Snakes, Sacrifice, and Sacrality in South Asian Religion

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Abstract: Ritual sacrifice associated with snake veneration is not uniformly expressed. The snake figures prominently in the art and narrative of contemporary Saivism, Vaisnavism, Jainism, and Buddhism in addition to the myriad of popular devotional practices of rural village and peripatetic peoples of India. Drawing on the evidence within the many traditions that have accommodated or rejected the snake as a subject of veneration, this article theorizes its associated sacrifice(s) as a tripartite phenomenon reflecting divergent cultural valuation of the snake across the Indian sub-continent.

Introduction

Rituals devoted to the propitiation and supplication of the *sarpa*, as the common snake is called in Sanskrit, as well as the snake's supernatural counterpart the *Naga*, have been in evidence on the Indian sub-continent for more than two millennia[1]. It has been suggested that snake veneration, within the vast corpus of fertility and ancestor cult practices[2] permeating the South Asian pre-historic devotional landscape[3], are the ritual seeds[4] from which medieval iconography and devotional practice evolved[5].

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[1] Laurie Cozad. 2004. *Sacred Snakes: Orthodox Images of Indian Snake Worship*, Davies Group, 2.

[2] A. Coomerswamy. *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, 5

[3] D.M. Srinivasan. *On the Cusp of an Era: Art in the Pre-Kusana World*, 21.

[4] A. Coomarswamy, 56-57.

[5] *Ibid*, 43.

The snake figures are prominent within the art[6] and narrative[7] of contemporary Saivism, Vaisnavism, Jainism[8] and Buddhism[9], as well as within the many popular devotional practices of rural villages[10] and nomadic peoples[11] throughout India. In part to the lingering colonial sentiment dogging the subject of popular religious practice, too often dismissed as primitive[12], superstitious[13], peasant[14] or folk[15], serious academic examination of the impact of snake veneration on the religious landscape of India has been limited.

Building on Robert Redfield's notion that one can construct a valid characterization of pre- or proto-historic peoples through the combined efforts of archaeology and ethnography[16], and Clifford Geertz's "thick description[17]" in the interpretation of culture, this paper looks to "thicken" the phenomena of snake sacrifice as a lived practice within distinct cultural theatres, integrated within textual and material referents of sacrifice to, and of, the snake. Furthermore, this paper looks at how the many religious meaning(s) ascribed to snakes within a sacrificial context have been [re-] interpreted and implemented in those same theatres. In taking this approach, I also set out to redirect certain assumptions persisting within South Asian scholarship, particularly from scholars engaged within orthodox

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[6] D.M. Srinivasan , 21.

[7] Laurie Cozad, 4.

[8] P.S. Jaini. *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, 273.

[9] Robert DeCaroli. *Haunting the Buddha,* 69-70, 74.

[10] Frederick J. Simoons. 1998. *Plants of Life, Plants of Death,* 82.

[11] M. Robertson. *Snake Charmers: The Jogi Nath Kalbelias of Rajasthan,* 7.

[12] Robert Redfield. *The Primitive World,* 3.

[13] K. Gogri and S. Jain. 2007. personal communications, Jaipur.

[14] William Crooke. *Religion and Folklore in Northern India,*19.

[15] Robert Redfield, 26; Geertz, 173.

[16] Robert Redfield*,* 3-4.

[17]Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 6.

traditions, on the nature and influence of "popular[18]" religious practices within more institutionalized, and thereby more visible (and more studied) traditions. Within these discourses it is implied that popular religions generally, and snake veneration specifically, are not subjects worthy of serious study[19]. It is my hope this paper will address this criticism by surveying the influence and essential importance of snake veneration to contemporary devotional representation and practice.

I will begin with reviewing the cultural conditions in pre- to proto-historic Indian society, which encompasses the late Indus Valley to Kusana periods (roughly 1200 BCE to 300CE) of India's material culture history. This selection pertains directly to two major religious innovations in which snake veneration are historically implicated, and still prominently enacted. The first of these innovations was the ritual and narrative re-evaluation of the snake, long an object of fear, awe and devotional activity, which we access through textual analysis and material culture evidence. This last innovation is followed closely by a second innovation, the implementation and formalization of a devotionally anchored representational canon, which cultural art historian D.M. Srinivasan argues was a bid to "concretize religious belief into the viable forms which Pan-India could recognize and accept as being fit for worship"[20]. To this last end, this paper juxtaposes material and narrative referents from Pre-Kusana (900 BCE to 400 BCE) and Kusana (400 BCE to 375 CE) periods[21] alongside contemporary South Asian expressions of snake sacrifice, representing accounts from Nepal and the Western Himalayas, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kerala.

Snake worship: archaeological and textual considerations

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[18] Robert DeCaroli, 18.

[19] William Crooke, 399.

[20] D.M. Srinivasan, 14.

[21] *Ibid*, 11.

The contemporary religious traditions of India display a remarkable familiarity with snake worship[22]; from *Krsna's* legendary destruction of the many headed serpent *Kaliya*[23], *Visnu* reclining against the cosmic serpent *Ananta*[24], the Jina Parsvanatha protected by the rajanaga *Dhanendra* and his queen *Padmavati* during his assault by the demon *Kamatha*, the Buddha likewise was protected by the serpent *Muchalinda* which earned him the moniker of *Mahanaga*[25], or great snake. These hagiographic referents, when considered alongside the continuing presence of devotional cults to deified naga and nagini[26], as autonomous, affiliated or subaltern practices, demonstrate the prominence of the sacred snake as an object of ritual and religious authority in India. As a prehistoric lived practice little is known with certainty beyond what can be inferred from the available material evidence, particularly with regards to religion in ancient pre-literate societies[27]. Ethnoarcheological surveys of Palaeolithic sites across western and central India have unearthed a wealth of Harappan terracotta wares depicting the divine feminine[28] and the lingam, as well as water symbols, plants, and snakes[29].

The prominence of snake imagery is by no means limited to potsherds[30]; several Harappan seals also provide

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[22] G. Ravindran Nair. *Snake Worship In India,* 5.

[23] John Bowker. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions,* 324 and G.R. Nair, *Snake Worship In India*, 17.

[24]*Ibid,* 229.

[25] Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn. *The Buddha and His Teachings,* 320.

[26] G. Ravindran Nair*,* 30-36.

[27] Bridget and Raymond Allchin. *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan*, 89.

[28] *Ibid*, 163.

[29] Richard F.S. Starr. *Indus Valley Painted Pottery*, 80-81.

[30] *Ibid.*

compelling evidence of prehistoric snake veneration[31]. The most commonly cited seal is the so-called proto-*Siva*/*Prashupati* figure crowned with what are variously interpreted as pipal leaves[32] or snake(s)[33]. A far less cited Harappan seal depicts kneeling devotees covered by rearing cobra-like snakes with hands raised to a yogic figure[34]. If we accept Raymond Allchin's claim that there is a "close connection in prehistoric societies between their beliefs concerning religion and ideology, and their artistic expression[35]", this last image provides the most compelling representation of a prehistoric snake cult in the Indus valley[36]. Unfortunately, between these prehistoric material referents, and the earliest comparable proto-historic ones a thousand years later[37], there is a significant gap in the material evidence. Doris Srinivasan argues that this evidentiary gap may reflect the increased use of impermanent materials[38] such as wood, reed, dung, or even consumables over the stone and baked clay wares across the late Harrappan (1900 BCE to 900 BCE) and early pre-Kusana periods (900 BCE-200 BCE). In the absence of direct material evidence we must instead turn to textual referents. Sadly, as no indigenous text from this period has ever been found, we must look to the early Vedic redactors for evidence of devotion to the sacred snake[39]. The *Rg Veda* records the very earliest textual mention of snake worship in its

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[31] G. Ravindran Nair, 2.

[32] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 163.

[33] See A.L. Basham. *A Cultural History of India,* 18. See also Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 214. The one side of a triangular terracotta amulet (Md 013) depicting fishes, *gharials* and snakes. A horned person sits in *padmasana* on a throne with hoofed legs. Discovered at Mohenjo-daro in 1936, collection of the Dept. of Eastern Art, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

[34] Ranesh Ray and Jay Van Alphen. *Tejas: 1500 Years of Indian Art,* 55.

[35] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 93-94.

[36] *Ibid*, 214.

[37] *Ibid*, 229.

[38] D.M. Srinivasan, 21.

[39] Laurie Cozad, 20.

description of the world-serpent *Vrtra*[40], meaning 'storm-cloud', demonic opponent to the Vedic hero *Indra*.

> *Vritra*, the *Dasyu*, literally a robber, but apparently used in contrast to *Arya*, as if intending the uncivilized tribes of India. 'Thou, singly assailing him, although with auxiliaries at hand/ Perceiving the impending manifold destructiveness of [*Indra's*] bow/ they, the *Sanakas* [followers of *Vritra*], the *neglecters of sacrifice*, fled.[41]'

The characterization of *Vrtra* as the "concealer[42]" of the sun, the bringer of night, as an indigenous object of veneration, as well as of a culture that "neglected" to sacrifice, alludes to the dramatic axiological difference between Vedic and non-Vedic peoples. In the *Rg Veda*, *Vrtra* is cast as "the obstructor of heaven and earth[43]", that which prevented the celestial waters from falling. *Indra*, in striking off the head of *Vrtra*, is, from the Vedic perspective, liberating the Vedic peoples from the worldly hegemony that the indigenous worship of the celestial snake represented.

The Bhagavata and Vishnu Puranas allude to the cosmic snake *Ananta* being both the source and physical support of all creation[44]. *Ananta*, meaning "endless[45]" is also called *Śesa,* the serpent god, or *Adishesha*, the first snake[46]. *Ananta* is described as a primal creative being in whose hoods are held all the planets of the universe[47], and whose endless coiling maintains the order

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[40] *Ibid*, 14-15.

[41] A. Pike. Cited from H.H. Wilson translation of Rg Veda, 627.

[42] *Ibid*, 627.

[43] *Ibid*, 629.

[44] Eugene Burnouf. *Bhagavata Purana,* vol. 35, 83.

[45] John Bowker*,* 527.

[46] *Ibid*, 10.

[47] *Srimad Bhagavatam,* 5.25.13. http://vedabase.net/sb/5/25/1/en1 (accessed 22 Jan 2010).

of the universe[48]. The Matsya Purana tells that when "all creatures are consumed by fire at the end of the Yuga [current era], *Śesa* alone will remain[49]". While *Ananta* is associated with *Visnu*[50], *Vasuki* the serpent king is associated with *Siva*, depicted slung around Siva's neck[51]as a warning and a blessing. *Vasuki*, in contrast to *Ananta*, is much more involved in the worldly affairs of gods and men, and is commonly invoked in the laying of foundation of a new house to ensure the security of the household. *Ananta*, *Śesa* and *Vasuki* are understood as either elder snakes or snake kings, depending on the implicit value of each within the observing community. They are uniformly bringers of rain and fertility when appeased, or earthquakes, death, and destruction when angered. *Vrtra*, *Ananta*, *Śesa* and *Vasuki* are essentially understood as untamed, and normally untameable, supernatural agents of the cosmos in animal form. The taming of the sacred snake appears to originate in the admixture of Vedic Brahmins and indigenous tribal populations widespread across north-central India when Vedic Aryans began first migrating into the Indian sub-continent[52] around 2200 BCE. We see this transformation of the prehistoric tradition in that snake veneration, initially tolerated in the *Samhita* Rg Veda[53] reflected in the ritual accommodation of the sacred snake as a locus of power[54]and stemming from an operational shift from strategies of open warfare with resident peoples[55] to those of cultural assimilation[56]. As the power base weighed increasingly in favour of the Brahmin, there is a distinct change in how the

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[48] *Ibid.*

[49] G. Ravindran Nair*,* 13.

[50] *Srimad Bhagavatam.* 5.25.1. http://vedabase.net/sb/5/25/1/en1 (accessed 22 Jan 2010).

[51] G. Ravindran Nair*,* 14.

[52] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307.

[53] Laurie Cozad, 27.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307-308.

[56] A.L. Basham, 29.

serpent is interpreted[57]. The Samhitas through to the Brahmanas maintains a distinct unity in Brahmin opposition to the *dasyus*, "dark ones", who are primary worshippers of the snake, the goddess and the lingam[58]. By the time of the Aranyakas, snake worship was being openly vilified by the Brahmin elite[59], perhaps in a bid to [re]gain control over wealthy patrons at the center of the growing urban polity of north-central India. This systematic suppression lasted until the Pre-Kusana period (1000 BCE-200 BCE) of north-central India, which corresponds archaeologically with the city-based culture described in the Upanishads[60] (600-500 BCE) wherein foreign invaders from Bactria and modern day north-western Yunnan[61] began asserting political control over traditionally Aryan strongholds. By the Kusana period (1st c. CE to 375 CE) in order to stabilize the newly forming empires, Kusan kings inclined themselves towards multivalent religious tolerance[62]. This freedom of worship is artistically expressed[63] throughout Pre-Kusana and Kusana sites around Mathura[64], the Deccan and the Gandharan region[65] particularly, which coincides with territories where Aryan and Dravidian populations were most intensely juxtaposed. Most significantly, it is in these milieus where cultic figures such as *Yakshas* and *Yakshis*[66], *Nagas* and *Naginis*[67]

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[57] Laurie Cozad, 52 and 69.

[58] Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307.

[59] Laurie Cozad. *Sacred Snakes*, 51-52.

[60] Valerie Roebuck. *The Upanisads,* Xxv.

[61] D.M. Srinivasan*,* 12.

[62] *Ibid*, 10 and 23.

[63] *Ibid*, 5.

[64] *Ibid*, 21 and U. Singh. *Cults and Shrines in Early Historic Mathura,* 386.

[65] D.M. Srinivasan*,* 25.

[66] A. Coomarswamy, 29.

[67] D.M. Srinivasan*,* 21.

appear in increasing prominence alongside political, religious and ancestral notables[68].

Yakshas and Nagas

Yakshas and their female counterparts *Yakshinis* are inherently ambiguous figures with distinctly numinous character. Perhaps best explained as manifestations of elemental uncertainty, the Yaksha in a devotional context function as embodied agents of the natural and the wild; comparable perhaps to the *djinn* of Arabia or the *pari* of the trans-Himalaya[69]. In India the *yaksha* is "a primeval symbol of fertility, abundance, water, and vegetation[70]" frequently represented aniconically, as demonstrated by the ongoing practice of keeping sacred trees, groves[71], water pools[72] or other naturally occurring features[73] as incarnations of fertility or elemental sacred power. The textual tradition underscores how the popular understanding of the Yaksha and Naga has changed, from beneficial figures which were uncontested objects of devotion[74], to "terrifying, demonic creature[s][75]" that must be subjugated and subordinated to more human agents of spiritual power[76]. The *Nagas*, in addition to being tutelary inhabitants of these sacred spaces[77], are understood as natural or supernatural agents of environmental

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[68] U. Singh, 385.

[69] M. H. Sidke. 1994. Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 53, 72-73.

[70] G. Hinich Sutherland. *The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism*, 1.

[71] F. J. Simoons, 49.

[72] *Ibid*, 95.

[73] A. Annamalai. July 2007. personal communication. Tamil temple, North Gower.

[74] U. Singh, 383.

[75] *Ibid*, 383.

[76] *Ibid*, 383.

[77] F. J. Simoons, 95.

affordance[78] by virtue of their physical, affective and numinous presence[79].

As the devotional demand to manifest[80] the *Yaksha* and *Naga* increased in new formed urban settings, they took on the familiar anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms pre-eminent throughout the late Vedic period (800 BCE-200 BCE). Significantly, Yaksha and Naga idols whether affiliated with an ancestor/hero or greater deity[81] across religious traditions in ritual, narrative and art[82], as is the case with *Nagadevatas* such as Ananta to Vishnu, or Dhanendra to Parsvanatha, continue nonetheless to be independently venerated as independent deities or as *Kshetrapala*[83] -- deified guardians of inhabited farmland or fields. Regardless of association the *Naga* is always thought of as *integral to the world* and *immanently accessible*, though eminently subject to whimsy and affiliatory uncertainty. This absolute otherness and moral ambiguity, intriguing to scholar and devotee alike, are what have kept the Yaksha and Naga in the collective imagination of communities for centuries as much as the essential nature of their (potential) boons of healthy crops, children[84] and good fortune.

The *Yaksha* and *Yaksha-Nag*a were prehistoric subjects of worship[85], granted primacy from their power over life and death, and later through their association with fertility and

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[78]James Gibson (1979:129) In accordance with James Gibson's views, environmental affordance is a reciprocal relationship between a person and his or her environment whereby the environment provides resources and opportunities for the person, and the person gets information from, and acts on, the environment. As cited in *Bush Base, Forest Farm: Culture, Environment and Development*, by E.J. Croll and D.J. Parkin. Routledge, 44.

[79] William Crooke, 383.

[80] Ananda Coomarswamy. *Yaksha*, 29.

[81] G. Hinich Sutherland, 1.

[82] D.M. Srinivasan, 4.

[83] K. Gogri: personal correspondence, December 2009.

[84] F. J. Simoons, 95.

[85] U. Singh, 385.

health[86]. That their use in ritual settings shifted from central figures in public setting, to temple settings, to small figures in predominantly domestic settings,[87] is indicative not of a decline in practice as is often stated, so much as a reflection of orthodox Brahmin sentiment regarding the indigenous traditions increasingly influencing the urban polity[88]. Even then, the Yaksha and Naga were increasingly being adopted as the devotional standard from which religious figurations[89] were derived, such as with Balarama, Siva and Vishnu within Hinduism[90], as well as Parsvanatha and the Buddha within the śramanic traditions[91]. This representational consolidation of grass-root[92] and elite traditions can be linked to conscious attempts on the part of the elite to assimilate or convert indigenous populations[93] seen as equally wild as the creatures they venerated. Politically, these "peasant" populations were an increasingly important demographic in the development of the physical and spiritual landscape[94] as consolidated fiefdoms known as *Janapadas* came into being. The period was therefore a rare time of religious equipoise[95] for Yaksha and Naga worship in the history of South Asian religions.

By the Gupta period (300 CE-600 CE) both Yaksha and Naga had become largely "displaced as major focuses of worship in the urban public domain by the deities [later] associated with

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[86] *Ibid*, 383.

[87] *Ibid*, 385.

[88] Robert DeCaroli, 33.

[89] D.M. Srinivasan, 14.

[90] U. Singh, 385.

[91] Ananda Coomarswamy. *Yaksha*, 29.

[92] William Crooke, 19.

[93] Robert DeCaroli, 34.

[94] *Ibid.*

[95] U. Singh, 387.

Puranic Hinduism[96]". Today, these principally persist amongst rural, marginal or nomadic communities of the western Himalaya and Northern India, lending popular support to the notion that snake veneration is a primitive or backwards practice. In the South these practices continued well into the 12th century CE, and prospered in revitalized form throughout the medieval period (12th c. CE to 16th c. CE). Naga worship in its many forms is particularly vibrant in Gujarat[97], Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala[98], Orissa, and West Bengal[99] where, coincidentally, tribal populations are most concentrated.

Nagas as paradigms of sacred immanence

India ecologically favours the proliferation of snakes, with over 120 distinct species so far catalogued on the sub-continent[100]. Snakes, and particularly the cobra, are understood as death dealers[101] which, in the choice ecological habitat provided by the predominantly sub-tropical and tropical climate of the Indian sub-continent, enable a diverse range of habitats. Indian snakes can be found in trees, burrowed in the earth as well as in, and around, all bodies of water[102]. They are functionally everywhere. It is only their inherently secretive nature[103] coupled with government subsidized snake-catching[104] that prevents contemporary India from being completely over-run by snakes, as undoubtedly has been the sentiment in ages past. Their

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[96] *Ibid*.

[97] G. Ravindran Nair*,* 28.

[98] *Ibid*, 21.

[99] *Ibid*, 28.

[100] Indraneil Das. *Herpetology of an Antique Land,* 215.

[101] B. Demers. 2007. *field notes*. Haridwar, India.

[102] F. J. Simoons, 82.

[103] William Crooke, 383.

[104] B. Demers. 2007. *field notes*. Haridwar, India. See also P. Bagla. Feb. 2003. "India Snake Hunters find Antidote to Joblessness". National Geographic web article,25: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0225_030225_Indiansnakes.html (accessed November 20th 2009).

characterization as inhabitants and symbolic guardians of the trees, in particular fig-trees[105], their association with the waters fed by monsoon rains[106], and finally their extreme prolificacy[107] (cobras can give birth to hundreds of young) connects the snake with fertility[108]. It has additionally often been suggested that the regular shedding of old skin is a visual metaphor for renewal and rebirth[109], which, when combined with their latent ability to kill, makes the snake an obvious embodied materialization of the life cycle, and of immortality. Given the immediate danger that the snake poses, particularly to small children and to the elderly (who are most susceptible to the venom of cobras and vipers) combined with the association with fertility, it is not surprising that a central preoccupation of devotees to the Naga are propitiatory requests for progeny, health and healing illness, and snakebite[110]:

> The knowledge of poisons or antidotes is one of the eight chief subjects of India medical science: 'Innumerable are the famous Lords of the Nagas (holy cobras) headed by Vasuki and beginning from Takshaka, earth bearers, resembling the sacrificial fire in their splendour (teja), who incessantly cause thunder, rain and heat and by whom this earth with her oceans, mountains and continents is supported and who in their wrath might smite the whole world with their breath and sight. Homage be to those. With those there is no need of the healing art. But of those of the poison fangs that belong to the earth and bite human beings I will enumerate the number and in the proper order.[111]'

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[105] F. J. Simoons, 95.

[106] G. Ravindran Nair, 30.

[107] G. Hinich Sutherland, 38.

[108] F. J. Simoons, 82.

[109] William Crooke, 383.

[110] *Ibid*, 384.

[111] Miriam Robertson. 1972. Snake Charmers. Citing Sasruta (1835) in *Vogel*, Vol.17, 85

The Artharvaveda alludes that the knowledge of medicinal herbs used in healing and countering poisons rest with the snakes themselves[112], a power later assumed by ascetics[113]as they systematically supplanted the sacred snake[114] as accessible embodiments of sacred presence. Nonetheless, the tradition as a whole persists, in large part due to its universally accessible affect-laden ground, but also as the multiethnic mélange represented in the growing urban polis encouraged incorporation of old beliefs with the new. The Bhavishya Purana, for example, which is dated to this period, exhorts men to bathe the snakes called Vasuki, Takshaka, Kaliya, Manibhadra, Airavata, Dhritarashtra, Karkotaka, and Dhananjaya with milk on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of Shravan to ensure "freedom from danger for their families[115]". These practices continue to this day, despite theological and caste-based criticism. Temples dedicated to Nagas such as the Jahar Pir Mandir in Rajasthan, dedicated to *Gugga*[116], or the Mannarasala Temple in Kerala, offer milk, butter, turmeric, or rice powder[117] as part of daily *puja* to the serpent deities to this day, or, for women desiring children a bell-metal vessel is offered[118]. These offerings are explicitly understood as propitiatory gifts chosen for their capacity to please or appease the Naga. The ritual performance of a *sarpan pattu,* or serpent song, by caste specialists[119] during major festivals and by special request by a patron, is also performed to

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[112] *Ibid.*

[113] *Ibid.*

[114] Laurie Cozad, 78.

[115] Jyotish News, August 2000, Supplemental: http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2 (accessed 23 December, 2009).

[116] William Crooke, 392.

[117] G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

[118] *Ibid.*

[119] *Ibid*; C. Guillebaud. 2008. *Le Chant des Serpents: Musiciens Itinérants du Kerala*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 77.

"assuage the wrath of the snake god[120]" and ensure good fortune in the coming year. This last is a distinctly south Indian elaboration on snake sacrifice, in that the song is both a propitiatory offering and a devotional gesture. Related to the *sarpam pattu* is the *Pampinthullal,* a ritual dance dedicated to the snake gods. Ordinary rice flour mixed with lime and turmeric powder and burnt paddy husk are employed, in all shades of red, white, black and ochre[121] to draw elaborately entwined snake figures on the ground. They are flanked by lamps and food offerings[122] such as milk, butter, and turmeric or rice powder[123] . This type of ritual drawing is known as *kalam*, and is circumambulated by devotees, accompanied by prayers and music[124].

Following the construction of the *kalam*, designated women, usually unmarried virgin women[125]of the sponsoring household, form a procession that, led by a *pujari* of high caste[126], circumambulates three times around the *kalam,* dancing and whirling in emulation of the movement of the snakes, touching the *kalam*, and their foreheads, in orchestration with the music and recitation of mantras. This ecstatic dance culminates in the recitation of prayers at the *kavu* [127] which is a "sacred spot set aside as the abode of the snake deity[128]". The most notable feature of the *Pampinthullal* is that as part of the circumambulatory dance, the young women "chosen to represent

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[120] G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

[121] *Ibid*, 22.

[122] *Ibid*; C. Guillebaud, 72.

[123] G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

[124] C. Guillebaud, 71.

[125] *Ibid*, 74.

[126] *Ibid*, 73.

[127] *Ibid.*

[128] G. Ravindran Nair, 21-22.

the power of the serpent[129]" following a period of abstinence[130] will fall into trance states, said to be possession by the deity[131], and utter sounds or words believed to be the "words of the [snake] god[132]". At the close of the ritual, the women, still believed to be possessed by the deity, wipe the kalam completely away with "fierce brushing of their hair[133]".

That snakes are believed to be keepers of hidden knowledge, a reoccurring theme frequently seen in hagiographic literature and poetry, is demonstrated in these ecstatic rites by the practice of pressing the possessed women with questions, suggesting these possessions serve oracular purposes[134]. This potential is not limited to any one Naga spirit; rather, the proceedings are typically dedicated to one or several of nine Nagas[135]: Nagaraja (directly identified with Dhanendra[136] for Jains), Sarpa Yakshi, Naga Yakshi, Naga Chamundi, Nilavara Muthassan, Kuzhi nagam, Kari Nagam, Mani Nagam and Para Nagam, who are seen as the leaders of the otherworldly serpent realms. These are but a few of the aspects that have come to form contemporary *sarpabali,* the literal strengthening or empowering of the snake gods.

Sacrifice and the snake

If the previous accounts tell us anything, it is that sacrifice, as constituted within snake veneration, is not uniformly interpreted or applied. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake

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[129] *Ibid*, 22; C. Guillebaud, 74.

[130] G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

[131] C. Guillebaud, 74.

[132] G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

[133] "Shyama". 2005. Comment posted September 22, 1:44pm on Performing Arts of Kerala forum: http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=3259 (accessed January 24, 2010).

[134] R. Bharucha. *Rajasthan : An Oral History,* 112.

[135] C. Guillebaud, 73.

[136] M.A. Dhaky. *Parsvanatha and Dhanendra Nexus,* 33

worship has produced performative variations which, in their complexity, make analyzing sacrifice problematic. This is most aptly demonstrated in the ambiguity attached to contemporary *sarpabali*, the performative "catch-all" incorporating classical Vedic, as well as regional, interpretations of snake sacrifice. *Sarpabali* may be variously performed as "a sacrifice to serpents, a sacrifice by serpents [or] a sacrifice consisting of serpents[137]". I would argue this performative ambiguity relates directly to the processual stages of inclusion, accommodation, incorporation, and assimilation that derive from the ongoing struggle for cultural equipoise within competing ethnospheres, accessible through the examination of ethnographic, textual, and material referents.

The first of these sacrificial nuances, the "sacrifice *to* snakes" is by far the most widespread and resilient of the sacrificial practices discussed throughout this paper. As we have seen, the abodes and haunts of the snake are often *caityas*, sites of sacred importance which are maintained in their natural state, or developed as *tirths*, enclaves with shrines and temples. Within these spaces anyone, regardless of caste, may pay homage in prayer, and through food offerings, to either a live snake, a representation of a snake, or, in more developed settings, a snake deity. This accessibility, described as "grass-roots devotion", goes far in explaining the pervasiveness of this practice.

It is traditionally believed that snakes like milk (itself the sacred by-product of the cow, another sacred animal), and bowls of milk[138] are frequently seen placed before anthills, pools, and groves where snakes are known to live. To see a snake drink from such an offering bowl is believed to be extremely auspicious[139], an indication that any prayer made by the witness would be granted. In addition to milk, raw or broken eggs are occasionally offered, as well as turmeric, rice flour[140], and clarified butter[141]. Such is the belief in the power of propitiatory

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[137] Hoek and Shestha, *The Sacrifice of Serpents*, 60.

[138] F.J. Simoons, 90.

[139] *Ibid.*

[140] G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

[141] F.J. Simoons, 90.

offerings to the snake, that during *Nag Panchami*, the pan-Indian festival dedicated to Nagas and snakes of all kinds, in which the enthusiastic feeding of live snakes, typically caught especially for the holy festival, frequently results in the death of the snakes from indigestion or asphyxiation[142]. This fact, greatly criticized by animal welfare activists and śramanic devotees as cruel, has occasioned the Indian government to ban[143] the use of live specimens in favour of state supplied brass idols[144]. Even with this proscription, many continue to travel outside the country to participate in traditional sacrifices with live animals[145] in what is still thought of as an extremely potent ritual practice[146].

Outside of disagreements as to what constitutes an appropriate offering to the sacred snake, the sacrificial practice as a whole is fairly consistent throughout India, and as any *bhakta* will tell you, is not exclusive to snake worship. Feeding the deity is an ancient[147]practice, likely derived from ancestral veneration rites of feeding ancestors[148]. Naga deities are also implicated in this form of veneration, as in the case of the Nagbansi Rajputs of Jharkhand, the Bais Rajputs of Uttar Pradesh, the Meitheis of Bangladesh, and the Mirasis of North India and Pakistan, who all claim descent from Nagas[149]. Interestingly, there is debate amongst devotees surrounding the question of whether offerings aim to *pacify* snakes and Nagas, therefore being understood as implicitly aggressive and

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[142] Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2 (accessed 20 December, 2009).

[143] Bower and Johnson. *Disappearing Peoples?,* 69.

[144] Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2 (accessed 20 December, 2009).

[145] M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009.

[146] G. Ravindran Nair, 1.

[147] William Crooke, 103.

[148] *Ibid*, 148; Carter, J. Excerpted from *H. Spencer: The Principles of Sociology,* 45.

[149] William Crooke, 391.

physically or spiritually cruel[150], as it is described in much of the Western Himalayas[151], or rather that the offerings are gifts exchanged for the valued commodity of preternatural blessings or protections, as Westermarck's theory of sacrifice postulates[152] and as it is described by Hindu devotees during Nag Panchami.

The textual sacred snake within orthodox Hinduism has presented an exegetical scenario of inclusion to accommodation through contextual reconfiguration[153]. From the earliest texts, the cultural collision and conflict between explicitly non-Vedic snake worshippers and Vedic Brahmin reveals an axiological divide centered on the source and nature of all earthly power. Beginning in the Rg Veda, redactors build a case for the sacred snake as a primordially non-human other, but more importantly, a non-sacrificial and therefore fundamentally non-religious other[154]. In contrast, late Vedic texts portray snake worship in more intimate and proximal terms. Theirs is the narrative of close neighbours trying to get along for mutual benefit[155], of mutual inclusion. This inclusion correlates to the textual tradition of hybrid categories, liminal figures who act as intercessors between two (or more) otherwise incompatible groups. Consider the following passage from the *Śatapatha Brahmana*:

> [A long haired person] is neither a woman nor a man since he is long haired. Since he is a man, he cannot be a woman, since he is long haired, he cannot be a man. And this red metal is neither iron nor gold, and these biting ones are neither worms nor non-worms. Red metal is used because these biting things are reddish. This is the

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[150] Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2 (page 4, accessed 20 December, 2009).

[151] O.C. Handa. *Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalayas,* 10.

[152] Jeffrey Carter. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice,* 101-102.

[153] Laurie Cozad, 150.

[154] A. Pike, 627.

[155] Laurie Cozad, 25.

> reason you put [red metal] in the mouth of a long haired man [to ward off snakes][156]

Given this passage's explicit categorization of the snake as a hybrid creature, and the use of similarly hybrid agents as magical prophylactics[157] demonstrates a discomfort with the snake as a naturally embodied liminal figure. This liminality, conceived for affective and proximal reasons in the case of the natural animal, is appropriated and revisioned as sentient, a willing participant in the sacrifice[158]. From this conceptual position, it is a short step to reconfiguring the sacred snake in purely Brahmanic terms, such as is recorded in the Vedic *sarpanama*, one of the rare snake-focussed Vedic rituals[159]. This last provides us with the second of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the "sacrifice *by* the snake[160]". The *sarpanama*, or snake-name mantras, are performed *exclusively by Brahmin and for Brahmin*[161] represented as Nagas, or Naga disciples, during sacrifices[162] to invoke the power or influence of the chthonic and elemental realms long associated with the sacred snake:

> Let us honor the snakes on the earth along with those that are in the atmosphere and those that are in the heavens. Honor to those snakes! /To those snakes who are the arrows of demons...to those snakes who are in the trees or who lie in holes – honor to those snakes! / To those snakes who are in the shining sky, or those who are in the water. Honor to those snakes![163]

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[156] *Ibid*, 32.

[157] Jeffrey Carter. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice,* 76-77.

[158] Hoek and Shestha, 60.

[159] Laurie Cozad, 28.

[160] Hoek and Shestha, 60.

[161] Laurie Cozad, 36.

[162] *Ibid*, 28.

[163] *Ibid*, 29.

This passage, the first recorded association of sacrifice within snake veneration, is clearly an attempt by Brahmins to control the sacred snake through application of the Vedic mantra, the *sarpa* subordinated by sacred utterance, the heart of Vedic belief. This clearly demonstrates that by the pre-Kusana/late Vedic era, in which the greatest concentrations of narrative and iconographic hybridizations, the sacred snake was undergoing a process of domestication by Brahmanic and Śramanic redactors[164] as it presented a presence "antithetical to the establishment of exclusive control over the natural world"[165] which was, and still is, the primary concern of the lay devotees[166].

Imperative to understanding the resilience of the sacred snake, even in the face of these processes, is the core belief that immanent power is a transferable commodity[167], from greater to lesser, through direct devotional engagement.

> The basic rule is that any being that a person considers more powerful than himself or herself in any particular realm of life can become an object of worship... [and] any action ... undertaken because of another being's power is religious action[168].

That religious action can also be sacrificial allows for the last of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the "sacrifice *of* snakes[169]". The *sarpasattra*, like the *sarpanama*, is a ritual action intended originally to be performed exclusively by priests[170], suggesting that snake veneration was useful to the consolidation of priestly authority and influence. *Sarpasattra* literally means snake sacrifice, however in its original intention it denoted sacrifice

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[164] *Ibid*, 20.

[165] *Ibid*.

[166] P.S. Jaini, 187-188.

[167] Laurie Cozad, 31.

[168] *Ibid*.

[169] Hoek and Shestha, 60.

[170] Laurie Cozad, 36.

performed "by snakes" embodied as Brahmins[171], for the "*sattra* is above all a ritual by and for the Brahmin officiate, who collectively accrue the benefits of their own endeavour[172]". Evidence of grass-roots intervention on this Brahmin appropriation of previously open practices suggests a tension between Brahmin ritualists and the snake worshipping populace at large. By the time of the redaction of the *Adi Parvan* portion of the *Mahabharata*, dated no earlier than the 2nd century BCE, a great deal of effort was exerted to undermine the sacrality of the snake[173]. The scriptural relationship between the sacred snake and sacrifice wanes, culminating in the epic of King *Janemajaya's* sarpasattra, arguably the most dramatic snake sacrifice ever described. Within this narrative, the sarpasattra is no longer depicted as a sacrifice by serpents but rather *of* serpents, a first in the literary history of India. Undertaken at Kurukshetra, the notable site of human holocaust which frames the Bhagavad Gita, King *Janemajaya*, *Arjuna's* great-grandson, avenging the death/murder of his father (or in some versions his son) by the Naga prince *Taksaka*[174], creates a massive *hotr*, or sacrificial fire into which all the snakes of the world, natural or supernatural, would be drawn into and immolated – a veritable genocide of serpent-kind. Notably, it is this event that sets the stage for the telling of the Mahabharata epic. In the end, this serpent holocaust is only just averted by *Astika*, a hybrid Brahmin-Naga who quells *Janemajaya's* wrath.

The practice of immolating snakes is still practiced throughout greater South Asia[175] despite it being officially banned in India[176]. In Kathmandu, as part of a *panchbali* or "five animal sacrifices", two snakes are frequently rendered to the flames with the understanding that they have ritually assented to

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[171] *Ibid.*

[172] Laurie Cozad, 37.

[173] Laurie Cozad, 52.

[174] Hoek and Shestha, 62.

[175] M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009. Consider: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8375591.stm

[176] M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009.

the sacrifice[177] as part of acts of propitiation to the mountain goddess *Indrayani*. The relationship between blood sacrifice, veneration to the goddess, and Naga worship is also evident in the lower western Himalayan region, where Naga are believed to be "fundamentally demonic and vengeful[178]" and under the tutelage of equally wrathful goddesses. There, to keep the *Naga Devta* peaceful[179], animal and (anecdotally) human sacrifices are performed[180], although with strict conditions grounded in locale:

> "...the Naga gods have always been very selective about the choice of sacrificial victims. Those Naga deities, who controlled the underground sources of water, could only be appeased by offering them women, usually having suckling child. ... Another class of Naga gods mostly confined to the interiors of the region … demanded only the able-bodied young men in sacrifice..." where others were satisfied by any human. Still others accepted only male goats or in some cases milk[181].

These mountain Nagas, characterized as capricious, wrathful gods, are again comparable to the *pari*, mountain spirits of the Hindu Kush Hunza valley who are likewise similarly propitiated by blood sacrifices[182]. Close examination of blood sacrifice to the Naga reveal there is a notable preponderance of wrathful Nagini, typically lineage deities, in environmentally sensitive or hazardous areas[183]. This suggests a conflation of highland

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[177] Hoek and Shestha, 58.

[178] O.C. Handa, 10.

[179] *Ibid,* 9.

[180] *Ibid*, 10.

[181] *Ibid*.

[182] M. H. Sidke, 72-73.

[183] O.C. Handa, 108

pastoralist animism[184], *kuldevi* veneration[185], and lowland agricultural Naga veneration[186]. I argue that the association of blood sacrifice with wrathful or highly dangerous deities in these dangerous environments are an upward valuation of the offering over the potential risk posed by an environment which is seen as hostile. The great number of taboos attached to land and water use in highland valley and terrace environments[187] lends support to this idea of sacrifice as measured against regional risks and affordances.

Final thoughts

This paper has demonstrated that ritual sacrifice within the broad practice of snake veneration is not uniformly expressed. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake worship has produced ritual and performative variations, touched briefly upon here within the context of India and the greater Western Himalayas. The multi-faceted picture that emerges makes theorizing sacrifice within the broader practice potentially problematic. However, by ethnographically contextualizing Hoek and Shrestra's formulation of snake sacrifice as a tri-partite structure, of sacrifice *to* snakes, *by* snakes, and *of* snakes, we gain valuable insight into what otherwise would be an unwieldy and unmanageable subject, which has often been a source of criticism in the study of Indian popular religion. By contextualizing the influence of external religious/political bodies in diminishing or appropriating the devotional impact of

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[184] Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas.* Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan': Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

[185] O.C. Handa. 95; See also Jones, G. *Kuldevi Worship as a Subaltern Cultural Tradition for Jaina Women*: paper presented for panel on "Personal Encounters of the Goddess" at the 2008 Gaia Gathering, University of Ottawa, May 2008.

[186] O.C. Handa, 81.

[187] Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas.* Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan'; Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

the sacred snake, we were able to isolate multiple strands of snake sacrifice which are given greater or lesser prominence within different ethnospheres[188]. The unifying thread for all three of these practices is the snake itself, a paradigmic object of fear and awe, death and immortality.

[188] Wade Davis. *Light at the Edge of the World*, 5.

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Footnotes