When the procession reaches the water, the *badvo* performs a *puja* on the edge of the water and a chicken is “cut”. The branches are submerged in water, and Gamshahi is finished, at least for this day.²⁰

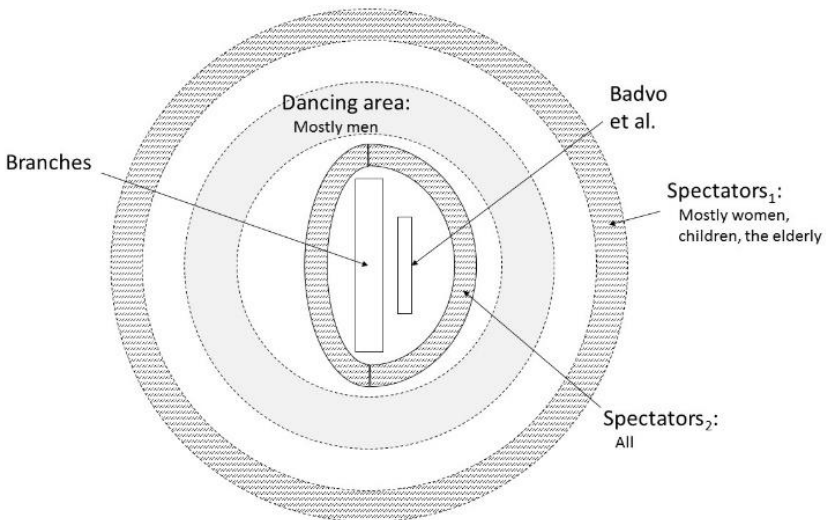
¹⁹ In this anglicization I am following Hardiman 1987. A *badvo*'s hair is long because it is never cut.

²⁰ The final day of the entire Gamshahi celebration is the following Sunday.

Performing Gamshahi – work, play, and spectation

There are, of course, any number of ways to analyze a ritual. Here I will simply focus on the spatial organization of the various activities, and I will do so only in regard to the central part of Gamshahi, the activity that takes place once the branches are erected and before they are dismantled. This focus recommends itself for a couple of reasons. First, it will facilitate the comparison with global modernity that is my ultimate aim. Specifically, it makes possible a comparison with the Olympics as analyzed by the ritual scholar John MacAloon (1984, 2006). Just as important, although the formal and functional localization of the various ritual activities that take place in Gamshahi is a feature that may not be immediately apparent from the list of scripts and routines, it is something that even casual observers cannot overlook without running the risk of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, with unpredictable consequences. Once the branches are planted, the field where Gamshahi is celebrated becomes divided into three concentric areas, each populated by a distinct group of people engaged in their own particular activities. Working out from the center – the row of branches – to the periphery, I will call these activities work, play, and spectation. “Spectation” is an unusual English word, but one that is useful here because of its resonance with the words “spectator” and “spectacle” (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: The ritual field



Closest to the center, in a line in front of the branches, sit the *badvo* and his assistants. Their fundamental task is to interact with the *devs*. Periodically they sing *gayna* about them, according to one informant the *gayna* of either the village *dev* or Indraj.²¹ Eventually, the *dev* enters the *badvo* and interacts with the villagers, talking and dancing through his body. Finally, the *badvo* consecrates the chickens and goats that the villagers present. The animals are killed in front of the branches, and their livers are cooked and presented to the *devs*.

One could see this activity as play, in the sense that Tanya Luhrmann has recently used the term in discussing the vivid interaction of certain Evangelical Christians with God, as in “date night” with God (Luhrmann 2012: 72–100, building upon the work of Donald W. Winnicott, e.g., 1971, on the “let’s pretend” kind of play). I prefer to see it as ritual work. For one thing, interacting with *devs* in this way is not something that just anyone can do. It requires specialists, and villagers must pay them for their services. As often happens when we hire specialists, villagers show very little interest in what the specialists are actually doing until it involves them directly: until the *dev* comes to interact with the villagers personally or until they bring their animals to be killed and offered to the *dev*. In this sense, the *badvo* and his assistants are agents working for the villagers.

The activity in the innermost ring is work in another sense, too: it is heterotelic. It aims at an external purpose, namely, the production or procurement of communal well-being through the placation and manifestation of the village *dev*. When this *dev* feels slighted, bad things are said to happen. The exact mechanics are of little concern. What is important is, with the help of the *badvo*, to interact with the *dev* in such a way that she or he remains pleased. From the Rathva point of view this interaction makes a vital contribution to the procurement of goods necessary for life: food and health. In fact, it provides a rare instance in which village work requires a specialist.

A second field of activity takes place in a broad circle around the branches, *badvo*, and assistants. In this area groups made up mostly of men dance exuberantly in a large, counterclockwise circle. They continue unabated from the time the erection of the branches is finished to the time the sacrifices are completed. The only changes that occur are to volume – in the sense of size

²¹ These songs are commonly known only to the *badva*. So far as I am aware, given the ambient noise, no one has been able to make usable recordings of them during actual celebrations of Gamshahi. One version of the *gayna* of Indraj, recorded around 1999 from a non-ritual recitation by Chuniya Biliya Rathva (Moti Jher village, Chhotaudepur *taluka*), is currently being edited by Subhash Ishai.

as well as sound – as the number and energy of the dancers waxes and wanes throughout the night and into the next morning.

Unlike the work around the branches, this activity is play.²² Indeed, that is what the dancing is called: *ramat* (“play”) or *nachramat* (“dance-play”). It is not, however, a dance competition or a competitive game like *Koko* (a children’s game). Groups of people dance together, all in step with the beat of the drums. For some the dancing may be occasioned by a conviction that the *dev* is present, but for others it is just a chance to have a good time. In any case, the dancing around the branches is not addressed to the *dev* nor does it initiate any interaction with the *dev*. It is autotelic. It seems to be simply joyous, communal celebration, done for its own sake and for the sake of the pleasure that results from it. It is an ideal illustration of a recent remark by Sam Gill: “Dancing is self-referential, autotelic, contained, not about anything outside itself, not by choice or subject matter but by its nature.” (Gill 2012: 184). This playful activity has its own kind of music, but unlike the *gayna* sung in front of the branches, it does not provide a narrative or some other semantically meaningful account. Instead, it provides the four-beat rhythm of the drums, punctuated by incursions from the *sharnai* or flutes and shouts from the dancers, that allows people to dance together. Especially at the beginning, emotions run high, mostly in the direction of exuberance – until fatigue sets in, and dancers take breaks.

Neither the *gayna* sung before the branches nor the dancing around them is a performance in the sense of an activity done for a human audience. Given the ambient noise, no one but the singers – and the *devs* – can make out the *gayna*, and while dancers may interact with each other, they do not generally perform for spectators the way dancers on stage or on a dance floor often do. Nevertheless, there is a third concentric ring that consists of women, children, some older men, and dancers taking breaks. Their principal activity is spectation; they watch the scene as it unfolds before them. For most of the night, spectators stand outside the ring of dancers, occasionally joining the dance and being joined by those who leave it (Spectators 1 in Figure 2). Like the number of dancers, their numbers fluctuate as people decide to catch a couple of hours of sleep or seek warmth elsewhere. Around dawn, however, when the *badvo* begins to dhune, the principal site of spectation changes. People crowd, sometimes extremely tightly, around the *badvo* and his assist-

²² There are, of course, many ways to use the term “play”. Some, like Roberts 2009, not only distinguish play from work but see the two as mutually exclusive. Others, like Sicart 2014, emphasize that there are play dimensions even in work. Victor Turner once spoke of the “ergic-ludic” and the “anergic-ludic” (Turner 1982: 52). While I have no absolute objections to any of these positions, they do not seem to capture the dynamic I want to highlight here.

ants (Spectators₂ in Figure 2). But although the *dev* is said to be present, onlookers are more entertained than overwhelmed by religious awe and wonder. I hesitate to say that the *badvo* consciously plays to the crowd. An hour or more of dhuning must produce some sort of mental state resembling dizziness, and *badva* claim after the fact that they have no memory of the entranced state. Nevertheless, at the Gamshahi in Gungaliya in February 2009, the *badvo*'s "consultations" with young teenage girls and boys (in separate-sex groups of three and two) were remarkable for their performative character.²³ His attitude was more playful than it was when adults consulted him, and to the amusement of the girls and boys, as well as the crowd, their consultations culminated with him pouring pitchers of water over them as well as himself.²⁴

Gamshahi and contemporary indigeneity

The central performance of Gamshahi, then, comprises ritual work nested within play, both of which are the object of spectation. Together, these three activities perform – act out – the Rathva village. First, hired experts ensure that members of the village who are generally unseen but upon whose pleasure communal well-being depends receive the recognition that is their due. Second, primarily male adults join together in a highly emotive group activity that reflects but also creates a sense of community. Third, the rest demonstrate their belonging by giving these activities their attention. These three activities – work, play, and spectation – and their respective locations from center to periphery reflect the social hierarchy of the village itself: *devs*, adult males, and women, children, and others. Other divisions, such as divisions into *faliya* and *nat*, while certainly known to participants, receive no formal, structural recognition. For example, they do not formally structure the groups in which men dance.

Technology aside, almost none of the elements in Gamshahi is particularly incompatible with a globalizing modernity (see footnote 2). The ritual use of tree branches, which Adivasis sometimes schematize in terms of the trope of "indigenous closeness to nature" (Vasava 2008; Ishai 2015) distinctive of indigenous culture, is hardly unfamiliar to the globalized modern. One need think no further than Christmas trees or – to take a Bavarian analogy –

²³ At the Gungaliya Gamshahi these were healthy girls and boys who assisted in the celebration. On some occasions Ind Puja is performed for the healing of sick children or to give thanks for children healed as the result of a vow.

²⁴ As *badva* dhune, they regularly douse themselves with small pitchers of water. There is a merging of work and play as the *badvo* picks up his sword and joins the dancers.

the branches that decorate Ludwigstraße during the Corpus Christi processions in Munich. Raucous communal celebrations are similarly familiar. For example, I recall vividly the flag-waving crowds promenading up and down Ludwigstraße in Munich every time the German team won a game in the 2006 World Cup. Even possession behavior is not incompatible with the modern. It may occupy a marginal place in many “developed” societies, but over the last seven decades, as is well known, Pentecostalism, a form of possession behavior, has marched hand in hand with modernity into the southern hemisphere (e.g., Cox 1995; Martin 2001; Jenkins 2006; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2006; Pew Research Center 2014).

The activity in Gamshahi that is probably most incompatible with global modernity is also the one that is most controversial from the perspective of hegemonizing caste Hinduism – animal sacrifice. The killing of animals for food is certainly not absent from the globally modern, but it is generally kept out of sight and out of mind. Animal food products are simply purchased as prepackaged items on the shelves of supermarkets and other shops. Cultural and social prejudices aside, then, there is no particular reason why the elements involved in a festival like Gamshahi could not “articulate” with the changing circumstances which the ongoing incursion of a globalizing modernity is bringing to the area.

None of this is to say, however, that Gamshahi can be integrated seamlessly into global modernity as Rathvas experience it. There are, I think, important ways in which Gamshahi and global modernity are out of sync. To illustrate this point, I want briefly to compare Gamshahi to a festival in which the modern global community performs itself, and one that occurs with similar frequency: the Olympic Games. As analyzed by John MacAloon (1984, 2006), the Olympics have a nesting structure reminiscent of Gamshahi: games nested within ritual nested within festival, all framed by spectacle. But the point of the Olympics, of course, is to celebrate and foster global and national communities and only rarely local ones. To this end, the Olympics employ “empty forms”, forms without specific cultural content, and this very lack of content contributes to their globalizing agenda (MacAloon 2006: 19–21). On my analysis, by contrast, Gamshahi is constructed from forms that are not empty but culturally full. The basic routines and Ind puja scripts are taken from the broader store of routines and scripts that make up Rathva ritual practice, and their ability to travel to other areas is limited.

At the center of Gamshahi stands what I have called ritual work. Unlike the central activity at the Olympics, that is, the games, this ritual work is interactive, not agonistic. It does not realize community through competition in an attempt to achieve superiority. It does so instead through cooperative interaction initiated from a position of acknowledged subordination, that is,

subordination to the village *dev*. Furthermore, although both the Olympic Games and Gamshahi involve the activity of elite agents with special physical abilities, at Gamshahi the ability at issue is not the special muscular abilities of the Olympics. It is the ability to effect what Mary Keller has called “instrumental agency,” namely, the ability to allow one’s body to be taken over by the divine (Keller 2002). Somewhat paradoxically, by means of agonistic activities the Olympics aim to foster not just nationalistic loyalty but a metaphorical brother- and sisterhood of all humanity. In this sense the Olympics provide a peacetime surrogate for war. By contrast, Gamshahi aims to unite only a specific group of persons. If there is an “other”, it is not other villages but what, following Graham Harvey, we might call other than human relations (Harvey 2006; cf. Castro 1998; Descola 2009) – except that these other than human relations are distinctly conceived of as persons. They are simply not visible in our ordinary, day-to-day world. The aim is to live in harmony with these “others” not by defeating them in some contest but by attending to their wants and needs.

As far as the middle rings of the Olympics are concerned, which MacAloon calls ritual and festival – the aspects of the Olympics that take place outside the stadiums and arenas along the streets, in restaurants and bars, in the athletes’ residences, and so on – I cannot say much. I have never witnessed the Olympics in person, and these aspects do not appear much in television coverage, at least in the United States. As a result my knowledge is quite limited. If the 2006 World Cup that I saw in Munich is any indication, these aspects, especially the festival, combine acts that signal extreme positive affect (regardless of a participant’s actual feelings), group action (e.g., drinking together, singing together, promenading up and down streets), and commercial activity (memorabilia in shops and at kiosks, carnival rides, food and drink stands). Gamshahi is considerably less commercial. At the Manka Gamshahi merchants did, in fact, spread two or three blankets with their wares on the ground at some distance from the ritual field, but especially in comparison with the various *bhagoriyas* (pre-Holi fairs) and other tribal *melas* (fairs) in the area, Gamshahi provides only limited opportunities to make money. Instead, the almost total emphasis is upon group action that signals extreme positive affect, although what people actually feel must vary. The effect would appear to be somewhat Durkheimian: the reinforcement of a sense of social belonging and solidarity, especially among males.

Perhaps the biggest area in which Gamshahi diverges from the Olympics is what I have called spectation. As MacAloon has emphasized, the Olympics, somewhat against conscious intentions, have embraced spectacle. By “spectacle” he means a kind of spectation (my term) whose distinguishing features are the “primacy [of] sensory and symbolic codes”, very large “size

and grandeur”, the presence of voluntary spectators, and “movement, action, change, and exchange on the part of the human actors” that stimulates excitement in the spectators (MacAloon 1984: 243–245).²⁵

Eastern Chhotaudepur District may present some possibilities for spectacle in this grand sense. The Gerno Mela held in Kavant town on the third day of Holi comes immediately to mind. During it the main streets of the city are clogged with hundreds if not thousands of people promenading. Among them are groups of musicians and dancers from different villages who often wear traditional or retro-traditional dress and ornaments and vie with each other to attract the spectators’ gaze. Meanwhile, balconies and rooftops are filled to overflowing, mostly but not entirely with local people, who watch and, increasingly, photograph and film the scenes that unfold below. Given that the organizing principle of this *mela* is spectation – aside from a handful of merchants, people go to it to see or to be seen (or both) – a few slight alterations might transform this event into a spectacle: a bit more orchestration, a larger media presence, and an even more explicit emphasis on the dancers as typifying tribal identity. Add indigenous participants from other parts of the country or the world, and one could have, in theory at least, a national or international spectacle.

Gamshahi, however, places much less emphasis on spectation. The dances are for participation, not observation, and dancers exhibit little skill. Although the entrancement of the *badvo* attracts spectators, it is small-scale, basically a one-man show. Features such as these would present challenges to the mediatization of Gamshahi, and so would the potential audience: most of the constituency (the current constituency, at least) is already present. Such factors are not, however, immutable, and it is possible to envision a celebration like Gamshahi being at least incorporated into a spectacle, although it would then no longer be a celebration of the village of, by, and for itself. Imagine that India is hosting the Olympic Games in Gujarat. It is not unusual for opening ceremonies to celebrate the cultural specificities of the host nation – as at the Summer Olympics in China in 2008 and the Winter Olympics in Canada in 2010. So it is conceivable that, for a few brief moments, the opening ceremonies in Gujarat might depict the central events of Gamshahi. The sound of *dhols*, *sharnais*, and flutes would swell over loudspeakers. Spotlights would momentarily illuminate an area where a *badvo* dhunes before a row of branches. Around him men and perhaps women would dance dressed in a way that signals tribal identity. Then the lights would shift to another scene. Such a display would no longer be Gamshahi

²⁵ Not everyone finds this definition of spectacle appropriate; e.g., Inomata / Coben 2006: 33, note 3. I have tried to sidestep this difficulty by introducing the term “spectation”.

but a simulacrum of it. This is one way in which a performance of Gamshahi could articulate with globalizing modernity, and it is in fact similar to the kinds of performances of local culture for the entertainment of outsiders that indigenous groups around the globe have been providing. But it would be a performance of the village in a very different sense. It would constitute a performance to be viewed, not participated in, by a very different community and for very different purposes.

It is impossible, of course, to predict what will happen to Gamshahi as Rathvas continue to feel and adopt the enticements of a spreading global modernity. On the one hand, in other parts of the world such forces have often led to accommodation and loss or conscious repudiation of indigenous culture, as is happening among Rathva Bhagat movements today. On the other hand, it may be relatively easy to adjust certain features to accord with modern tastes. Indeed, there is some evidence that this adjustment is already taking place. For example, at the Gamshahi celebrated in Khuntaliya in the first week of February 2015 offerings of coconuts replaced those of goats and chickens. Such a move raises the possibility of a reformulation of tradition along the lines that Claire Scheid and Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh present in this issue for Donyipolo and Rangfraism, respectively. At the same time, I suspect that the real challenges to Gamshahi are more structural, and they cut across several domains, social, political, economic, cultural, and cognitive. As an increasing number of Rathvas leave the area either for education or seasonal manual labour, will their expanding horizons and increased awareness of social diversity make activities that reflect and address this broader, more diverse community more fitting objects of their attention, including their ritual attention? Now that Chhotaudepur has become its own tribal-majority district, will political loyalties shift to larger units, again diminishing the motivation for a village festival? Will an increasing emphasis on material and monetary prosperity incline people away from Gamshahi and toward events – various festivals and *melas* – that are more susceptible to commercialization and more amenable to tourists? Will the increasing appeal of media culture – e.g., the now common DVDs of marriage celebrations – shift interest to events that are more capable of mediaization or even to events that, for most people, simply involve spectatorship? Finally, but significantly, with increasing formal education and the worldviews that come along with it, including the attractiveness of caste Hindu ways of thinking and celebrating, which strike many Rathvas as more modern, will it be possible for succeeding generations of Rathvas to conceive of and interact with a village *dev* seriously, or will such customs and beliefs be relegated, if not to the dustbins of history (cf. Lidia Guzy in this issue on memocide), then to the cabinets of

the intangible cultural heritage, from which they will be occasionally brought out and put on display?

Each of these factors would seem to lead away from celebrations like Gamshahi and toward celebrations more like the Olympics, whether they be the Olympics, World Cup football, World Cup, Test, ODI, or IPL cricket, or something else. But while the prediction of the demise of indigenous cultures has been a common trope for well over a century (Clifford 2013: 22), reality has generally turned out to be more complicated.

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