

Moving Identities: The Jādopatiā, the Santals and the Myth of Creation

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Abstract:

The myth of creation is a central locus for Santal identity. In their aspiration for the Jharkhand state, and greater autonomy within the Indian nation, the Santals have found a wellspring of rich material for their identity creation in the legacy of the Scandinavian Santal mission. Written ethnographic accounts by the Norwegian missionaries Skrefsrud and Bodding have beyond doubt had a certain influence on the popular myth of creation among the Santals. The scroll painting *Jādopatiās* have understood the great importance that the Santals places upon the creation myth. Thus the scroll painters have made an effort to connect themselves to the authorities of this tradition in various ways to collect knowledge about the creation myth, oral or written. Having acquired this knowledge, imbibing their scrolls with this theme and including themselves in the myth of creation the *Jādopatiās* have gained respect among the Santals. In this article, I explore some contexts and sites where the Santal myth of creation plays an important role. My main aim here is to explore some implications of the various adaptations of the oral and written forms of the Santal myth of creation in the wake of modernity, and then connect these insights to some aspects of the work the *Jādopatiās* perform among the Santals¹.

Introduction

The *Jādopatiās* live in West Bengal as well as in the bordering areas of Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa.² These male performers of Bengali origin operate mainly in the Santal households where they show their painted scrolls in return for rice. The *Jādopatiās* also have another source of income, which they render in return for rice, other items and money. They await the

news of any death that may have occurred in the villages within their professional territory. Some time later they will go there and perform a mortuary ritual known as *cokhodān*, ‘the gift of the eye’.³ One of the central events of this ritual performance is the bestowal of eyesight to a pictorial representation of the deceased person. This picture is about the size of a hand. During the ritual invocations uttered by the *Jādopaṭiā* he puts a dot, representing the iris of the eye, in the blank eye space. With the help of these actions the *Jādopaṭiā* assist the blind soul of the deceased person and bestow upon it a safe journey to heaven, so that it will turn into a benign ancestor instead of a haunting ghost. When a *Jādopaṭiā* describes his practice and his role as a funerary priest, he borrows categories from the Hindu context and glosses his role with these categories. The *Jādopaṭiā* calls himself the *purohit*, *agradanī* or Brahman of the Santal. He compares *cokhodān*, and the gifts and payment he receives from the Santals for performing the funerary service, with the gifts (*dān*) given to the Hindu funerary priest.

The *Jādopaṭiās* generally live in the outskirts of the indigenous peoples (*ādivāsī*) village, or in close proximity to it. Their mother tongue is in most cases Bengali, but they also speak the Munda dialects of their patrons with great ease. During the last century, many of these Bengali scroll painters moved out into the fringes of the Bengali society due to conflicts or socio-economic changes in that society. On two occasions, informants have reported instances of migration from Bengal ca 60-80 years back in time, due to conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in the district of Bankura and the industrialisation in the area of Asansole (Faivre 1980:111).⁴

Thanks to their flexibility and creativity, the *Jādopaṭiās* have been able to eke out a niche for themselves as funerary priests and performers among the neighbouring *ādivāsī* populations. Within the *ādivāsī* population the *Jādopaṭiās* have gained some respect and status, whereas within the Bengali society they are perceived as low-caste and degraded. However, the *Jādopaṭiās* position among the Santals is far from stable and secure.

At present some *Jādopaṭiās* of the younger generation leave the strenuous professional undertakings established by their ancestors and opt for manual labour on contract basis. Others continue the struggle of navigating through the changing professional environment of the *ādivāsī* populations. To continue the work amongst the Santals may prove to be an increasingly difficult task as the impact of modernity has had a marked effect on the Santal community.

While the Santals have lately adapted to changes in the modern world by flagging their identity as an indigenous people, the *Jādopaṭiās* try to gain status and clients by posing as some kind of Brahmins⁵. The *Jādopaṭiās* status and income depends on the respect they enjoy

with their clientele. As the Santals are engaged in a process of growing cultural self-consciousness, they are increasingly reluctant to accept the Hindu elements inserted into their creation myths and mortuary rites. The social gap between the *Jādopatiās* and the Santals may leave the former without sufficient income. The *Jādopatiās* may have to leave scroll painting altogether and opt for work as daily labourers, or to change their clientele, that is, to paint scrolls for sale to an urban audience. However, as I shall make clear below, the creative *Jādopatiās* seem to have found some solid ground for themselves, through their adaptation of the creation myth theme in their picture scrolls.

Descriptions of the Santal

The Santals inhabit several parts of north India as well as Nepal and Bangladesh. In India, the Santals are found mainly in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and Tripura. The Santals speak Santali, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austro-Asiatic language family (Gautam 1998:14). According to Andersen, the Santals have been recognised as a separate ethnic group since the end of the 18th century (1986:7f). An overwhelmingly rich documentary source of material is available about the Santals. The earlier works have been systematised by Troisi and Soren in their respective bibliographies (Troisi 1976, Soren 1999). Accounts of the Santals are found in works by Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists and social scientists. The Santals, the largest *ādivāsī* community on the Indian Subcontinent numbers approximately 5 million people (Gautam 1998:14).

The missionary work among the Santals was initiated around 1850 and gradually the missionaries conceived unanimous adaptation of writing the Santali language in Roman script (Anderson 1998:22).⁶ Among these missionary scholars, the work of Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Paul Olaf Bodding stand unrivalled. Both of these pioneers collected most of their data from areas around Dumka in the Santal Parganas of Bihar, L.O. Skrefsrud from his arrival in 1869 up to his death in 1910, and P.O. Bodding from his arrival in 1890 until he returned to Scandinavia in 1934. Skrefsrud and Bodding worked on a wide range of topics such as grammar, lexicography, folklore and anthropological descriptions of the Santals. One of their most precious legacies is Bodding's *Santal Dictionary*, published in five volumes between 1932 and 1936. It was based on Skrefsrud's vocabulary of 13,000 words which had been more than doubled during Bodding's own work. This dictionary contains a valuable source of

information about the Santals. Boddington did not limit the account to a list of translations, but offered ethnographic descriptions of various kinds in the articles as well (Anderson 1998:22f).

One of the British colonial administrators who wrote about the Santals was W.G. Archer. He was appointed Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas in December 1942 and after two and a half years he was placed on a special duty to record and codify Santal civil law. He held this post until June 1946. During these three and a half years he worked among the Santals, he learnt Santali language, organised a collection of Santal poetry, legends, stories and addresses. W. G. Archer also collected an invaluable ethnographic material about the Santals. Some of this material appeared in the book 'The Hill of Flutes' (Archer 1974). In spite of some reservations towards Boddington's work, Archer paid his tribute to both Boddington and Skrefsrud in the introduction to his monograph on the Santals.

Boddington's reference to the Santals' chief spirit, Maran Buru, as 'the devil' and his description of Santal poetry as 'often pure gibberish' were later to outrage me but his huge Santali-English dictionary staggered me by its encyclopaedic learning and gave me indispensable help. I must also pay tribute to the pioneering initiative of Skrefsrud who in the nineteenth century induced an old and knowledgeable Santal, Kolean Haram, to dictate an account of Santal traditions and customs. *Hapram Puthi* – 'The Book of the Ancestors' as it came to be termed – alerted me to many things that the Santals valued ... (Archer 1974:11)

In what follows, I will utilise and analyse some of the sources mentioned above in connection with the creation myth.

The Christian missionary conception of the Santal myth of creation

The evolutionist anthropological preoccupation with origin, myths of origin, classification, and unilinear evolution, was of a somewhat different epistemological order than the Christian missionaries' interest in the Santal legends of origin and creation. This is illustrated by the colonial anthropologist H. H. Risley's entry about the Santals in *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (Risley 1981 [1891]). These are Risley's comments after his inclusion of an abbreviated version of the Santal creation myth and the traditional following history of the Santal migrations.

Neither as a record of actual wanderings nor as an example of the workings of the myth-making faculty does this story of the wanderings of the Santáls appear to deserve serious consideration. A people whose only means of recording facts consist of tying knots in strings, and who have no bards [!] to hand down a national epic by oral tradition, can hardly be expected to preserve the memory of their past long enough or accurately enough for their accounts of it to possess any historical value. [Compare my description of *Karam Binti* and *Karam gurus* in the following paragraph below] (ibid.:225)

After the quote above, Risley discusses Skrefsrud's and Colonel Dalton's theories of the actual, and plausible, historical wanderings of the Santals on the Indian continent, as reflected in the Santal myths. Risley refutes both Skrefsrud's and Dalton's theories with these words '... there is not a fraction of substantial evidence in support of either' (ibid.:226). However, further on Risley grants the Santal myth of origin some more credibility, if understood as and account the recent migrations of the Santals (ibid.).

When it comes to the approach to the religious aspects of Santal life, Peter B. Andersen and Susanne Foss (2003) emphasise some major differences between the colonial administrators and the missionaries.

The administrators worked from a evolutionary theory of society where the tribals represented a low step in the development of religions, mostly animism focused on fertility rituals. The missionaries, however, had a theory of an original High God; and to them the tribals represented isolated groups of people who preserved traces of an original monotheism according to natural law, or who could perhaps even remember the original revelation of God (ibid.:305).

Further, according to Andersen and Foss, the major aim of the missionaries was 'to collect myths of creation because they wished to find a native god who could be identified with the Christian God in their translations of Christian texts into Santali' (ibid.:306). For Skrefsrud and Bodding the prime candidate for such a role was found in the Santal god *Thakur*, 'the creator and sustainer of the universe' (Bodding 1942, Troisi 1978:74ff). Skrefsrud (1968 [1887]) collected lengthy narratives of the creation myth and Santal traditions, related to him by Kolean Guru in 1871, and published in Santali as *Horkoren Mare Hapramko reak' Katha*. '*Hapram puthi* 'The book of the ancestors' as it came to be termed' by the Santals (Archer

1974:12). In the introduction to the first English translation, Bodding (1942) says that ‘Skrefsrud further told me, that the book contains absolutely nothing of his own, the whole being a faithful record of Kolean’s words and language. I cannot, however, help thinking that Skrefsrud had something to do with the arrangement.’ (Bodding 1942:1). Bodding’s statement is a clear recognition of the initial imprint the missionaries had on the Santal oral tradition.

Thus, in *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* we can read ‘... our ancestors of old have handed over to us, viz., to us gurus, that Thakur is different [from the other gods and divinities]; he is not seen by human eyes; but he himself sees all. He himself has created earth and heaven, the human beings, the animals, the trees and plants, the paddy and rice ...’ (Bodding 1994:132). The missionaries found in *Thakur* a worthy replacement for the ‘wicked Bongas’, the various spirits worshiped with sacrificial rites by the Santals. ‘apparently he did not receive sacrifices, and was consequently regarded by the missionaries as more civilised’ (Andersen 1992:326).

The anthropologists Carrin and Tambs-Lyche (2003), who has undertaken an extensive research on the cultural encounter between the Scandinavian missionaries and the Santals, underline that the missionaries’ documentation of Santal myth and traditions, in the form of folklore, has had an important impact on Santal ethnicity in several ways (ibid.:283). ‘Skrefsrud’s work in describing and codifying Santal custom was important in making the British recognize the cultural specificity of the Santals, whose ethnic identity was in no way a creation of the colonial period.’ (ibid.). Carrin and Tambs-Lyche makes it clear that Skrefsrud defended Santal culture strongly in several ways. However, they also include Skrefsrud’s disapproval; ‘he never ceased to fight tribal religion: “I put my fingers into everything that can bring down the *bongas*, and raise Thakur in every consciousness,” he wrote to his Dansih supporter.’ (ibid.:288). Commenting on Skrefsrud’s publication in 1887, the so-called ‘The book of the ancestors’, mentioned above, Carrin and Tambs-Lyche makes the following revealing comment.

This material was not to be forgotten, and Skrefsrud even introduced it in the mission schools as part of national tradition, though Bodding later withdrew it. No doubt, Skrefsrud hoped the *bongas*, like Norwegian gremlins and trolls, would soon become folklore: he may not have realized that his had taken centuries in the Norwegian case. (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2003:283)

Thus, the Scandinavian missionaries wanted to replace the Santal worldview with a Christian modernist ontology, installing *Thakur* as an omnipotent ‘God’, turning *bongas*, conceived by the missionaries as demons, into Santal national folklore to be proud of. As we shall see, the legacy of the missionaries has played a role in the Santal revivalism.

Karam Binti; the myth of creation

The *Karam Binti* is one of the most pivotal institutions of the Santals, connected with the recitation of ‘... the history of the world from the creation and through the ages (acc. To Santal traditions)’ (Bodding 1935:451f). According to Bodding a *binti* is; ‘Supplication, instruction, precept, exhortation, doctrine; [to] supplicate, instruct, exhort, proclaim, recite (traditions)’ (Bodding 1930:293). Among the Santals the recitation of such *bintis*, undertaken by specialists known as *Karam gurus*, also occur at a number of festivals, generally named *Karam*, and at the life-cycle rituals such as - *Caco chatiar*, the ritual purification and initiation of children as persons of the Santal society, at marriage, and at the time of the performance of the final Santal mortuary ritual⁷; *bhandan* (Bodding 1942, Archer 1974). Bodding relates how the *Karam Binti* is recited at *Caco chatiar*, the initiation of children into the Santal society.

A guru recites the traditions, commencing with the creation of the world, following the history of mankind and the wanderings of the ancestors (as known from the traditions) and finishing off with a description of how they have come to their present abode, how the parents were married and the child (or children) born. The child is in this way brought into Santal ‘history’. (Bodding 1932:443f)

At the time of death a *Karam* ritual may be performed. This event is known as *mora* (death) *karam*.

The *mora* (or *goc*) *karam* is performed together with the *bhandan*, the last funeral ceremonies for the dead person, by the people who can afford it. In addition to the performance of the ordinary *bhandan* with sacrifices to the deceased, the branches are brought and disposed of as at the *karam* mentioned; there is the same dancing and singing; the host, moreover, places at the branches brass cups and plates, and even a drum in some cases; these are taken by the reciting guru. The *binti* is somewhat different, inasmuch that here mention is made of the birth, and death of the dead person. (Bodding 1935:452)

The *Karam* tree plays a central role in several of the events mentioned above. At the time of the *Karam* ritual the *Karam guru* narrates the origin of the *Karam*. The story relate how one of the twelve Santal clans, the Marandi, made rice-beer and danced around the *Karam* branch throughout the night – how Karmu and Dharmu later lost the branch, and with it all good fortune – how the *Karam* branch was regained again and prosperity with it (Archer 1974:264ff). ‘Each ceremony focuses on the magical properties believed to be inherent in the *Karam* tree [lat.; *Adinia cordifolia*] and by honouring the *Karam* seeks to obtain and increase in wealth and progeny’ (ibid.:256). Among Santal girls the *Karam* branch is a popular tattoo (*khudni*) motif, received at the time of reaching maturity (Rycroft 1996:77).

A clear analogy seems to exist between the belief and practice connected with birth and death, and there is a continuous complementary relationship between the two. The powerful and potent cultural vehicles like the *Karam* tree occur in many of the Santal life-cycle rites, and carry potential ideas about fertility, fecundation and regeneration. The notion of fertility that is suggested above, tallies with the approach to this concept taken by Bloch and Parry (1982), in their comparative essay about death and the generation of life. In this essay they underline that ‘If death is often associated with a renewal of fertility that which is renewed may either be the fecundity of people, or of animals and crops, or of all three.’ (ibid:7). The idea that the *Karam* tree or branch appearing in various contexts in the Santal society, is closely tied to an idea of the reproduction of social order. What is the connection between this social order and identity construction in the wake of modernity among the Santals?

Modernity, indiginity and the creation of myth

In a recent article ‘Proving “Indiginity”, exploiting Modernity’ the anthropologist Robert Parkin argues ‘that maintaining a distinct identity is important for advance in this [middle Indian] multiplex society.’ (Parkin 2000:49). Parkin also states that, in the wake of modernity, attitudes to myth and history plays a central role in the process of identity construction among groups, conventionally known as ‘tribes’, situated in middle India. One of the cases he considers in his article concerns the Santals. In this context Parkin also refer to and quote the article ‘The Santalization of the Santals’ by the Anthropologist Moham K. Gautam (1977b), and the works by Datta-Majumdar (1965), Orans (1965), and Mahapatra (1977), among others.

All commentators agree, however, that, with the gradual introduction of representative government from 1930s and of complete institutional democracy after [India's] independence, a further shift to non-assimilative Santal identity construction took place, involving the revival, revision, and in some cases creation of myths, mythologized history, religion, symbolic practices, drama, dances, and script, a process Gautam (1977[b]) refers to as "Santalization" (Parkin 2000:55)

Gautam (1977b) mentions several aspects of the revivalist trend, which he calls Santalization. He claims that this revivalism is based on local ethnic traditions and ideals of a golden age in a remote past. Such ideas provide unity by creating a platform for the Santal standards of behaviour. Santalization also opposes the hierarchic caste ideology. Gautam underlines that 'The Santals' pride in their traditions and ideals is often reflected in their rituals, strict observation of tribal endogamy and clan-cum-village exogamy ...' (ibid.:373ff).

In his article, Parkin refers to the contemporary anthropological trend to focus on identities and identity formation. When it comes to ethnic identity, Parkin cites the anthropological volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Social difference* edited by Fredrik Barth (1969). Referring to this volume Parkin points out that the more recent anthropological conceptualisation of such ethnic identities are conceived as fluid, malleable as well as being manipulated and under constant negotiation. Even though these 'post-modern' identities may appear fixed to those who hold these, this does not stop anthropologists from treating them as arbitrary (Parkin 2000:49). Further Parkin underlines that Barth's (1969) and Cohen's (1969, 1974) downgrading of the explanatory power of culture, as well as the 'invention of tradition' approach in anthropology (building on the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) has led to a further tendency to treat identities as being created out of nothing. However, Parkin stresses that there is often continuity as well as innovation involved in the process of identity construction (Parkin 2000:49ff). In the case of the Santals it is of importance for us to look at some basic features that concern the story of the creation of the Santal society. Is the myth of the creation nothing but a creation of myth? In the introduction to his work *Steps Towards Modern Identities: The Karam Myth and Ritual among the Santals* (Anderson 2000) Peter B. Anderson contends that;

... the Santals have seen the potential in reformulating the myth of origin which forms part of the Karam mythology into claims of right, addressing the national state

in India in a terminology matching national law. In the present Indian situation this refers to individual claims for cultural protection and development assistance as scheduled tribals under the law, and to collective claims of rights as an indigenous people in recent ILO terminology even if this has not been ratified by the Government of India. (Andersen 2000:4)

For a more detailed discussion of the complexities of the 'indigenous slot' in the Indian setting see Bengt K. Karlsson (2003). Let us look a bit closer at the relationship between the myth of creation and Santal identity construction.

Creation of Santal identity

Some salient features of the identity construction undertaken by the Santals are connected to the primeval past, and the notion of a golden age of harmony following the creation of the Santal society. Thus the myth of creation is a central **locus** for the Santal identity construction. According to Marine Carrin (2000) the Santals have produced a symbolic answer to dominance in order to resist oppression by other powerful groups.

The formulation of Santal ethnicity is rooted in a consciousness of a distinctive past. It is on this basis that Santals act in different social and political contexts; as members of a scheduled tribe, as *adivasis* or as Jharkhandis. But this distinctive past is linked to particular places, such as the old forts (*mare ghar*) of the mythical kingdom Champa located in Hazaribagh. (Carrin 2000:1)

Peter Andersen states that; 'The core of the Karam Binti is not a proclamation of Santal identity, but the *Karam* ritual and its immediate object, the creation of wealth' (Andersen 2000:29).⁸ I believe that the perspectives held by Andersen, and that held by Carrin, cited above, sound plausible and are, in fact complementary. As we have seen, the idea of a common origin and belonging is connected to subsistence, fertility and reproduction of social order. Thus, there is no difference between the act of creation (i.e. the ritual event) and the mythological origin of the ritual, 'the acquisition and the loss of the karam bough and the search to regain it.' (Andersen 2000:38f). In other words; the recitation of the *Karam Binti* at the time of the performance of any ritual is a creative act (sic), never uniform and ever changing, that unites the past and the present, people and places. Here we are dealing with what Rappaport has called 'Time out of time' connected with ritual intervals and eternity

manifested as a constant cosmological cyclical renewal (Rappaport 1999:216ff). We are often warned that wordings such as Rappaport's above are not theirs but ours. Representations, irrespective of who is projecting or perceiving, need to have an anchorage, belonging or locus. Arjun Appadurai has this to say about the social production of locality, in relation to what anthropologists generally would call ritual.

As some of the best work in the social logic of ritual in the past few decades so amply shows (Lewis 1986; Munn 1986; Schieffelin 1985), space and time are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation and action. We have tended to call these practices *cosmological* or *ritual* – terms that by distracting us from their active, intentional, and productive character create the dubious impression of mechanical reproduction. (Appadurai 1997:180)

Drawing on Appadurai's insight I shall sum up my argument in relation to the myth of creation amongst the Santals. I suggest that the myth of creation is a central locus for Santal identity construction, an important anchorage in a world in transition, marked by modernity.

In conclusion it may not be farfetched to suggest that the *Jādopaṭiās'* picture scrolls depicting images of the *Karam Binti*, the recitation of the *Karam Binti*, as well as the performance of the *Karam* ritual, are all closely connected to the ontological status of the Santal society. As such the scrolls depicting the myth of creation are not merely passive props in a performance. The growing of rice, the ritual use of rice beer, the images of the scrolls, the recitations and the ritual actions are in themselves a part of the constant cyclical renewal of the Santal society and Santal identity. Seeing the *Jādopaṭiās'* work in the light of the material presented above we shall take a look at their creative use of the *Karam Binti*.

The Santal tradition through the mouth of the creative Jādopaṭiās

Many of the Santals I talked to claimed that the *Jādopaṭiās* had been with them from 'the beginning of time'. The myths, in the form of picture recitations, delivered by the *Jādopaṭiās* of how the first *Jādopaṭiā* got his role as a painter-priest among the Santals places the beginning of their profession in primordial time. As a matter of fact, the *Jādopaṭiās* plant themselves firmly within the *Karam Binti* and the creation myth. The introduction of the first *Jādopaṭiā* usually occurs in the scrolls after the death of the two original human beings, Pilchu

Haram and Pilchu Budhi, or the death of their progeny. When the *Jādopatiā*, created by *Maran Buru* or *Sin bonga*, appears in the picture of the scrolls shown to the Santal audience, he is conveniently included in the creation of the social order amongst the Santals.

The *Karam Binti* picture recitations are one of the most extensive of all the themes in the *Jādopatiās* repertoire. They call it the '*Jonmopata*', 'the birth scroll', or the '*Karam Binti pata*'.

Jonmo, or *Karam Binti* is the longest of all the *patas*, sometimes 15 to 16 feet. Each panel is executed with excellent skill. The first panel of the *pata* usually represents three prime gods, followed by the dark Universe submerged in water which is drawn in a symbolic, geometrical form, the descent of *Thakur* from heaven with the help of the eternal thread, *tore sutam*, the creation of the two birds, *Has* and *Hasil* (swans) and then the vain trials of raising the earth from water by the aquatic creatures like the tortoise and prawn and the success of the earthworm, the birth of the earth with *Sirom*, *Korom* [*Karam*] and other plants on her. Next comes the birth of first man and women – *Pilcu Haram* and *Pilcu Budhi* – from eggs laid by the two birds, the wrath of the fire god, whom they call *Brahma muni*, and the protection provided by *Maran Buru* to the newborns in a stone-house; gradually the discovery of *handi* [rice beer]; the birth of the 15 children; afterwards the parent's separation and finally the marriage of the brothers and sisters and thus the distribution of the 12 lineages; death of the parents and the creation of the *Jado Guru* [the *Jādopatiā*]. (Das 2001:103f)

In the quotation above, Nilanjana Das give us a clear description of the variety of themes commonly included in the *Karam Binti* scrolls made by the *Jādopatiās*.

Whereas other themes may take a few minutes to perform, the creation myth theme may sometimes extend for as long as twenty minutes. However, compared to a recitation of a *Karam binit* in the Santal context, where the *binti* recitations may last for as long as nine to twelve hours, the *binti* of the *Jādopatiā* is a mere miniature (personal communication with Thomas Kaiser/bureau64, February 2002, Andersen 2000:32). The time length of the rendering of the creation myth scrolls shows that the *Jādopatiās* have understood the importance of the *Karam Binti* tradition among the Santals.

In the quote below Troisi underline that the Santal tradition used to be an oral one. 'In the absence of written documents, the traditional lore of the Santals is handed down orally, as we have seen, from generation to generation' (Troisi 1976:141). However, as we have seen,

with modernity this has changed (Andersen 1996). Let us now take a look on some concrete instances where a *Jādopaṭiā* relates the current Santal tradition.

At the time of tape-recording the recitation of a Santal myth narrated by *Rām Bilās Cītrakar*, the narrating *Jādopaṭiā* introduced himself with these words; ‘I am the priest (*purohit/ṭhākur*) of the Santal. By reading and knowing the Santal scriptures and the tradition of Santal ancestors (*hapram*) I do the expiation (*prāyaścitta*) work (*kā*) for them’. Having said this he told me the name of his *Jādopaṭiā* teacher, as well as the name of his Santal teachers (*Karam guru*⁹) who had taught him his trade and the traditions of the Santals. In this manner the *Jādopaṭiā* in question strives to legitimise himself in the eyes of the Santals by the invocation of the name of his *Karam guru*, as well as the written sources of his narrative.¹⁰ How is it that the oral source of the *Karam guru*, as well as the written source has become an important site of authority to be invoked?

Andersen describes how the oral tradition of the Santals has been transmitted in various ways. However, the only institutionalised mode of transmission that has prevailed is by the *Karam guru*. They have the specialised knowledge in order to undertake the recitation at the *Karam* ritual and at the time of the life-cycle rituals. Andersen claims that ‘The written literature of the Santals began in the last century by the dictation of the very same *gurus* to folklorists and missionaries who published their tales. (ibid.:26) As we have seen, from the 19th century onwards the oral tradition has gradually been ‘canonised’; transformed into written texts and edited, like in the case of the material collected by Skrefsrud (Skrefsrud 1968 [1887]).

Andersen who has analysed this process of the transition from this oral *binti* media to the written form, criticise J. Goody & I. P. Watt (1963), who focuses on the difference between these medias generally, and perceive this process of change as a unilinear evolutionary process, implicating a great divide between the primitive and civilised peoples (Andersen 1996:25f). Andersen underlines that the oral *binti* media, as well as the written form, exists simultaneously and are equally valued and authoritative today among the Santals (ibid.).

The myth recited by *Rām Bilās* is a variation based on yet another version of the creation myth of the Santals like ‘The ancestor’s Story’ in “Traditions and Institutions of The Santals’ (Bodding 1942:3 ff).

In their strive for a separate state Jharkhand, within the Indian nation, along with other tribal groups, the Santals have found a wellspring of rich material for their identity creation in the legacy of Skrefsrud’s and Bodding’s work. To put it very briefly, as we have

seen, ethnographic accounts have beyond doubt had a certain influence on the myth of creation. Anderson sums it up with the following words.

The epics [*bintis*] are politically relevant to the situation of the *gurus* and their rural audience. The content helps the audience to define their ethnic identity as the Santals (with whom they are allowed to intermarry), and which castes are to be considered as friendly, and which as exploiters (mostly [high caste] Brahmins). (Andersen 1996:27)

When explaining the work the *Jādopatiās* perform in connection with a death among the Santals *Rām Bilās Cītrakart* told me the following;

That is why *Maran Buru* told us to utter these words for the salvation of the dead one, and so that the oldest son and the entire family will stay in peace. That is in accordance with the ‘scriptures’ [*śāstra*]. After this we apply a spot in the eye of the picture, with a pen. Then we put it [the picture] in oil and turmeric.¹¹ Then [we] have to say one *mantra*. It says in the traditions [*hapram puthi*, i.e. scriptures];

‘- *kate sunum, pathe sunum, nāi gaḍa dub rakap´ me. Mako lahao kana jotogi ojok´ haṭing pe. Tel kupi Barni ghāṭ, gang nāi, tupo nāi. Tirio ghāṭ, murali ghāṭ, gāi ghāṭ, bida rakap´ me.*’ [Freely translated; Then, with loincloth and oil; come on and take a dip in the Damodar river, and ascend! Come on and anoint [yourself with oil], divide an offering in three [for *Pilchu Haram*, *Pilchu Buri*, and *Maran Buru*], and for all those who have passed away before you. At the landing place; of oil, of music and of jollity, come on and immerse [the bones of the dead] in the river [The Ganges, i.e. the Damodar]. At the landing place; of the flute and of the cow, bid your farewell and ascend.] Thus they [the dead ones] attain liberation].

After it [the picture] has been put in the turmeric and oil, the son and all the members of the family perform obeisance [*pranām*] and the work of the *Jādopatiā* is finished.

The treatment of the picture of the dead one by *Rām Bilās* and other *Jādopatiās* is a good example of how the *Jādopatiās* utilise a prevalent practice among the Santals, and use it to imbibe their own practice with potential meaning. The picture of the dead, made by the *Jādopatiā*, is partly treated as the *jan baha* (lit. flower-bone), the bones of the dead. The invocation uttered by *Rām Bilās*, cited above, is usually uttered when the bones of the dead

are immersed in the river, traditionally in the sacred Damodar in Hazaribagh mentioned above, or any other running water or pond. In a similar manner, at the end of a *Karam* ritual the *Karam* branch to is immersed into a stream or a pond.

It is evident that the *Jādopatiās* have understood the great importance that the Santals places upon the *Karam Binti*. Thus the scroll painters have made an effort to connect themselves to the authorities of this tradition in various ways to collect knowledge about these matters, oral or written. Having acquired this knowledge the *Jādopatiās* have gained greater respect among the Santals. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that in spite of the fact that the Santals generally do accept the *Jādopatiās*, they are far from uncritical about them and their work.

The *Jādopatiā* often appears when death has struck a household. He also paints the story of creation, the birth of the first couple and the origin of the Santal society. The recitation of some form of the *Karam Binti* is a welcome and auspicious act in connection with death. Now we are able to see clearly how the *Jādopatiā* has gained access to knowledge of vital importance to the Santals in several contexts. The picture recitation performed by the *Jādopatiās* has great attraction for the Santal audience in several respects. By imbibing their scrolls with the *Karam Binti* theme and including themselves in the myth of creation, the *Jādopatiās* may have captured a secure ground within the folds of the Santal society for some time yet. The *Jādopatiās* or 'Jado Patiyas' have lately been mentioned at various internet sites as the painters, folk artist, or folk culture of the state of Jharkhand.

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² An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the conference 'Reinterpreting Adivasi (Indigenous Peoples) Movements in South Asia', held at the Centre for World Environmental History, Sussex University, in March 2005. This article is a reworked and more elaborate version of an article published earlier in Norwegian, in the Scandinavian journal of religious history *Chaos* (Hadders 2004).

³ In my text, I have aspired to follow the standard system of transliterating the Bengali language, as exemplified by Anderson (1962), with minor modifications. For instance *Cokhodān* is not transcribed ‘*cakṣudān*’, which is the way it would be transcribed following the ‘sanskritised’ manner. The reason for such inconstancies on my part is that I want to stay closer to the colloquial pronunciation of my informants. Where other authors are cited, the diacritical mark system (or lack of it) of these authors is reproduced. When Santali words are concerned, I have been less consistent.

⁴ For a detailed overview and analysis of the descriptions of the *Jādopaṭiās* over the last century see Hadders 2005 (forthcoming).

⁵ Thus, the scroll-painters strive to gain status, via a process coined ‘Sanskritization’ by Srinivas (Srinivas 1952:30). The move to espouse ‘indigeneity’ among the Santals comes partly as a counter-reaction to an earlier ‘Sanskritization’ among some Santal groups. The latter type of ‘Sanskritization’ among the Santals has been coined ‘Sanskritization type B’ (‘without any change of ethnic identity, and consequently without change of borders between ethnic groups’) by Peter Andersen, who has undertaken extensive research on the *Karam Binti* among the Santals (Andersen 1991).

⁶ In the 1920s Raghunath Murmu conceptualised the Ol Chiki script for Santali language.

⁷ According to Peter Andersen ‘Some Santals confirm the existence of such a *binti*, and stress that it is the most philosophical of all the *bintis*, but others maintain that it is not a *binti* at all, as it is only different songs sung during the rituals for a deceased.’ (Andersen 2000:26).

⁸ However, Andersen also acknowledges that ‘As far as the reasons for publishing the *bintis* are concerned identity formation is the overall concern.’ (Andersen 2000:47). When Santal ethnicity is concerned Andersen argues for readings other than M. Banton’s, E. Gellner’s and B. Andersen’s (ibid.:1).

⁹ As stated before the *Karam guru* is a Santal who knows the *Karam Binti*, the oral tradition of the Santals and their ancestors. Uninitiated persons will usually not receive any information about the *Karam* myth or ritual.

¹⁰ At the time of recording we were surrounded by a Santal audience in a Santal village.

¹¹ Oil and turmeric is regarded as cleansing and applied in most life-cycle rituals among the Santals.