

[Composite Cultures]

[Sant Kabīr and Gūgā the Snake God]

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Summary

In recent scholarship on Hindu-Muslim composite culture in India much emphasis has been laid on interreligious tolerance and co-existence as the main factor for composite culture to develop and maintain. This thesis takes a critical approach to such an understanding by suggesting a triangular approach based on research on two rather different oral traditions in North India, namely the ones surrounding the figures of Kabīr and Gūgā. Besides examining orally derived texts of these traditions, in form of poetry and epics, I have also conducted a fieldwork in Northern Rajasthan so as to see how a composite cult works in practice. Thereby this thesis crosses over many different layers in South Asian culture. My belief is that the pragmatic aspect of a folk hero like Gūgā in the everyday life of both Hindu and Muslim communities, as well as the total rejection of established traditions as seen in the poetry of the Sants and Kabīr, are strong catalysts for the developments and continuance of composite cultures in South Asia.

In scholarship and politics promoting composite culture as the normative better, and as a counterargument for growing communal tension, Kabīr is presented as the ‘Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity’, to the extent that he is actually said to have forwarded an agenda to unite these two religious communities intentionally. By taking a closer look into some of the poetry which is assigned to Kabīr there is not much to support such an agenda. Rather his sayings are deeply entrenched with harsh criticism towards the established religious traditions in his surroundings, at the same time as he seems to have used their vocabularies and symbolisms to benefit his positions.

The folk tradition evolving around the snake god Gūgā includes an oral epic tradition, which flourishes throughout North-Western India. At a fieldwork conducted at a festival venerating this hero/deity in Northern Rajasthan in August 2009, I soon discovered that the tolerant and normative aspect of composite culture was something that did not concern the average ‘practitioners’ of composite culture. They were rather concerned with the efficacy of Gūgā in mundane matters; that he could cure illness and provide help if they venerated him. I do not claim that tolerance is not present within composite cultures, sometimes it is very much at hand, and sometimes not. Tolerance seems to be of a pre-reflective kind for the average ‘practitioner’ of composite culture; they participated at the festival because of the efficacy of the deity, not for celebration of inter-religious tolerance and togetherness.

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COMPOSITE CULTURE: Background and Methodology

Chapter One: Introduction

Defining the theme

Hindu-Muslim composite culture is a constructed concept of the 20th century that describes amalgams of Hindu and Islamic elements in South Asian culture. Composite culture cannot be labeled syncretism, as syncretism is “The merging of different religions or religious traditions, or the absorption of foreign elements into a particular religion.”¹ Further syncretism can have negative connotations as it can imply the contamination of one religion by the other.² Composite culture can rather be described as blends where Muslim and Hindu elements are overlapping and easily recognizable. Categories of Hindu and Muslim are not to be seen exclusively as religious units, but initially as two diverse cultures, hence many events occurring throughout the development of composite culture have to be understood also in light of other aspects than the religious ones. Hindu-Muslim composite culture is in other words not merely composite religion, but product of intercommunity relations in all cultural arenas.

Composite culture has to a great extent developed in oral traditions and in the encounter of the mystical traditions of Hinduism and Islam, as a result of co-existence of the two religious communities. This thesis on Hindu-Muslim composite culture in Northern India will describe developments that took place in medieval times in the encounter between Hindu and Muslim communities, and explain the present situation of some of these developments, and it will look at some movements that have worked actively in opposition to interreligious activity. But most importantly the focus of the thesis will be on two separate popular traditions in North India that are examples for composite culture; namely the traditions revolving around Kabīr and Gūgā. In short, Kabīr is reckoned to be one of the most famous and popular *Sant* (non-sectarian Bhakti) poets of medieval North India, whereas Gūgā is a divine hero who is venerated in North India by both Hindu and Muslim communities for his supernatural powers and ability to cure snake bites.

¹ *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*, 509.

² *Ibid.*

We seem to be confronted with a complex theme, developments taking place during a long period of time and over a large geographical area. Hindu-Muslim composite culture is found in the field of religion, art and architecture, but also in everyday life circumstances; such as dress codes and food habits. Thereby it is a phenomenon that includes a great variety of occurrences. The discourse on composite culture crosses into those of social identity, religious identity, secularism, and religious nationalism and other trends that are opposed to interreligious movements. I will briefly discuss the notion of composite culture in relation to these issues in chapter two which will be concerned with the background to composite culture. However, this thesis will not be concerned with detailed accounts of the great variety of historical developments, but rather stay focused on the two separate figures and traditions of Kabīr and Gūgā that represent composite culture.

Proposing a triangular approach to composite culture

In recent literature on the subject of composite culture, as we shall see in the next chapter, the general tendency has been to emphasize that what these figures and movements share is unity and tolerance; tolerance towards the ‘others’ and towards religions in general. This tolerance is according to contemporary scholarship on the subject often posed as the common denominator for compositeness, and the reason why for example Kabīr and Gūgā are seen as promoters and symbols of Hindu-Muslim unity. I am critical to this modern attitude because it seems to have a clear political agenda that does not try to analyze the elements as they are, but rather emphasize the co-existence and togetherness of Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, as this is a contemporary necessity. Composite culture has never been an institutionalized movement, but a phenomenon that develops out of the interaction in the everyday life, and in the common religious practices of Hindu and Muslim communities. It can therefore be fragile to interference from outside institutions, for example orthodox Islam, mainstream Hinduism or religious nationalist and revivalist movements. Kathryn Hansen states that “The construct [composite culture] has been used in a variety of contexts: to signify an attitude of tolerance and mutual respect between Hindus and Muslims; to denote a shared, syncretistic aesthetic, as in architecture and music; and to valorize a history that emphasizes coexistence rather than antagonism across communal lines.”³ This composite culture can be seen as a counterargument to growing communal tension in India, particularly to the rise of the Hindu

³ Kathryn Hansen, “Staging Composite Culture: Nautanki and Parsi theatre in recent revivals.”, *South Asia Research*, July 2009, no. 29, 152.

Nationalist Sangh Parivar,⁴ which is “a constellation of intertwined political parties and cultural organizations”⁵ with their focus on *Hindutva*, literally Hinduness⁶, as defining the Indian nation. Hansen continues “Against *Hindutva* supporters’ claims that Muslims are outsiders and second class citizens, the notion of composite culture has provided a historical rationale for espousing pluralism. In this ongoing contestation, composite culture often appears as a concern mainly of intellectuals and politicians.”⁷

In the composite culture of the practitioners, co-existence and tolerance seems most of the time to be of a pre-reflective kind. With regards to the tradition of Kabīr there is little evidence in his sayings that reveal a foremost tolerant attitude. What he meant is of course out of reach to us, as the only relics we have are collections of texts out of which scholars repeatedly have tried to reveal some kind of authoritative and original core. Being an oral tradition for approximately one and a half century (and still continuing as such) prior to the first written collection,⁸ this is by and large impossible.⁹ It has been said about Kabīr that he was an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity. What he seems to have done on the other hand is to have been equally critical towards all religions; towards the existing rigidity of the brahmanical tradition, the orthodoxy of Islam, and the practices of Hindu *bhaktas* and Islamic *sufis*, wandering yogis, and so on, even though he used their vocabularies, and was part and parcel of the environment in which he lived. The god of Kabīr was the same for all, and salvation/liberation was a matter of a personal relationship with god, not with written doctrines, priests, temples, and rituals. In this way Kabīr is understood as not only a great poet and mystic, but also a social reformer who through his rather rude and crude utterances confronted the common man, whatever religious or social background he had, with the context in which he was living. The following couplets from Charlotte Vaudevilles work *Kabīr* are examples to illustrate the sentiment in the utterances of Kabīr:

⁴ The Sangh Parivar includes the political right wing party Bharaiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). (C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, 2004, 273-273) For further information on Religious Nationalism see Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism – Hindus and Muslims in South Asia*, 1994, and Shubh Mathur, *The Everyday Life of Hindu Nationalism: An Ethnographic Account*, 2008.

⁵ Hansen, “Staging Composite Culture: Nautanki and Parsi theatre in recent revivals”, 153.

⁶ C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, 2004, 263.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Winand M. Callevaert, *The Millennium Kabīr Vānī - A collection of pad-s*, 1.

⁹ This will be further elaborated in chapter three.

Why does the Mullah climb the minaret?
Allah is not outside!
Him for whom you cry the calls [to prayer],
You should recognize in your heart.¹⁰

The Hindu died crying: 'Ram!'
The Mussulman crying: 'Khuda!'
Kabīr, that one will live,
Who keeps away from both!¹¹

The perfect Jewel dwells in your own soul,
bring It to your consciousness!
He who is free from care cares for you,
for such is the way of the Lord.¹²

Composite culture, and the reason for it to unfold, is often seen in the light of interreligious tolerance, as we shall see below. At the Gūgā Medhi Melā, a popular festival in Rajasthan, which is held annually in August, a large part of the participants were not aware of the concept composite culture, but came as Hindus or Muslims to venerate the hero-deity Gūgā Jī. The reason for the popularity of Gūgā and the festival is his effectiveness in practical matters that is the fundament, and the reason for devotion by both Hindu and Muslim communities. The fact of the practiced help Gūgā (and other similar deities and saints) provides in the everyday life of individuals is not given the attention it deserves by much contemporary scholarship that emphasize religious tolerance as the foundation for composite practices. The composite practice of different popular cults has little to do with established religions, but with the efficacy of the actual saint, poet, hero or god in focus. The folk/popular traditions are open to everybody and they disregard religious identity as Hindus or Muslims, or, as we shall see in case of both Kabīr and Gūgā, the devotees sometimes claim the religious affiliation of the object of worship to be either Hindu or Muslim, depending on their own background.

The inclusivity and practice of popular traditions can also be understood as a counterargument to the rigidity of established tradition. What needs some more attention in order to understand composite culture are the practitioners and their agendas, and they cannot be overlooked by pure emphasis on some kind of normative interreligious tolerance. I will

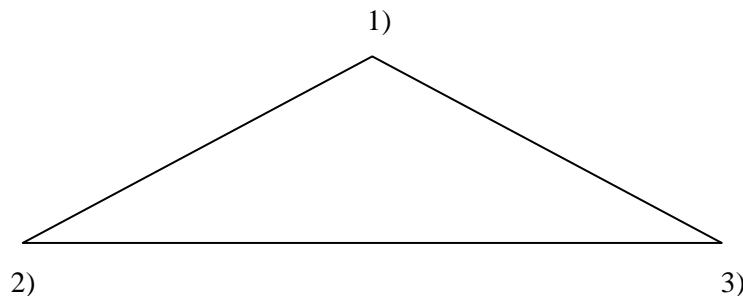
¹⁰ Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 1974, 285.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 263, (According to Vaudeville "He who will keep away from both terms is he who will not accept any distinction.")

¹² Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 306.

suggest now a triangular approach to composite culture as presented in the following model. The three corners of the triangle represent three very different understandings of what composite culture can mean:

1) Composite Culture as intentional promotion of interreligious tolerance and understanding: This approach is typically found among intellectuals and South Asian politicians.



**2) Composite Culture at a folk level:
Characterized by a common belief in the effectiveness of a deity/saint/place in practical matters, for example Gūgā Jī.**

3) Composite culture as a result of rejection of all established traditions and their rituals. For example the Sants and Kabīr.

My aim with this triangle is to stress point two and three as major catalysts for the actual development of composite practices. With regards to point two I will emphasize the significance of efficacy in practical matters as one that overrides the issue whether a divine being is a Hindu or a Muslim through analyzing material collected at a fieldwork conducted at a common religious festival in North India, August 2009. Another type of composite culture can be illustrated by the figure of Kabīr, a 15th century poet, who, through his thorough criticism of established religious traditions and sects, which he based on the idea that god is not tied up in rigid ritualism and doctrines, forwarded a vision of god as one and the same for all. Through ridiculing religious establishments and their exclusivist points of view, and at the same time emphasizing a personal goodness, and openness for the ‘Ultimate truth’ or god, Kabīr has strongly influenced many followers from his time until today. He has been described as an Apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity¹³, although his sayings do not reveal such an agenda. In modern discourse on composite culture tolerance is seen as a major factor for the development of a common culture both for Hindus and for Muslims. I will criticize this

¹³ Mohammad Hedayetullah, *Kabīr: An apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity*, 1977.

approach, since it doesn't take into account the realities of point two and three of the triangle. These two points will thoroughly be described in Part II and III in this thesis. I do not intend to reject that interreligious tolerance also is present within composite culture, but I believe that the common practitioners and their real agendas are just ignored in the promotion of composite culture as a tolerant counterargument to communal conflicts in South Asia. The points in the triangle are therefore not to be interpreted as if in a hierarchical relationship to each other, but as present on an equal level. Their relationship, however, is quite complex: Modern intellectuals and politicians celebrate Kabīr as a foremost promoter of tolerance regarding Hindu-Muslims issues, even though he was very critical towards both. But the same people do not celebrate a composite cult as that of the folk deity Gūgā Ji for obvious reasons; whereas Kabīr is known on a national and even international level, Gūgā and his popularity is limited to a regional field, and to mostly a low-caste community.

Emphasizing a common culture is, however, important to create unity amongst a population as varied as the Indian, but the way by which it depicts its history creates the impression that composite culture is an institutionalized movement, something it never was. So the point is that tolerance sometimes may be an element of composite culture, but frequently it is not. The participants of the Gūgā festival as I met them in Rajasthan in 2009 were first and foremost concerned with their own relationship to Gūgā, whether they saw him as a hero, a saint, or a god, whether they saw him as Hindu, Muslim, both or neither. Not all participants at such festivals do promote interreligious tolerance, not all those who in theory/practice are tolerant reflect over the festival as interreligious, and there are of course those who do. I mean to say that it is a complex field we are stepping into. A festival like this is in many ways a microcosm of the cult in its entirety, and I will return to the details of this conglomerate later on in the last part of the thesis named 'Composite places of the present'. My main aim in this thesis is to emphasize the pragmatic/effective aspect found in the cult of Gūgā, and the religious criticism/dissent of Kabīr, as I believe that such an approach does better justice to the attitudes and activities of real practitioners of composite culture.

Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into three parts. The first part 'Composite culture – Background and Methodology' includes chapter one 'Introduction', chapter two 'Background' and chapter three 'Methodology'. This part acquaints the reader with various aspects of our topic. Chapter one outlines the main issues and introduces the composite culture triangle. Chapter two

‘Background’ explains in short developments of composite culture in the encounter of Hindu and Muslim traditions. I will give some accounts for the complex religious environment of medieval North India; different sects and movements that flourished will be introduced. Thereafter follows a brief discussion on literature on religious identity with regards to South Asia and composite culture. Chapter three on methodology is two-fold. First I will explain the distinction of orality and literacy before I continue to explain Oral Theory as this is a method which I have used in connection with the orally derived texts of both Kabīr and the Sant tradition, but also the oral epic of Gūgā. The second part of this chapter is written as a narrative of the fieldwork, where I explain the field, the interviews and observations I made, and the situations I encountered.

The second part ‘Composite texts of the past’ consists of chapter four ‘Dissent and protest in Sant poetry’ and chapter five ‘Kabīr - an Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity?’ This part will center on the tradition of the Sants and particularly Kabīr, his poetry and how it has been interpreted within the general frame of the history of Indian religions in the following periods. In this part I will highlight the rejection of established religious traditions which is to be found throughout the poetry of the Sants and Kabīr, and argue that there is no indication in this literature that Kabīr was tolerant and preached for the cause of national integration of Hindus and Muslims in South Asia. The relationship between point one and three of the triangle is seen in the tradition evolving after Kabīr. On the one side there is the attempt at presenting him as the ‘Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity’, while his sayings contradict such a position. On the other there is the tendency amongst religious traditions to claim him as theirs. In this part I have also explained the most used poetic forms and techniques of this tradition, and included some of the poetry of Kabīr to highlight central themes in his compositions.

Part three ‘Composite Places of the Present’ is centered on the figure of Gūgā. Gūgā is for some a warrior hero, for others a saint or a deity. He is initially connected to snake worship and is the center figure of an epic tradition, which will be introduced in chapter six. The epic tradition of Gūgā shares many plots and themes with other epic traditions in South Asia, as we will see in chapter three. I will discuss the legends of Gūgā with regards to the issue of Hindu-Muslim composite culture, and show how the different communities interpret his history differently. This chapter will make the reader acquainted with the figure of Gūgā and the epic tradition revolving around him, before we continue to chapter seven ‘Gūgā – composite culture in practice’. Chapter seven explains how composite culture at a common Hindu-Muslim religious festival actually takes place. Here I emphasize that a festival like this

in many regards is a microcosm of the cult in its entirety. I pointed out above that my aim is to emphasize that composite culture is based upon more than merely some kind of normative interreligious tolerance. At the festival in Gūgā Medhi both the pragmatic/efficacious aspect (point two) and the normative tolerant aspect (point one) were present.

Chapter two: Background

Hindu-Muslim composite culture is, as we have seen so far, a constructed concept that describes the intermixing of Hindu and Muslim religious and cultural elements from the advent of Muslim populations in South Asia until today. It includes a variety of different traditions and sects that are intermixtures of Hindu and Islamic practices, beliefs and customs, and it is seen in everyday life in terms of dress codes and eating habits. There are trends in modern scholarship and politics in India to promote Hindu-Muslim composite culture as the normative better, and there is an emphasis on interreligious tolerance as the basis for composite culture. This approach tends to interpret figures as Kabīr as intentionally trying to break down barriers separating Hindus from Muslims – An interpretive axis that “was part of the Congress nationalist ideology of a Hindu-Muslim syncretistic culture in post-medieval times.”¹⁴ Such an attitude tends to lose sight of the average ‘practitioners’ of composite cultures and of the possibility that other factors than tolerance characterize composite culture; such as the efficacy of a sacred place or a deity in case of folk traditions, or the rejection of all established traditions in case of the Sants.

It is commonly accepted that the encounter between the mystical traditions of Hinduism and Islam, namely Bhakti (and other mystical movements existing prior to the northern Bhakti movement, like the Nāths which we will return to below) and Sufism, had a great impact on the development of composite culture in India. “At the orthodox level, Islam and Hinduism clashed, since they expounded almost diametrically opposed doctrines. At the popular and mystical levels, however, it was possible for the two religions to interact.”¹⁵ This chapter will briefly describe the development of composite culture within the mystical traditions of Bhakti and Sufism, and how such developments also tended to take place at a folk/popular level rather than inside the orthodox/mainstream core of the established traditions of Hinduism and Islam. Some of the traditions within the Sufi and Bhakti movements were more in accordance with the established traditions than others. In this chapter some religious and social trends of medieval India which are relevant to the thesis will be presented. With regards to the Sufi and the Bhakti movements I will not elaborate on developments that took place prior to Islam’s advent in India. This chapter will also describe some additional aspects of the field of composite culture like religious identity, religious

¹⁴ Pradeep Bandyopadhyaya, “The Uses of Kabīr: Missionary Writings and Civilisational Difference”, in Monika Horstmann (ed.), *Images of Kabīr*, 2002, 15.

¹⁵ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 2003, 12.

nationalism etc. This will provide us with the background to proceed with the two main parts of the thesis that are focused on Kabīr (and the Sants) and Gūgā Jī. Kabīr and Gūgā are representatives of two quite different oral traditions in North India, but both are seen within the frame of composite culture.

Development of Hindu-Muslim composite culture

“Mysticism has been called the “the great spiritual current which goes through all religions.””¹⁶ According to Annemarie Schimmel “the reality that is the goal of the mystic, and is ineffable, cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception; neither philosophy nor reason can reveal it. Only the wisdom of the heart, *gnosis*, may give insight into some of its aspects.”¹⁷ The encounter between the mystical traditions of Islam and Hinduism is given a lot of credit for the development of composite culture and for the reconciliation of Hindu and Muslim communities in India. And the heart stands at the core of these traditions - love, devotion and longing for/union with god or the ultimate reality.

Bhakti, the name of a devotional movement, or rather many movements, in India “came to be defined as “devotion to a personal deity.””¹⁸ Bhakti is generally defined as devotion, but it is also reckoned to be a mystical tradition, as the focus is devotion to god or the ‘ultimate reality’ through different forms of practices. The Bhakti movement has also been interpreted as a movement of dissent and of social reform.¹⁹ Throughout the medieval era North India was characterised by a variety of different sects and communities which to a greater or lesser extent were in accordance with the mainstream and orthodox traditions. “The tradition of dissent and protest by various sections has been a long one in India, especially among those with “a low status”, and also on occasions among other sections, including those who enjoyed “high status”. The early Jain and Buddhist protests against a rigid religious “great tradition” ideology and the caste system were continued in later times.”²⁰ Central within such movements of dissent is a rejection of the existing social, religious and also political context.

Monika Thiel-Horstman states that “All Bhakti sects do, indeed, agree that salvation is attainable at any stage of life because it is bestowed upon the individual as an act of divine

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 3.

¹⁹ Malik Mohamed, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 2007, 248.

²⁰ Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Medieval India & Hindi Bhakti Poetry: A Socio-Cultural Study*, 15.

grace.”²¹ As such Bhakti made salvation available to all, irrespective of caste, class, and gender. Bhakti as a movement started out in South India in the 6th century, and spread later to the North. David N. Lorenzen points out that “Since the latter part of the 15th century, bhakti religion in North India has been divided into two major streams or currents – *nirguṇī* and *saguṇī* – ostensibly on the basis of a theological difference in the way of conceptualizing the nature of the divine being that is the object of worship.”²² Whereas *saguṇa* (‘with qualities’) Bhakti concentrates its devotion on god with attributes, forms, names, myths, *nirguṇa* (‘without qualities’) conception of god is the direct opposite. The *nirguṇa bhaktas* did however search for a union with their formless god, who often took the name of Rām (not to be confused with the *saguṇa* deity Rām of the epic tradition of Rāmāyaṇa). The state of this union is frequently called *sahaja* (‘innate, natural, unforced, easy, the unqualified absolute (as perceivable in the heart)’²³) by the Sants. The term Sant has derived from the Sanskrit word *sat* (‘truth’), and has different meanings. According to Karine Schomer a Sant has experienced the Ultimate Truth or Reality, or refers to all those who sincerely seek enlightenment.²⁴ Schomer states that “it [‘Sant’] differs considerably from the false cognate ‘saint’ which is often used to translate it.”²⁵ The Sants comprise two separate devotional movements in India; the Northern and the Maharashtrian Sants. The Northern Sants are *nirguṇa bhaktas*. This is the group I will deal with throughout. I will elaborate on Sant tradition and poetry in chapter four.

Already from the 11th century different Sufi *silsilāhs* (‘orders, brotherhoods’) established themselves in India. The Sufis, the mystics of Islam, came with the early Muslim invaders and migrants, and “had spread far and wide over the north and even the southern part of the sub-continent by the end of the 14th century. During this period, the sufis had many opportunities of interacting with the Hindus.”²⁶ Satish Chandra states that “From the eleventh to the fifteenth century, it would appear that as far as the Indic region is concerned, the main interaction between Sufism and Hindu mysticism was through the yogic movement. [...] The most influential and widespread among the yogis were the *Nāthpanthīs* who had their main seat at Gorakhpur in modern east Uttar Pradesh.”²⁷ According to Charlotte Vaudeville the

²¹ Monika Thiel-Horstman, “Bhakti and Monasticism”, in Sontheimer and Kulke (eds.) *Hinduism Reconsidered*, 127.

²² David N. Lorenzen, “Introduction”, in David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*, 1995, 1.

²³ R. S. McGregor, *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 1993.

²⁴ Karine Schomer, “The Sant tradition in perspective”, in Schomer and McLeod *The Sants*, 1987, 2f.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Medieval India & Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 58.

²⁷ Satish Chandra, *Historiography, Religion and State in Medieval India*, 135.

Sant ideal of sanctity “may be viewed as a subtle blending of two main traditions of Hindu mysticism, apparently antagonistic to each other: Vaishnava bhakti and an esoteric Tantric tradition, whose most popular representatives are Gorakhnāth and the Nāth yogis, often referred to by Kabīr and his followers.”²⁸ The Nāths flourished all over North India in medieval times, and are believed to have had great impact on the social and religious developments that took place at the time. “Most of the *Nāthpanthī siddhas* and *jogis* belonged to the low-castes (*sudras*). They opposed the caste-based inequalities, denounced the religion of works favoured by the Brahmans, and did not favour image worship.”²⁹ The *Nāthpanthīs* influenced the thoughts of both Hindu and Sufi mystics and poets in medieval India. “The fifteenth century saw the rise of popular Bhakti and popular Sufis in the country and a broadening of the contact between the two religions, Islam and Hinduism.”³⁰ The philosophy of the Nāth yogis and the poetry of Kabīr gained increasing popularity amongst most Sufis, but even more striking was the growing interest in Vedanta.³¹ The mystics of Sufi and Bhakti traditions, particularly *nirguṇa* Bhakti, shared many features, and influenced each other on many levels. Malik Mohamed states that “Centuries of contact between the two communities (Hindu and Muslim) gradually led to the emergence and evolution of many popular cults. They were the mixtures of both Hinduism and Islam. Love, harmony and peace were the cardinal principles of these cults.”³² Here we see again how harmony and peace are features that describe the developments as they took place in medieval India, paying no attention to other factors that might have influenced such developments. It might be that many of these cults acted towards each other and towards Hindus and Muslims with tolerance and inclusivity, at the same time, as we see in the case of Kabīr and the Sants, the rejection of both Hindu and Muslim traditions seems to have been popular amongst the people that followed them. Bhakti and Sufi traditions of northern India, did, however through their *nirguṇa* stance, de-emphasize the role of the orthodox/mainstream clergy, and elevated the relationship between the devotee and his god.

A distinction which is of particular relevance to us in this context is between “the attitudes of “orthodox” Sufis who remained aloof from and often mistrusted non-Muslims,

²⁸ Charlotte Vaudeville, “Sant Mat”, in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 36.

²⁹ Chandra, *Historiography, Religion and State in Medieval India*, 137.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

³¹ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism*, Vol 2, 390f.

³² Mohamed, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 330.

and the open-minded liberalism of Sufis like Shaikh Fariduddin Shakarganj”.³³ A divide between those Sufis who behaved according to the Islamic law and those who understood themselves as exempted from it became more visible in the Indian environment – a division that came to resemble the one between pure and impure Hindu castes and between the *Ajlaf* and *Ashraf* in the Muslim community.³⁴ The stark distinction between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, as found in monotheistic traditions like Christianity and Islam, is not applicable to Hinduism as there is no institutional framework or centralized church within the tradition. “The most crucial distinction here is between those civilizations where it is legitimate to use the term heterodoxy and those where it is more appropriate to limit the discussion to sects and sectarianism.”³⁵ In India the Brahmin is the representative of “orthodoxy” whereas the untouchable *Siddha* or *Yogi* is representative of “heterodoxy” or heresy. David Shulman states that “It is also possible to offer a “thermodynamic” interpretation of these relations. Both the Untouchable and the Brahmin deal with forces which are considered “hot” in that they are powerful but uncontrolled, divine and life-giving but also dangerous. While the Untouchable shares the heat of these impure forces, the Brahmin provides them with a safe border of “coolness” through the force of his renunciatory virtues of asceticism and purity.”³⁶

Movements of dissent in North India rejected the status of the Brahmin, but many ideals of the “orthodoxy” were in many instances still accepted by them. Most of the sects or movements of dissent in India were particularly popular amongst the lower castes. They rejected the social hierarchy, written sacred texts (and languages), and the distinction between purity and pollution. The focus is on a personal experience of the divine, but also on the teachings of a personal guru.³⁷ Within such traditions texts were transmitted orally. We shall further discuss this in chapter three.

The concept of Composite Culture in modern discourse

Composite culture is a constructed concept of the 20th century describing the intermixing of Hindu and Islamic elements in the South Asian culture. It is firmly enshrined in the Indian Constitution of 1950 in Part IVA that the citizens of India have a responsibility “to value and

³³ Hugh van Skyhawk, “Hindu-Muslim religious syncretism in folk literature, in Brückner, Lutze and Malik (eds.), *Flags of Fame*, 1993, 446.

³⁴ Simon Digby, “The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India”, in Eaton (ed.), *India’s Islamic traditions, 711-1750*, 2008, 239.

³⁵ S. N. Eisenstadt, “Dissent, Heterodoxy and Civilizational Dynamics”, in Eisenstadt, Kahane and Shulman (eds.), *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*, 1984, 6.

³⁶ David Shulman, “Idealism and Dissent in South Indian Hinduism”, in Eisenstadt et al. (eds.), *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*, 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture”.³⁸ Kathryn Hansen states that “With its stress upon the subtle intermixing or synthesis of the world-views and living habits of Muslims and Hindus, composite culture has been treated as a powerful resource for cultural unification.”³⁹ Composite culture is in lack of an institutional framework and is therefore flexible and fragile. Therefore the composite culture does not describe a fusion of traditions where the distinct qualities are hard to separate, but is a phenomenon where the original identities are withheld, at the same time as there is an active participation in practise not necessarily *across* the boundaries of the traditions, but perhaps to some degree in a common ground of popular tradition that serves as an intermediate platform between the religious traditions of Hinduism and Islam. In some cases, as with Hindu participation at Sufi shrines, it is perhaps more obviously a cross-religious participation, but in other cases, as with Gūgā Pīr, it is harder to say whether Hindu or Muslim communities have “ownership”. Further, syncretism is to a large extent confined to the religious field, whereas the composite culture, as the term implies, includes all fields of culture.

Malik Mohamed defines composite culture as “a product of borrowing, sharing and fusing through processes of interaction between two or more streams over time, in the belief that such cultural symbiosis has a propensity for greater vitality, through larger acceptability, than mono-culture, either of the dominant or dominated ethnic segment.”⁴⁰ This definition reveals an ideological agenda in the scholarship on the subject in that it tends to ignore the actual devotees and their experience, and makes it sound like the interreligious interaction was something done intentionally in order to create a composite culture. There is little reason to believe that this definition is valid for the average ‘practitioners’ of composite culture.

Asim Roy questions the very concept of composite culture. He states that “historians, as political partisans, only asked the question in terms of either/or; whether there was and is a composite culture or not. [...] The historians never asked what was the foundational basis of our composite culture and the kind of terrain on which it was standing.”⁴¹ Further, Roy points to the orthodoxy and the elites’ interventions in interreligious relations in order to argue that any composite culture can be broken down from outside. Hindu-Muslim composite culture was never a movement within an institutionalized framework, but had from the start a strong pragmatic aspect. It developed in the everyday life of Hindus and Muslims who had lived side

³⁸ Kathryn Hansen, “Staging Composite Culture: Nautanki and Parsi Theatre in recent revivals”, 152.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁰ Malik Mohamed, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 2007:415.

⁴¹ Asim Roy, *Islam in History and Politics*, 39.

by side for centuries and who had taken advantage of the new options available to them. They were not concerned with the origin of a ritual, a saint, a poem, a god or the name of a god as long as the cult had some kind of practical result that could help them through the struggles of everyday life. Hindus and Muslims venerated each other's saints, heroes and sacred places. They participated in each other's festivities, not necessarily only for religious merit, but also just for the fun of it, and they still do so.

Asim Roy states that "at these folk levels what came about as an intermingling or fusion or synthesis has been of a pre-reflective kind, that is, it was not thought out and consciously appropriated by the people belonging to different religious traditions or by the bearers of culture within them. [...] Once the orthodoxy felt the danger and began intervening, by what ever modalities from above, they more or less succeeded, and are succeeding, in pushing back or defeating most of these trends."⁴² Roy has a point, but to perceive composite culture as being endangered because of elite interference, when obviously the public continues to venerate deities across established religions, is questionable. Moreover, as composite culture has become a discourse in national politics and scholarship, and is forwarded as the normative superior outcome of the multi-religiousness of India, right-wing elite interferences with the purpose of breaking down composite developments have strong opponents.

Composite culture and religious identity

The population of India is often categorized in terms of religious identity: a person belongs to either one or the other religious community. The different censuses done under the British Raj and afterwards to map the subcontinent in statistics have contributed to a picture of the population as associated with clear religious categories. Too often our focus of attention is drawn to the religious aspects of terms like 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', when they in reality include so much more. The same can be said for our understanding of the notion of identity on the subcontinent, where the focus time and again was put on the identities of different religious communities, ignorant of other identity markers that are shared, or not shared, by the population. Peter Gottschalk argues that scholarship on religious identity in South Asia has taken four different approaches; 1) the singular identity approach, 2) the conflict approach, 3) the historical approach, and 4) the composite identity approach.⁴³

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim*, 35-40.

The singular identity approach is according to Gottschalk often found amongst scholars who wish to restrict their studies to a particular religious tradition. In this view Hinduism and Islam are seen as two communities that do not share the history of the subcontinent, but withhold their differences. “Scholars who rely on a singular identity model commonly describe groups and individuals by Hindu or Muslim affiliation first, by regional location or caste second, and then by other qualifications. Thus, they ignore the identities that Hindus and Muslims may share despite their differing religious identities. [...] And they also miss the possibility of shared religious identities, such as those that result from the *mélange* of devotional traditions, including *Sufism* and *Bhakti*, that have influenced one another in north India at various times.”⁴⁴ The conflict approach can be seen as a response amongst scholars to the increasing communal conflicts in India after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. He further argues “these scholars use the terms Hindu and Muslim in ways that reflect the oppositional discourse of the communalists they study.”⁴⁵ The historical approach understands religious identity as a result of historical events. Peter van der Veer is a representative of this view. He sees the present religious conflicts in South Asia as a continuation, albeit transformed by the colonial encounter, of historical conflicts reaching back before the British Raj. The composite identity approach “portrays religious identity as one component of some broader group identity. [...] The composite approach attempts to set religious identity within a larger social context.”⁴⁶ This approach focuses on how one group shares a variety of identities, and that this combination gives the fundament for their self-understanding. But the erasure of common identities through exclusive emphasis on religious division “is intensified with the common scholastic focus on social conflict, instead of cooperation.”⁴⁷

Gottschalk claims in the context of how individuals are constructs of many different identities, and therefore identify with a multiplicity of groups, that there is a “weakness in the notion of *communal identity* because the term implies that Hindus and Muslims identify only with a community of other Hindus and Muslims. [...] Although many Indians may embrace and propagate such an identity, few Indians live with such a singular self-understanding.”⁴⁸ Further, he proposes that the same counts for the term *religious identity* because, “in a secular perspective, it suggests an identity that develops in a community of common practices and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37 .

⁴⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

beliefs devoted to one or more superhuman agents. [...] many Hindus and Muslims do not live within discrete and distinct religious worlds, but practice faith lives that obscure clear identity boundaries.”⁴⁹ Thus many Hindus and Muslims are aware that “they perceive a community of people who not only worship in the same way but also draw from similar, broad cultural traditions.”⁵⁰

The promoters of composite culture focus then on the common identities, the shared culture and the interreligious tolerance, as a result of co-existence of Hindu and Muslim communities for approximately a millennium. The idea of composite culture is often applied to medieval India of early Hindu-Muslim interaction, as if already then there was some form of established movement. As this is not the case, this approach seems to homogenize Indian culture into a unified and harmonious frame, where religious conflict and hostility is underestimated. As for example Malik Mohammad generalises in his work *The Foundations of the Composite Culture of India* that “Muslim rulers brought about the best and the most harmonious relations between the Hindus and Muslims”⁵¹ or describes Indian civilization and culture as “a story of unity and synthesis, of adaption and development, of fusion of old traditions with new values”⁵² the reality of conflict is ignored. This work is absolutely a tribute to the composite culture of India, and important as it is to counter-argue the notion that Hindus and Muslims on the subcontinent cannot co-exist, it perhaps fails to depict the whole truth and the background for such an inter-religious practice. Despite its somewhat glorifying approach to the topic, Mohamed’s work does to a great extent throw light upon different aspects of composite culture and interreligious coexistence. As Mohamed argues in the introduction “The composite culture of India, rightly understood, can contribute significantly to the cause of national integration [...] The compositeness of a culture leaves room for, if not promotes, the peculiarities and richness of local and regional cultures.”⁵³ This statement reflects the political or ideological agenda of much “composite” scholarship and represents the top point in our triangle. If composite culture shall be “rightly understood”, I suggest that one should approach the practitioners and their attitudes rather than generalising a prescriptive togetherness.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mohamed, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 9.

⁵² Ibid., 13f.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

Chapter three: Methodology

This thesis stretches over themes in Indian culture that do not allow me to make use of only one main methodology. In approaching the sayings of Kabīr as well as the oral epic of Gūgā, I have been concerned with oral textual traditions, which I interpret in light of Oral Theory. In addition I have approached the practice of the cult of Gūgā through fieldwork, interviews and observation, and thus from an anthropological perspective. Composite culture is to be found across many levels of Indian culture; for example in popular/folk/oral and mystical traditions. It is crucial to take a look at tendencies within such traditions in order to understand how oral texts work. One may think that the two main methodologies are in each case connected to one of the two main parts, but unfortunately it is not that simple. The part “Composite Texts of the Past” will, though, be built upon an approach of Oral Theory, which deals with oral and orally derived texts. I have used both my own and others’ translations, particularly the ones of Charlotte Vaudeville from her work *Kabīr*. The latter part “Composite Places of the Present”, even though the title implies that this should be a matter of fieldwork analysis in a contemporary South Asian popular tradition, also includes the oral epic of Gūgā, and thus an Oral Theory analysis, as a point of departure for further examination of the contemporary state of the cult in relation to the concept of composite culture. I have not translated this epic myself, but relied on others’ translations. Those versions of legends I collected during the fieldwork I have, though, translated, but these are included in those parts of the thesis where they are relevant for illustrating different Hindu and Muslim views. The legends concerning Gūgā will be analyzed also in relation to the overall topic of composite culture in India. Explaining the methodology of the fieldwork will take the form of a narrative about the fieldwork, as I am of the opinion that the reader in this way will reach a better understanding of the situations that I encountered and how I was to interpret them. I have done fieldwork based on interviews and observations as I found this to be the best method to understand peoples’ practices of and attitudes towards the cult as part of a religious festival in North India. I will begin with exploring some scholarship in oral traditions, before continuing with explaining some principles of Oral Theory, and its relevance for my research. Thereafter I will continue with describing and analyzing the fieldwork.

Oral Theory

Orality versus literacy: study of oral traditions

The term ‘oral’ is often opposed both to what is written/literate and to that which is non-verbal.⁵⁴ “Such contrasts need care for they sometimes reflect less local distinctions than unthinking western models of verbal ‘text’ as self-evidently differentiated from visual, auditory or bodily signs. One of the themes in recent studies of orally-delivered art forms is that, though in one sense they centre on words, in another they involve *more* than words.”⁵⁵ Oral traditions imply that “the tradition in question is in some way 1) verbal or 2) non-written (not necessarily the same thing), sometimes also or alternatively 3) belonging to the ‘people’ or the ‘folk’, usually with the connotation of non-educated, non-elite, and/or 4) fundamental and valued, often supposedly transmitted over generations, perhaps by the community or ‘folk’ rather than conscious individual action.”⁵⁶ ‘Oral literature’ is a term which “is used for what are deemed unwritten but somehow literary forms.”⁵⁷ It often overlaps with ‘oral tradition’, and is in itself contradictory, because “it imposes written and ethnocentric models on activities that may have other elements than the purely verbal and/or aesthetic, highlighting textual rather than performative aspects.”⁵⁸ The term folklore has in some contexts been used to encompass all forms of orally transmitted tradition, but its most common referent is to verbal forms such as stories, songs or proverbs, with special emphasis on collection or analysis of text. An alternative term for ‘folk’ can be ‘popular’, but also this connotes difficulties as ‘oral’ and ‘popular’ not necessarily coincides.⁵⁹ Simply said oral traditions rely on memory, are heard and performed, not initially read and written. This thesis will be concerned with orally transmitted poetry assigned to Kabīr and the oral epic tradition of Gūgā.

The study of oral traditions and texts has a long history. “It is commonplace that the study of oral tradition and verbal art has moved from earlier preoccupations with origins and the ‘old’, to more recent emphases on meaning, structure and contemporary dynamics.”⁶⁰ The

⁵⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and Verbal Arts*, 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

distinction between orality and literacy has been used by scholars such as Eric Havelock⁶¹, Walter J. Ong⁶² and Guy Poitevin⁶³, during the 20th century. An important subject of Ong's work *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* is "the difference between orality and literacy. Or, rather, since readers of this or any book by definition are acquainted with literate culture from the inside, the subject is, first, thought and its verbal expression in oral culture, which is strange and at times bizarre to us, and, second, literate thought and expression in terms of their emergence from and relation to orality."⁶⁴ One of the most important issues discussed by Ong is the way writing distances the originator of a thought from the receiver. Both Havelock and Ong equate the transition from orality to writing with the development of complex societies,⁶⁵ but the Indus civilization, to take just one example, which was complex and without a written language, as far as we know today, can be seen as a counterargument to this. Havelock and Ong embody a tendency related to the evolutionist approach to cultural development, especially of script. According to Guy Poitevin "the written word gives those religions which are transmitted through written documents (Scriptures) a universal and ethical character. This differs from other religions that remain rather local, national and ethnic. The latter are considered for the same reasons 'primitive', 'pagan', (originally 'rustic', that is to say from the 'peasant' in the countryside as opposed to the culture of the 'urban' in towns), 'backward', 'superstitious', and called to accomplish themselves in religions of the Scriptures."⁶⁶ Poitevin further argues that the written word "establishes restricted references of belonging and orthodoxy much like when borders are drawn for demarcation and inimical nationalist divides. The written word demands conversion and produces the faithful and the dissident. Through the written word, truth takes on a different meaning because the official Scriptures become the reference and no longer the experience of the individuals or human beings."⁶⁷

Poitevin makes a parallel between the distinction of oral popular traditions and classical written traditions, and the dialectic of tradition and modernity, "or rather of 'past memories' and 'actual experience'⁶⁸. This dialectic is observed in processes of innovation and

⁶¹ Eric Havelock, *The muse learns to write: reflections on orality and literacy from antiquity to the present*, 1986.

⁶² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and literacy; the technologizing of the word*, 2002.

⁶³ Guy Poitevin, "Popular traditions, strategic assets", in *Indian Folklore Research Journal*, Vol. 1, No 2, May 2002.

⁶⁴ Ong, *Orality and literacy; the technologizing of the word*. 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁶ Poitevin, "Popular Traditions, Strategic Assets", 88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

interpretation, [...] [and] in processes of creative recontextualisation of traditions to be legitimised by the authority of old canonical texts.”⁶⁹ He emphasises the way in which written traditions often are given more authority, whereas what is orally transmitted is denounced as of less value. His argument against this perception begins with the equation of speech with democracy. “One has to look at the dimensions of the impact that the written word can have on, as well as the changes it can enforce upon, the domains of religion, economy, politics, and law, in order to understand the importance that social action groups, in India as well as in other parts of the world, give to popular traditions of socially suppressed categories of the population and to the “speech act” of their representatives.”⁷⁰ The lowered status of the oral traditions is tightly connected to the elevated position of literacy. Poitevin argues further that “oral language remains local and spontaneous”⁷¹, and if “the written word is an argument of strength of the powerful, then the spoken word is an asset of counter-power for the weak and the humble.”⁷² Poitevin describes women’s grind mill songs as a vehicle for expressing emotions, as seen in contrast to modern Dalit literature that expresses emotion through narratives concerning the author’s experiences as individuals and community.⁷³ The women “own the myth [the songs are about Sita] to make it serve as a function for self-cognition. Women singers radically transform the epic narrative to the extent that their reediting is altogether inconsistent with the epic figure.”⁷⁴ Sita of the popular grindmill tradition is differentiated from the Sita of Rām in the Rāmāyaṇa, which, according to Poitevin “are analogous to the variations revealed by studies made in other parts of India of popular traditions in which similarly, orality proves to be a privileged stake of spontaneity and autonomy of local cultures *vis-a-vis* written dominant orthodoxies.”⁷⁵ This statement might be an underestimation of the rules and rituals that also can be seen in the oral traditions and their compositions and performances, as is argued by C. P. Zoller in an article on “Kabīr and ritualized language”.⁷⁶ The way the individuals in the popular tradition described by Poitevin identify with the songs they are singing, resembles the relationship the devotees have to the oral epic tradition of Gūgā Jī. The oral epic of Gūgā has a strong emphasis on female roles. “The portrayal of kin relations in the Gūgā epic is, however, distinctive in its focus on

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 87f.

⁷¹ Ibid., 89.

⁷² Ibid., 89.

⁷³ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Claus Peter Zoller, “Kabīr and Ritualized language”, in *Acta Orientalia*, 2004:65, 33-65.

matrilateral and affinal ties.”⁷⁷ The emphasis on the female actors who experience realistic family conflicts makes the Gūgā epic particularly popular amongst women who can identify themselves with those characters. I will return to this in chapter six on the epic tradition of Gūgā.

Oral Theory in poetry and epic traditions

The drive to work with non-written sources arose from two main directions. “First there was the aspiration to find out more about those societies and peoples which, according to the earlier stereotype, ‘had no history’: no history, that is in the ‘normal’ sense of documentary records. [...] The second strand was an interest in experiences of ‘underneath’ peoples in literate societies.”⁷⁸ “Anthropologists’ interest in oral traditions and verbal arts is, no doubt, to understand people’s cultural activities and artistries, rather than to build theory.”⁷⁹ Still, the development of a comparative apparatus for approaching oral traditions has shown to be useful. According to Ruth Finnegan “The so-called ‘oral theory’ first started from controversies about the nature of the Homeric epics, inspiring Milman Parry’s studies of Homeric formulae, followed by fieldwork on South Slavic oral heroic poetry in the 1930’s. The results appeared in Albert Lord’s enormously influential *The Singer of Tales* (1960).”⁸⁰ This work showed how songs of many thousand lines could be composed without writing “by the singer’s drawing on a store of formulae and formulaic expressions with no need to prepare a text beforehand: composition and performance were not separate stages but facets of the same act.”⁸¹ “Some formulae were short phrases fitting a given metrical position, but longer formulaic expressions included runs of several lines, themes, topics and narrative plots. There was no fixed or ‘correct’ text, as in written literature, for each performance was different and equally authentic.”⁸² “The discovery of this ‘special technique’ (Lord 1960: 17) elucidated one widely-spread pattern for oral delivery, as well as illuminating text as process rather than fixed product. It also laid a comparative framework for the analysis or re-analysis of oral (or arguably oral) texts from a whole range of disciplines and areas, and for the idea of oral composition as a process lying behind texts previously assumed to originate in writing.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Elwyn C. Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga: A North Indian Oral Tradition” in Sylvia Vatuk (ed.), *American Studies in the Anthropology of India*, 1978, 296.

⁷⁸ Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts*, 47.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Finnegan states that “Any cultural product needs to be set in its wider social and economic context for full understanding – including how it is produced, transmitted and supported.”⁸⁴ “Composing, transmitting and remembering are often held to be key processes in oral tradition and verbal arts.”⁸⁵ Oral texts are transmitted through performance, and the idea behind the oral theory is that a rather huge repertoire of formulae, structures, phrases and themes are used by performers to compose texts while performing. The structures and formulae are familiar to them, and bear more meaning than simply being words that are repeated. John Miles Foley’s work *The Singer of Tales in Performance* is “first a book about *word-power*, that is about how words engage context and mediate communication in verbal art from oral tradition. It is also, and crucially, about the enabling event – *performance* – and the enabling referent – *tradition* – that give meaning to word-power.”⁸⁶

In comparing oral traditions in South Asia it becomes obvious that many such themes and formulae reoccur in different traditions, something which also can be seen in such oral derived texts that have been collected in written form. What has been shown, however, is that there are deep connections linking the oral traditions of India with those that are labelled classical and, hence, written. “The difference between oral and written is in some approaches taken as the basis of all further classification [...] This convenient and widely used differentiation, however, also conceals many problems and controversies and some established genre terms (epic, legend, myth, riddle) cut across the apparent distinction.”⁸⁷ “However, useful though such terms will continue to be for some purposes, recent writers in a number of disciplines have been moving away from the idea of fixed genres. One approach is to look more to the dynamics of performance and practice.”⁸⁸

The term epic was originally based on classical Greek literature, before its extended use included other European and Asian similar forms.⁸⁹ An epic can be defined as a long narrative poem on heroic subjects, but as Finnegan points out the category of length is a rather relative concept – “how long is long?”⁹⁰ “Indian oral epics are characterized by several formal features that literary and folklore scholars have identified with the epic genre worldwide. Although no scholar has given a precise definition of “epic”, the literature reveals a fairly

⁸⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, 1.

⁸⁷ Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts* 141.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 137.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 150.

strong consensus on its three primary features: epic is narrative, it is poetic, and it is heroic.”⁹¹ According to Blackburn and Flueckiger these features can be problematic when applied to Indian oral epics. The poetry/prose distinction is misleading when discussing Indian oral epic performance, because much of the narrative is sung, and many epics also “include significant prose and nonsung sections, which are used to explain or elaborate the sung material.”⁹² “The third generic feature of the epic, its heroic nature, is perhaps the most fundamental as well as the most troublesome. Much of the literature contrasts the “heroic” epic against the supernatural myth and fairy tale (*märchen*); “heroic” in the epic context, is seen to be martial as opposed to magical, human rather than celestial. Rarely, however is there any clear division between the heroic and the supernatural in the epics themselves.”⁹³ “Epic heroism in India, as elsewhere, touches on both the human and the supernatural, and on gradations in between. Since any sharp division between the human and the divine is alien to Hinduism and to Indian culture generally, a major theme of many Indian oral epics is precisely this relation between gods and humans. Moreover, epic heroes are often deified after death and thereby literally cross the boundary between human and divine.”⁹⁴ This description fits well to the oral epic of Gūgā. Gūgā is a warrior and a prince, but he has supernatural powers and connections already from birth, and is deified after his death.

The connections between the oral epics and the classical epics and between parallel versions within the genre of oral epics as well, are difficult to describe. Hildebeitel states “To put it bluntly, the relationship between Indian oral epics and the Sanskrit epics is indirect, and not susceptible to such immediate oppositions. Moreover, the significance and complexity of that relationship cannot be appreciated by explanations that sidetrack it to formalisms, sociology, or ideology. [...] I will argue that it [the relationship of oral and Sanskrit epics] remains ill-defined.”⁹⁵ He argues that “I will not stress epic as an analytical genre, or look for commonalities with classical, folk, or oral epic traditions outside of India. But I do regard epic as a sufficiently useful analytic and comparative term to allow us to continue to classify by it not only the two Sanskrit texts but a number of South Asian oral traditions.”⁹⁶ “While “epic” retains its usefulness as a cross-cultural analytic genre, analytical classification and definition

⁹¹ Stuart H. Blackburn and Joyce B. Flueckiger, “Introduction”, in Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger and Wadley, *Oral Epics in India*, 1989, 2-3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Alf Hildebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

are highly problematic in their treatment of India's wealth and variety of epic traditions."⁹⁷ Hildebeitel argues that certain regional oral epics rethink India's classical epics. He continues by stressing that in order to understand how regional martial epics rethink India's classical epics, one must explore Rajput culture, and further Rajput-Muslim cultures as lending a major impetus to these rethinking projects. "Indian oral epics are intertextual with both written and oral texts"⁹⁸, Hildebeitel continues, "they frame themselves by what seem to be literary conventions, reenplot what seem to be literary schemes, and sometimes make telling allusion to writing. To be sure, South Asian oral bards make use to varying degrees of oral formulaic verse. But this does not mean that "oral theory" can tell us how the Sanskrit epics were composed, much less recover a pristine state of pure oral tradition either behind the Sanskrit epics, or in regional oral epics themselves."⁹⁹

According to Aditya Malik "at least two interconnected issues seem to be pertinent with regard to the study of folk epics: (a) an examination of the epics in the context of folk cults (deification of heroes, spirit possession, etc.) and (b) the unravelling of social and religious ideals that sustain and generate both the epic narrative and the folk-religious phenomena accompanying them."¹⁰⁰ "Oral epics in India have that special ability to tell a community's own story and thus help to create and maintain that community's self identity."¹⁰¹ This statement can be applied to the Gūgā epic, and to the community of worshippers of Gūgā. The epic has different versions, though all have the same basic outline.

The topic of chapter four and five is the poetry of the Sants and Kabīr, while chapter six is concerned with the oral epic tradition of Gūgā. Within the tradition of the Sants and Kabīr, as well as the oral epic traditions, there are many themes, formulae and structures that reoccur, and that are seen in the poetry of their predecessors. Here are some examples:

Reading books, the whole world died.

and no one became learned:

Read just one letter of the word 'love',

then you'll be a pandit.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁰ Aditya Malik, "Avatara, avenger, and King: Narrative themes in the Rajasthani Oral epic of Devnarayan", in Brückner, Lutze and Malik, *Flags of Fame – Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, 375f.

¹⁰¹ Alf Hildebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, 21.

¹⁰² Karine Schomer, "The doha and Sant teachings", in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a devotional tradition of India*, 1987, 67.

Another similar couplet (*dohā/sākhī*) found in the Jain Pahuḍadohā of Rāmasimha, which is a couple of centuries older, goes like this:

You've read a lot, your moth is dry,
but you're still a fool:
Read only that one letter
which takes you to Shiva's abode!¹⁰³

With regards to the motif of the birth scene in the Gūgā epic, this reoccurs in different levels of oral tradition in South Asia. I have described the birth scene of Gūgā in chapter six, but briefly put it deals with the two sisters Bāchal and Kāchal and their difficulties conceiving children. Bāchal venerates the guru Gorakhnāth for twelve years, and her sister does not. After twelve years Gorakhnāth decides to give Bāchal a boon, but Kāchal hears of this, so she dresses up like her sister, and therefore Gorakhnāth gives the boon to her instead. When Bāchal then returns to receive the boon, she and Gorakhnāth realize that Kāchal has deceived them. As we shall see in the following stories, this is a motif that reoccurs across popular and classical traditions.

In “Die Panduan: Ein mündliches Mahābhārata-Epos aus dem Garhwal-Himalaya”¹⁰⁴, documented/translated by Claus Peter Zoller the same motif reoccurs. Here the story begins with the two daughters of King Impati (Himalaya): Kunti and Gandhari. They have not been able to conceive children, and Kunti has therefore worshiped the slippers of the Lord of the World for twelve or eighteen years. Her younger sister Gandhari deceives Kunti in the same manner as seen in the Gūgā Epic. She dresses up like Kunti and goes to worship the Lord of the World, who asks her why she is returning like this: Gandhari answers that she worships to get a boon. “What kind of boon, should it be auspicious or inauspicious?” - “My dear, what do I know what is ‘auspicious’ and what is ‘inauspicious’?” – “My dear, ‘auspicious’ are those: one or three or five; ‘inauspicious’ are those: the many.” Gandhari chooses ‘the many’ because she expects some of them to die and others to waste away, and goes from there with a golden staff and a golden plate to the Tree of Immortality where she is supposed to hit the branches of the tree and to eat as many seeds as fall down. She eats one hundred seeds and gives birth to King Duryodhana, Duhshasan and further an army of different kinds of beings, including grasshoppers. Kunti returns to the Lord of the World and they realize what has

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Claus Peter Zoller, “Die Panduan: Ein mündliches Mahābhārata-Epos aus dem Garhwal-Himalaya”(forthcoming).

happened, and he gives her an auspicious boon. Kunti eats six seeds. Kunti gets pregnant through the gazes of various gods. She gives birth to Karna, Bhimsen, Arjun, Yuddhistir and Nakul and Sahadev.

In G. Maskarinec's *Nepalese shaman oral texts* there is a recitation called "Kadum and Padum event." Also here there are two sisters, where the younger cheats the elder by getting a boon from god after the latter had worshipped him for twelve years.¹⁰⁵ The younger sister gives birth to the nine *Nāgas* (the nine snakes) and the elder to two *Garuḍas*, who are eagles.¹⁰⁶

A similar story is mentioned in Vogel's *Serpent Lore* with regards to the myth of the origin of the *Nāgs*.¹⁰⁷ Vogel mentions an episode of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata where the sisters Kadrū and Vinatā compete with each other with regards to their future sons. Kadrū is the same as Kadum in the Himalaya version. Kadrū gives birth to a thousand snakes, while Vinatā gives birth to a pair of eagles. These four stories are from four different traditions and repeat the same motif of the two sisters of whom the one is cheated by the other, with regards to a boon (here conceiving children). The version mentioned in *Nepalese shaman oral texts* is also similar to the version from the Sanskrit Mahābhārata mentioned in Vogel's *Indian Serpent Lore* with regards to the snake and eagle motif. In all the traditions, the deceiving sister loses somehow, and gets some kind of punishment.

Gūgā's association with snakes is found differently in various legends. "One legend makes Gūgā's bride the daughter of Bāśaknāg."¹⁰⁸ Bāśaknāg is the king of the serpents.¹⁰⁹ Another describes Gūgā as the disciple of Gorakhnāth.¹¹⁰ The association might originally also have had something to do with the association of snakes with his mother. This episode of the Gūgā epic is mentioned in chapter six. What seems to be the case, though, is that the serpent aspect of Gūgā gradually has bleached over time; it does not appear to be as central to the worship of Gūgā in present day cults, as it seems to have been earlier. There are though very few recordings of the Gūgā epic prior to the 20th century, and it is therefore difficult to estimate what kind of changes might have taken place in the narrative, and in the cult of devotees.

¹⁰⁵ G. Maskarinec, *Nepalese shaman oral texts*, 292.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰⁷ Jean Philippe Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore*, 1926, 47-50.

¹⁰⁸ George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphata Yogis*, 134.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

Fieldwork in Gūgā Medhi

The field – a Hindu-Muslim festival

My fieldwork took place in India, the late summer of 2009 in a temple complex outside the village Gūgā Medhi in the district of Hanumangarh in the north-east of the state of Rajasthan. The place is not far from Delhi, or the borders to Punjab and Haryana, and approximately 360 kilometers from Jaipur. The festival *Gūgā Medhī Melā* is an annual event lasting for approximately one month, but the date of its beginning changes according to what is the most auspicious day of the Hindu calendar, this year it started the 5th of August. Still it always finds place in August/September, or the Hindu month of *Bhāḍḍ*. I came four days after its beginning, and stayed for a week. The festival or *Melā* is a celebration of the deity and warrior-hero Gūgā who is connected to the *Nāga* cults (snake worship). The festival is celebrated at the end of the rainy season, when there are most incidents of snake-bites in the area. It takes place in the desert at the time of year when the temperatures are at their peak. According to the government official Narayan Singh whose duty was to supervise the event; “Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, come on foot or by vehicles from all over northern India, from eleven states, to celebrate Gūgā”. The exact number of festival participants is impossible for me to estimate. Some stayed for one afternoon, others for up to a week. Each devotee was allowed to enter each temple three times during his/her stay. How this was monitored I do not know, most likely it was merely the respect the devotees showed towards the guards, arrangers and police, and of course Gūgā and Gorakhnāth. As each person was only allowed into the temple three times, most people I talked to did not stay there for more than that. The festival lasted for a month, but according to my informants it started out with a duration of two weeks. Gradually it became so popular that the arrangers decided to repeat these two weeks a second time as they had limited capacity to host all the pilgrims at the same time.

The festival area consists of two separate temples; the Jaharvīr¹¹¹ (“poison hero”¹¹²) Gūgā Jī Mandir, and the Gorakḥṭīla (“Gorakh-hill”) Mandir. The first is the temple built around the grave/*samādhi* of Gūgā Jī; the other is built to venerate Gūgā’s guru Gorakhnāth, the founder of the Nāth *panth*. It is quite usual that there are Gorakhnāth temples and idols

¹¹¹ According to H.A. Rose his name is to be read as ‘Saint Apparent’ (Hindi *zāhir* ‘apparent’) (H. A. Rose, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, 60), but this makes little sense.

¹¹² O. C. Handa, *Naga Cults and Traditions in the western Himalaya*, 2004, 317.

nearby Gūgā temples.¹¹³ The relationship between Gūgā and Gorakhnāth and the serpents is elaborated and thoroughly established in the oral epic of Gūgā.¹¹⁴ The temples in Gūgā Medhi are situated a few hundred meters apart. Prior to visiting Gūgā's temple, the devotees venerate his guru Gorakhnāth; this includes the Muslim devotees as well. This is not a set rule, but it is considered a respectful act to show esteem towards the spiritual teacher first – both for Muslims and Hindus. Between these two temples there were administrative offices, stands selling Gūgā and Gorakhnāth material; CDs, pamphlets, t-shirts with Gūgā and his blue horse printed on, bangles, iron whips, peacock fans, the horse of Gūgā in different sizes, dolls representing Gūgā, and of course food and drinks. Despite the heat it was a crowded and lively surrounding; people celebrated, danced, laughed and joked. An NGO connected to the Gorakhnāth temple served free meals twice a day to the public. According to Mr. Singh they had at least one hundred volunteer-workers at the festival. These volunteer-workers came a week prior to the festival opening and left a week after it was officially over to help setting up the arrangements and taking them down.

My informants

My fieldwork was not of the kind where I had the chance to get to know my informants over a longer period of time. It was not as if I was living with them and observing them for months. It was, though, a rather explosive experience lasting for a week at a common Hindu-Muslim festival. My informants consisted of two rather different groups of people based on their social status and their role at the festival, namely the arrangers and the devotees. My first meeting with the festival was through a journalist and editor of the local newspaper, Dr. Sharwan Suthar, who was employed at the Gorakhnāth temple. His occupation there was concerned with Gūgā and Gorakhnāth; to quote him; “I also am a student of Gūgā Jī. We work very hard here to reveal the true, one and only, history and Hindu philosophy of Gūgā Jī, of Gūgā *Vīr*! The people coming here have gotten it all wrong.” He was starting a new NGO based on the philosophy of Gūgā Jī, which was going to prevent all “wrong” stories and legends of this hero to circulate. I will return to the teachings of the journalist below. Prior to my arrival at the Melā I had only spoken of Gūgā, as Gūgā *Pīr*, which is the most commonly used epithet for Gūgā. *Pīr* literally means saint, and is a Persian word, while *Vīr* or *Bīr* means hero/brave and is a Hindi word deriving from Sanskrit. Amongst the devotees these names

¹¹³ George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphatha Yogīs*, 138.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132f.

were used interchangeably. The name Gūgā Pīr was stuck to my brain, so to say. During the first two hours of my stay at the festival the journalist corrected me several times; “let me just correct your speech, he is not Gūgā Pīr, Gūgā Vīr, Vīr, VĪR!” It really seemed to trigger his temperament that this figure, that for him represented a great Hindu warrior-hero, was known to me, a “western scholar”, by his Muslim name. The journalist Dr. Suthar and his way of introducing me to the field had impacts on the material I collected, as we shall see below.

To come back for a moment to the triangle presented in the introduction; I am of the opinion that not only one of the corners that constitute it is present at a festival like this. My informants as I came to know them represented two quite different groups. I will refer to the first group as ‘the arrangers’. These people do for me form one group of my informants as separate from the devotees of Hindu and Muslim rural and mostly low-caste background who represent the other group. I call them the devotees or the practitioners, even though some of the people from the first group also were devotees, and not all of them were directly involved in the arrangements, but rather hung around and helped out. There were other great differences between these two main groups as well. Most of the arrangers had an attitude corresponding to the “normative” approach at the top of the triangle; they emphasized religious tolerance and Hindu-Muslim communal harmony from an outsiders’ point of view. Even though some of them were devotees, they emphasized the idea of Hindu-Muslims harmony. However, despite their principles of tolerant understanding they in fact talked of the devotees in depreciative terms. For instance when devotees of low caste came to the magistrate office to ask the government official Mr. Narayan Singh for help with some practical issues, he laughed and joked about the situation with his colleagues and expected us to sympathize with his demeanor.

The journalist Dr. Suthar on the other hand seemed more than a little bit personally involved with Gūgā and his significance for the people, at the same time as he appeared uninterested in the whole idea of Hindu-Muslim compositeness as Gūgā to him was entirely Hindu. He also expressed that the devotees were “just confused masses that had misinterpreted the history of Gūgā.” The devotees on the other hand came for practical reasons and for their personal relationship and experience with Gūgā Jī. In this manner they present the pragmatic/effective side to composite culture as I want to emphasize. It is represented in the triangle in the lower left corner. My aim was from the start to interview people with different backgrounds, status, sex, age and so on, but I was most of the times guided towards the elder men of the families, or gatherings of people. This prevented me

often from getting the point of views of women and youth, and when I asked why it was like this people answered that their grandfather, father or husband had more experience with and knowledge about the festival and the legends of Gūgā.

The entire first day at the festival I was led through the area by the journalist, Dr. Suthar, who introduced me to some of the leading figures behind the arrangements; amongst others government official Mr. Narayan Singh. I was only present at the festival for a few days, mainly because I had been informed prior to its start, that it was only to last for a week, and I had therefore already made arrangements for transport and further plans after returning to Delhi. I travelled accompanied by a fellow student, Hanne Karen Unhammer, who participated in my fieldwork by filming, taking photos and at times partaking in the interviews. The entire first day I was the guest of Dr. Suthar. He took responsibility to show me around, and I really got to see the festival as he wanted me to see it. Mr. Suthar or Dr. Jī as we and his employees came to call him, was convinced that Gūgā was Hindu and did not appreciate the Muslim versions of the Gūgā legend. I was time and again led away from the stands selling pamphlets and CDs as he was of the opinion that such media did not tell the true story; “this is not scientific”, he expressed, before guiding me to a memorial site where the “true” story of Gūgā was painted on some large sandstone pillars¹¹⁵, and the most important events of his life and events connecting him to the Nāth panth were depicted. Dr. Suthar admitted that there were Muslims present at the festival, but conveniently prevented me from meeting any of them. I left the area that first day confused over why I had spent a day at a composite festival that hosted no Muslims. Fortunately Dr. Suthar introduced me to other people with responsibilities at the festival, amongst others the government official Narayan Singh, who had a far more tolerant perspective on the festival and introduced me to Hindu and Muslim arrangers and devotees the following day. I met amongst others the police officer in chief, Ismail Khan, who was a descendant of Gūgā, and who showed me his genealogy.¹¹⁶

Interviews and observations – reflections on practical matters

The interviews I conducted with these two groups had rather different forms. Interviews with the arrangers mostly took place in an office or at least in relative quiet circumstances, while interviews with the devotees took place outside in the crowded and noisy areas. Most of the

¹¹⁵ See picture no. 2, 11 and 12 in the appendix.

¹¹⁶ See picture 12.

arrangers spoke English, not always fluently, but sufficiently. Most of the devotees did not on the other hand. I had unfortunately not been able to bring a translator, as the man who was supposed to help me with this had cancelled just prior to our departure from Delhi. The interviews with the arrangers mostly went in a mix of English and Hindi, while those I conducted with the devotees were mostly in Hindi. This posed some challenges, as my knowledge of Hindi is not fluent. Our driver, Mr. Om Prakash spoke English to some extent and as he accompanied us for four days around the festival he was a good help in this regard. The downside of his participation was that he translated according to his own understanding and language ability. Fortunately I understood most of what was said, and could recognize in the dialogues when Mr. Prakash was simplifying the stories. The interviews I had with the arrangers were also conducted in relatively peaceful surroundings, and they always set aside sufficient time for a conversation. When they had to go somewhere I was most of the time invited to join them, and thereby got to see the festival from different perspectives. Interviews with the devotees on the other hand found place outside in the festival area; at small restaurants (*dhābās*), in the shadow of trees, or inside the temple; all of which are extremely noisy and crowded places. Another remarkable difference in the interviews was that while the arrangers mostly gave me “the official” story (of Hindu-Muslim unity), the devotees answered according to their personal experience based on the efficacy of Gūgā.

I found it rather difficult to take field notes during the interviews and observations, because it was practically impossible at some times. As I was most of the time on the move from one temple to another, or between offices and arrangements, I could not always stop and take my notebook from the bag and begin to write. When I did write notes in the field it tended to affect the atmosphere and the attitudes of the informants, as my focus was split between them and a pen and piece of paper. I found it easier to do the field notes after the interviews were over. It was sufficiently disturbing that I had brought camera and recorder; other technical equipments I tried to keep in the background. Unfortunately I did not have much energy left when I got back home in the evening after a long day in the field. The days started around 7 o’clock. We reached the festival around 9 o’clock and from then on the temperatures increased to around 45 degrees Celsius in the shadow. There were not many toilet facilities at the area, except from those in the offices of the government official and the journalist, but we did not feel comfortable running down their doors either. So we drank far too little water, and were exhausted when we finally reached back to the hotel in Hanumangarh town at 8 – 9 o’clock at night. The problem with taking field notes was solved

to some extent by long conversations about what we had experienced and seen after leaving the festival area in the evening. Some of these talks I recorded. Besides that films and tape recordings of the festival and the interviews have been helpful tools to remember the atmosphere and the dialogues.

Ethical reflections

I stated in the introduction that my aim in this thesis is to focus on the practitioners of composite culture, as I think that this aspect of the phenomenon has not received the attention that it deserves. The reason why I bring this up here is that having studied earlier scholarship on the subject prior to my own fieldwork had left me with an understanding of composite culture as something based on this normative idea of mutual interreligious tolerance and co-existence and being superior to other factors as a counterargument to religious nationalism on the subcontinent. As a researcher at a festival like the Gūgā Medhi Melā I was initially looking for composite culture as a phenomenon based foremost on tolerance between different religious communities; a sort of happy “we are all Hindus and Muslims celebrating together and liking it” atmosphere. I knew that my aim was to figure out the practice of composite culture, as seen in the devotees and their actions and attitudes, but still the message from much of the literature worked as extra baggage. One comes as an analyzing individual, with the agenda to understand what is taking place but is constricted by one’s own presuppositions, and the questions one has prepared to ask and expects to be answered are based on this. As an outsider it may be easier to take notice of actions and happenings which those who are part of it do not necessarily reflect over or are even not aware of. At the same time there might be reasons for the practitioners not to reflect over these things, or perhaps they do acknowledge the features I find extremely fascinating, but do not count them as relevant. For example issues concerning the differences of Hindu and Muslim versions of the Gūgā legends, or the fact that the festival was shared by these religious communities. What I did realize was that the inter-religiousness, if I might call it that, was most of the time of a pre-reflective kind, and the questions I asked tended to bring Hindu-Muslim issues to the surface amongst the groups I spoke to. The situation that Hindu and Muslim communities celebrated the same religious figure was just “how it was” for those I asked. The reason for this seemed to be due to the personal relationship each devotee had to the saint/hero in focus. My interference into this might have caused latent issues to become explicit. This again is also quite interesting, that I instinctively found it a little difficult to raise such questions

relating to Hindu and Muslim togetherness or conflict. People walked around the area and did not seem to care at all about each other's presence there. What were my impressions based on? Why did I at one point look for Hindu-Muslim idyllic togetherness, and at the same time being frightened to ask issues related to this togetherness or conflict? What I mean to say is that one can get the impression of the Indian society as polarized into either or; either tolerant or in-tolerant based on much scholarship (as mentioned in the previous chapter) regarding issues of religious tolerance or intolerance. I believe that in my case the polarization between communal tension and religious co-existence was based on the lack of focus on the average practitioner. When I raised questions regarding this inter-religiousness it was often an issue that the devotees were not concerned about. Gradually, though, people started to discuss this issue in relation to their own perceptions of Gūgā as a saint and hero, in relation to the festival, and they concluded most of the time with statements as “we agree to disagree as to whether Gūgā converted to Islam or not, Gūgā is for all, his power is not limited to only Hindus or only Muslims”. The government official and the Hindu Pujārī (the temple “priest” who has the responsibility for the rituals and the devotees) had a short discussion over the religious background of Gūgā, and they both concluded that “the final answer to this is that Gūgā was and is a symbol of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony.” Perhaps an answer they thought I was looking for.

As I was guided around the festival first by the journalist and later by the government official I met the devotees not on their (the arrangers') terms. The journalist kept me most of the time away from the public, which gave me the impression at the end of the first day that there were no Muslims there. I met the government official the day after. He wanted to show me around and asked me what I needed to see and if there were particular people I wanted to talk to. I explained to him that I wanted to speak to as many diverse people as possible; Hindu or Muslim, men and women, old and young, and so on. This initiated a rather strange procession through the fairground; the government official made a quick phone call to his friend the Muslim police officer in charge, Mr. Ismail Khan, who brought some of his colleagues. Another phone call went to the camera man who came with his assistant, and the third call went to the driver who needed to call another driver as we now were so many people that we could not fit into one car. Including Hanne Karen, Om Prakash and me we were thirteen people who marched into the crowds. The government official and the police officer marched in front, approaching tired people who took rest in the shadow after a long day in the heat. I was stunned. I had not wanted to approach people by giving the impression that they

were arrested. The first group we approached seemed extremely poor. One could read from the government official's face that he found this group of people to be way below his standards of social encountering, and he behaved accordingly. I was so staggered by the situation, and the extreme heat, that I almost exploded, and told the government official that I felt this approach was a bit intimidating, and I wondered if we could encounter people without scaring them. "Yes, Yes", he said. And as we entered the Gūgā temple, Hanne Karen and I were placed inside a dark room on the left side where the devotees would end up after having circulated the temple. They had no idea that we sat there; they were only "captured" by the head of police and the government official and taken to us. The first two people to enter the room were an old lady and her grandson. They were both crying, and she was trying to explain how they had not done anything wrong. She got an explanation for why she was here, and when her anger had passed, she and her grandson both smiled with relief and told us why they celebrated Gūgā. The word spread, and the rest of the devotees who were brought to me knew that they had nothing to fear, and came willingly to elaborate on their relationship to Gūgā. Some played songs, some danced, and the atmosphere was joyous. Had I realized what I started when I accepted the company of the government official and his crew, I had perhaps done it differently, by informing the people before dragging them out of what they were doing. When they were informed they seemed to appreciate the interest. At the same time such a situation must have had its impact on the information I got. On the one side, I was introduced to women and youth without them sending me to their elders, and so I got their points of views. At the same time they were in a situation where they were likely to have told me just what I wanted to hear, or what the arrangers and policemen wanted me to hear.

Some concluding remarks

It is by and large impossible to be totally prepared for the kinds of situations one encounters at a fieldwork like this. The people one initially meets tend to hijack one, and guide one in the direction of what they want to show. Thereby one can be left with only one side of a story, one aspect of a legend, or generally the parts of the cult and practice that are important for them. At the same time one's own attitudes, questions and knowledge might influence their answers. One does not know prior to coming what kind of people one is going to encounter, but they are anyhow likely to influence the researcher. During a fieldwork like this it is unavoidable. I was on one side very lucky to meet the arrangers; the journalist Dr. Suthar and his employees, and the government official Mr. Narayan Singh and the chief of police Mr.

Ismail Khan. Their interpretations of the festival were different from each other, as well as from the practice and attitudes of the general devotees. And fortunately these men were rather busy, and I was therefore left on my own with Hanne Karen for a few days. Thus I got the opportunity to talk to the practitioners, the devotees with a Hindu or Muslim background, without interference from people that had status and power. There are most likely a lot of aspects from the festival that I have not been able to count for, that I have not seen, but those people I met, both groups of informants showed me how complex composite culture actually can be. And I got the impression that a festival like this can reveal most sides of a composite cult, and therefore work as a microcosm of the cult in its entirety.

PART TWO: COMPOSITE TEXTS OF THE PAST

Chapter four: Dissent and Protest in Sant Poetry

I now turn to a very different tradition which, nevertheless, is also regarded as an embodiment of composite culture – the tradition of the Sant poet-saints. This tradition is an example for the type of composite culture as shown in the lower right corner of the triangle. Kabīr is reckoned to be the best known of the Sant poets, and we will continue with him and his sayings in chapter five.

“From the fourteenth century onwards, in northern and central India, there is an efflorescence of religious poetry whose authors are known as Sants, or poet-saints.”¹¹⁷ “The Sants are non-sectarian and do not hold a body of doctrine in common.”¹¹⁸ The tradition can be divided into two main groups; the northern group which includes poets from the north-western provinces of Punjab and Rajasthan and from the Gangetic valley, including eastern Uttar Pradesh. They composed in a rough form of archaic Hindi. The southern group worked in Maharashtra, and composed in an archaic form of Marathi. Both these group are given a lot of credit for the development of vernaculars in their area.¹¹⁹ Both groups are included within the wider framework of Bhakti (devotion), but they related differently to the existing established religions. Whereas the southern tradition was connected to mainstream Vaishnavism, and practiced *saguṇa* Bhakti, the tradition of the north for the most part rejected all established traditions and everything they represented, and are reckoned to belong within the *nirguṇa* Bhakti fold. Representatives of the normative and politically motivated approach to composite culture have interpreted the fundamental critique of all (established traditions) as tolerance towards all. The Sants and Kabīr have been interpreted as promoters of Hindu-Muslim unity by much modern scholarship that emphasises tolerance as the agent for composite culture to develop, even though this tolerance is not at the core of Sant poetry. This chapter will be concerned with the northern Sants, the poetic genres they used, and explain some features of this poetry both with regards to contents and styles.

¹¹⁷ Charlotte Vaudeville, “Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity”, in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁹ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 117.

The Sants – attitudes and context

The social, religious and political context of the northern Sants seems to have been complex. The 15th century India is reckoned to have been marked by an extraordinary eruption of devotional poetry. This was inspired by diverse religious movements that flourished in those days. During this period the establishment of local vernaculars took place, simultaneously as the faith of the people was permeated by new ideas. According to Vaudeville “We are inclined to think that this formative period actually started earlier, around the twelfth or thirteenth century, both in the Deccan and in Northern India, and that it was concomitant with the permanent establishment of Muslim domination in India.”¹²⁰ She continues; “Shaiva Bhakti and the theories and practices of Tantric Yoga, especially under their latest form, Nāthism, played an important part in this process, which was strengthened by the influence of Islamic monotheism and the eclectic mysticism of the Chishti Sūfīs.”¹²¹

Dissent to existing elite institutions and established traditions, both religious and social, has a long history in India, particularly amongst those who are seen as low-caste, or who have low status. “The early Jain and Buddhist protests against a rigid religious “great tradition” ideology and the caste system were continued in later times. In north India Mahayana Buddhism was followed by Tantrism and much later by the Nāthpanthī movement.”¹²² The Nāth panth flourished in north India, and seems to have influenced much of Sant poetry.

The Sants, even though they are characterised as non-sectarian do have certain characteristics in common with regards to attitudes and poetic style. These characteristics mark them as distinct from ‘learned’ (literate and educated) poets and sectarian poets. Throughout Sant poetry there are strong anti-Brahmanical overtones. The Sants appear quite heterodox, or in opposition to the elite mainstream traditions. The notion of orthodoxy can hardly be applied to Hinduism, but if it were to be defined in terms of acceptance of the Vedas, the Sants will appear as heretics. The Sants reject the Veda and the Brahmanical traditions all together, and those who are Muslims reject the Quran as well.¹²³ The rejection goes beyond that of established religions; they reject scriptures and writing as such. In Brahmanical and Islamic traditions the scriptures are venerated and holy. The Sants privilege performance and the immediacy of orality. Besides rejecting the written texts and their

¹²⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹²¹ Ibid., 117f.

¹²² Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 56.

¹²³ Charlotte Vaudeville, “Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity”, 23.

imputed authority, the Sants also reject Brahmanical rituals, idol-worship, and the practice of caste discrimination. The idea of purity and pollution is ridiculed throughout Sant poetry, and Kabīr might well be the harshest one of them all. The poetry of Kabīr reveals an idea of equality of mankind. All come from the same “drop of semen”, and can therefore not be seen as belonging to different categories. This critique points not only towards the caste system, but also towards the idea of one religion being superior to the other. One might interpret the sayings of Kabīr as to imply a complete unity of Hindus and Muslims, but this does not hold well with regards to religious institutions, but only with regards to the equality of individuals. All are born from the same Supreme Being, so how can ‘one’ are seen as better than ‘the other’; as Brahman and Shudra. “Ritual barriers between castes, based on the notion of pollution, are considered purely artificial and totally irrelevant to the man who seeks salvation. So are all the common practices of popular Hinduism, such as pilgrimage to holy spots (*tirtha*) and holy baths supposed to wash away man’s sins.”¹²⁴ This way the Sants position is identical to that of the earlier Buddhists and Jains. Their stress on the point that god or the Supreme Being is the reason for all existence makes each religious tradition’s descriptions of god and his qualities and attributes paradoxical, and ultimately created by man. “Many of these ideas of Kabīr’s, voicing dissent against the existing institutions and values are echoed by his successors. Large sections of the society seem to have been influenced by the attitudes of the Sants throughout medieval times, also in the upper sections of society. “Rejecting as they do the plurality of gods as well as the Vaishnava doctrine of the avatars of the supreme Lord, the Sants appear as seekers of the Absolute, conceived as the One Godhead, or the Ultimate Reality.”¹²⁵ This absolute can be seen as monistic (*advaita*), a concept which is known from Vedantic tradition and denies any real distinction between God and the self or the soul. Kabīr is probably the strongest representative of nirguṇa Bhakti, and describes merging of the soul into god. This experience is not expressed by all the Sants. The poets of the Sant tradition varied in their stance towards dissent of the social structure. Not everybody was as harsh as Kabīr. Some respected the position of the Brahmans, and continued to respect their privileged position in society.¹²⁶ Still the Sants agreed upon certain things. “Whether they be born Shaiva, Vaishnava or Muslim, all the Sant poets stress the necessity of devotion to and practice of the divine Name (*nāma*), devotion to the Divine Guru

¹²⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁶ Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 63.

(*satguru*) and the great importance of the ‘company of the Sants’ (*satsaṅg*).¹²⁷ They were mystics, and as such did they experience and compose poetry about the soul’s continuous yearning for personal communion with god.

Sant poetry of dissent

The poetry of the Sants reveals protest with regards to political, social and religious contexts. The social system in early medieval India was dominated by the caste system, which justified and sanctified the division of society between the rich and the poor, privileged and unprivileged, the pure and the impure, at the same time as it gave the rulers protection in the name of *dharma* (righteousness).¹²⁸ The advent of Muslim rulers brought about a new situation, as the four-fold hierarchy of the *varṇa* system was not part of their own social structure. The Muslim rulers did not uphold the *varṇāśramadharmā* system, and were not as focused on holding movements of dissent under control. “However, the caste system remained the basis of the Hindu society, and for political reasons the Turkish rulers took no active step against it.”¹²⁹ This system was challenged in the poetry of the northern Sants. Kabīr and Dādu Dayāl claimed that the human essence was one and the same, and came from the one god. Discrimination based on caste, skin colour or name should therefore be considered meaningless. A fundamental equality of man is forwarded by the Sants, and as god or the Supreme Spirit also is regarded as one, this rejection of difference is also applied to religion. No established tradition is to be reckoned as above others, and god is to be conceived of as one and the same. The society in which the Sants and Kabīr lived was deeply entrenched with differences based on religion, caste, status, colour and so on. The blunt protests against the society and religion, as seen in the utterances of Kabīr were probably quite revolutionary for the time. According to Vaudeville, “Kabīr does not only reject idol-worship and ridicule the vain pretensions of the Brahmans and the hypocrisy of swamis and Yogis. He and his followers do not look upon themselves as Hindus or Muslims, but reject all religions based on revelation, advocating a purer, higher form of religion which actually does away with God – at least a personal God.”¹³⁰

Hindu and Muslim religious (orthodox/mainstream) and political elites opposed tendencies of dissent. If the public’s respect for the divides in social and religious status were

¹²⁷ Vaudeville, “Sant Mat”, 31.

¹²⁸ Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 57.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Vaudeville, “Sant Mat”, 38.

to vanish, the positions of leaders would be questioned, and the purity of the traditions would be polluted. Attitudes of dissent were mainly to be found at the popular level, amongst the Bhakti and *Sūfī* poets. Muslim orthodox elites therefore questioned whether such heterodox *Sūfīs* at all could be considered Muslims, as they clearly exchanged ideas with Hindu populations and were influenced by these. Other *Sūfīs* were in accordance with the orthodoxy, and kept emphasising that the only way was the one of Islam. Shaikh Abdus Qaddus Gangohi addressed letters to Babur forwarding these attitudes with the argument that interaction with the Hindus would clearly prevent Islam from reaching its zenith.¹³¹ Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi continued this trend in the late 17th century in repeated letters to Jahangir urging him and the Muslims in general to avoid mixing with Hindus in social, religious and political spheres.¹³² Such attitudes were equally prevalent amongst Brahman elites, and were later to lay the foundation for reform movements and religious nationalist movements in India.

Poetry as performance – author and authority

The Sants were critical towards the written word, the written texts and the rigidity that followed them with regards to religious rituals. They also opposed the social status of those who relied on written textual traditions. The poetry that remains today can be found in written form, being written down after a long period of oral transmission, but the traditions still continue orally. The emphasis on superiority of the oral over the written must also be connected to how *śruti* (revelation, what is being heard) has a heightened status not only in Sant tradition, but traditionally in Brahmin and shamanic traditions as well.¹³³ According to Zoller the sayings of Kabīr have a “dual performative attitude” of scolding and eulogizing. “When Kabīr addresses or speaks about God, the subject matter is “praise and yearning”, when he addresses or speaks about man, the subject matter is “ridicule and teaching”.¹³⁴ This is according to Zoller a widespread dual attitude in South Asian traditions of dissent, and also an indication for a public engagement of the Sants. In other words there are reasons to believe that the poetry connected to the Sants today was performed in public space at the time it was composed. The interaction of performer and his audience continue to shape and change the sayings. “Thus, the dual “performative attitude” in the “heterodox” traditions has certainly

¹³¹ Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 60.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Zoller, “Kabīr and Ritualized Language”, 43.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 46.

undergone many changes in time and space, even though we do not know the details.”¹³⁵ The poems or utterances have during this period spread in different directions all over North India, a fact which makes the scholars’ attempt at finding an original core close to impossible, as there are multiple variants of the same texts to be found in different areas and social settings.

Further the performance act which makes up a public event and the texts used in it has a symbolic nature.¹³⁶ The public event points to something beyond itself, and as such it is a symbol of something outside itself. “The “design” of an old tradition is “enacted” by him [the Sant], and the enactment serves also as a referent to a “wider world beyond” it, to an “immanent tradition””.¹³⁷

In shamanism and Brahmanism the texts are revealed, while in the Sant tradition they have an author, though in an ambivalent manner.¹³⁸ John Stratton Hawley stresses that it is a requirement that the author’s name appears in the structure of a Bhakti poem as a signature that gives it authority.¹³⁹ This sense of authorship is very distinct from a western understanding. The signature implies much more than merely the name of the author in Sant poetry. The poetic compositions (*sākhīs*, *padś* and *Ramainīs*) of the Sants are basically non-narrative.¹⁴⁰ Zoller argues that “Lyric poetry neither has just the appearance of reality nor does it express mere emotion: lyric poetry describes experience. However, the experiences described in the lyric poem must not always be the experiences of its author.”¹⁴¹ Behind the author and the text there is a notion of a revealer. In traditions of dissent preceding that of the Sants a ‘poet-saint’ was called *sākhī* ‘witness’ (of god’s revelations). Later on it came to denote the *dohās*. The *sākhī*, a couplet, also referred to as a *dohā*, literally translates to witness. The author or poet has witnessed a truth which he forwards to the audience in a public performance.

“It is normal practice in the commentarial literature, both oral and written, to understand the poet’s name as connected to the syntax of the rest of the line in which it figures by means of the verb ‘to say’ or some variant of it.”¹⁴²

¹³⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 46, 47.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Zoller, 48.

¹³⁹ John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Zoller, “Kabīr and Ritualized Language”, 48.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁴² John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 32.

Fool soul,
There are rivers and rivers
In which to bathe
And gods and gods to praise,
But none will set you free,
Says Kabīr:
Freedom comes in serving Hari Rām¹⁴³

This implies that the poet who is named in the poem is also the composer or author. In the actual poetry the verb ‘to say’ is not always there.¹⁴⁴ Kabīr is one of few poets who actually uses the verb ‘to say’ in some form in his sayings.¹⁴⁵ Other ways of marking ownership is through the use of a genitive postposition to the name, which is frequently seen in the poetry connected to Mīra Bai (a Rajasthani princess, who composed Bhakti poetry mainly to Lord Kṛṣṇa). These two ways of signing a poem has though quite different meanings. Whereas Kabīr is an ‘author’ through which god speaks, or rather is a witness to god’s speech, Mira is a *saguna bhakta* and her poetry does thereby refer to the mythology of Krishna, and is building upon a long narrative tradition revolving around the *saguna* deity. The poetic genres of these two poets are very different from each other, perhaps due to the kind of contents they are revealing. The *sākhī* is very short, concise, and without complex grammatical structure. It reveals a truth directly from god. The *saguna* poetic style is longer, and narrative like. A challenge that is posed through such signatures is when the names of for example Kabīr are used frequently in poems actually composed by someone else. Signatures of famous poets are therefore found in poetry that tells the poets hagiography, which has been composed long after the era in which the poet actually lived. “The sanctity of the speaker makes the poem worth listening to regardless of its literary quality, and if a poem conveys beauty as well as truth, so much the better. [...] more is involved in giving a signature to a poem than merely citing an author’s name.”¹⁴⁶ There are many ways in which Bhakti poems of North India register the authors authority; “the perception that some poets ought to be venerated as gurus, the attraction of poems by multiple authors to one single poet’s name, the close interaction of poetry and biography, and the often-strong impingement of a poet’s signature on the verse of which it is a part.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Ibid., 309.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 44.

The poetry of the Sants was often performed with musical rendition, and its intensity often builds up to the point where the signature of the poem is revealed. This strengthens the emotional experience of the performance. The signature makes according to Hawley a break in the poem, when the text leads up to revealing the author that experienced it. He claims that “the poet is doubly present – first as the general narrator (in various guises) and then with redoubled force as the giver of his own signature.”¹⁴⁸ The signature of an orally performed poem, as this northern Bhakti poetry generally implies, also reveals an indication that knowledge and truth are based on personal experience. “One doubts that they can be learned from books, at least if there is no teacher at hand to impart them.”¹⁴⁹

The *Dohā/Sākhī* – couplet as a carrier of protest

The *dohā* is a widely used meter in late ancient and medieval Indian literature. It is as Karine Schomer states “an omnipurpose meter”¹⁵⁰, used in matters both secular and religious.¹⁵¹ Its structure is that of a couplet, with approximately 24 morae in each line, and makes therefore one of the shortest quantitative meters of Hindi.¹⁵² The *dohā* is reckoned to be the major poetic meter of Apabhraṃśa¹⁵³ literature, and it is closely connected to the rise of Apabhraṃśa language.¹⁵⁴ “The *dohā* is distanced from Sanskrit and Prakrit meters by the fact that its form suggests oral composition and sung performance.”¹⁵⁵ It is typically used by the Sants and Kabīr, and is in this connection often also referred to as a *Sākhī*, which literally means a witness (to the ultimate truth)¹⁵⁶ and thereby gives the couplet authority.¹⁵⁷ As seen in the preceding paragraph. The *dohā* was also in medieval Hindi the most popular poetic meter, a status which it retained until the twentieth century.¹⁵⁸ The *dohā* has a long history prior to its usage by the Sants. It was only one of many features transferred from the Buddhist Siddhas and Nāth yogis to the Sants. These features or attitudes include the contempt for the written word and established religions and their representatives.¹⁵⁹ Another concept which is

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁵⁰ Karine Schomer, “The Doha as a vehicle of Sant Teachings”, in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, 66.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵² Ibid., 62.

¹⁵³ Apabhraṃśa is a collective name for the middle Indo-Aryan dialects which evolved from the various forms of Prakrit between the 6th and 10th centuries.

¹⁵⁴ Schomer, “The Doha as a vehicle of Sant Teachings”, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁶ Vaudeville, “Sant Mat: Santism as the universal path to sanctity”, in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, 22.

¹⁵⁷ Karine Schomer, “Introduction: The Sant Tradition in Perspective”, in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, 10.

¹⁵⁸ Schomer, “The Doha as a vehicle of Sant Teaching”, in Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*, 73.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 68.

transferred from the Siddhas to the Sants is the one of *Sahaja* (the unqualified absolute). According to Karine Schomer the *dohā* tended to “remain the special province of the nirguṇa Sants, and never became an important genre of either *Ramaite* or *Kṛṣṇaite Saguṇa Bhakti*.”¹⁶⁰ The reason for this is the tight connection between the *dohā* and different heterodox traditions that opposed the rigidity of established religions. This made it natural for the Sants to adopt it, but not so much for the *saguṇa* Bhakti traditions that were closer connected to the mainstream Vaishnava tradition. Another point is related to difference in contents and meanings of the poetry of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* Bhakti. Whereas *saguṇa* Bhakti poetry narrates a story concerning a god or gods of the poet’s choice, the nirguṇa bhaktas composed poetry of their own experience of god, which was without and beyond attributes or qualities. Thus *saguṇa* Bhakti poetry is not as succinct as that of the Sants. Therefore other meters were preferred.

For the Sants the *dohā* had particularly two principal functions. Primarily it was a compressed aphoristic statement, but also a proverbial utterance or even a folk saying; secondly it was used as a lyrical evocation of intense feeling, for instance in *viraha*. *Viraha* was initially the feeling of longing in separation from one’s beloved. The theme had been central to all medieval love poetry, and was adopted by the Sants to express the souls yearning for god.¹⁶¹ Schomer explains that the *dohā* cannot be completely understood without taking into account the multiplicity of rhetorical contexts in which it can occur. “These are of three kinds: contexts of original utterance or composition, contexts of compilation and written preservation, and contexts of present-day oral communication.”¹⁶² Schomer continues with emphasising that the former contexts are the ones that are most difficult to ascertain, but that “at least the kind of situation it was can be envisioned by analogy to present-day verbal interaction between religious teachers and their listeners and from accounts of typical interactions preserved in hagiographic texts.”¹⁶³ What is important with this kind of interaction, she emphasises, is what these patterns of intercourse exemplify. The *dohā* or the utterance in general “is a Sant’s response to a specific situation and an act of face to face communication. In every instance someone was being addressed.”¹⁶⁴

The second type of rhetorical context of the *dohā* concerns the way in which it is compiled and preserved as a written text. Generally the *sākhīs* of the Sants are compiled of the sayings of one or several Sant poets. The *sākhīs* are organised according to topics (*aṅgas*).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶² Ibid., 85.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 86.

“Thus both the inclusion of *dohās* within the particular *aṅgas* and their ordering within these *aṅgas* are significant, as it is by their proximity to other similar *dohās* that they serve their purpose of highlighting different facets of a theme.”¹⁶⁵ The *dohās* does not strictly fit in to only one topic. ”Sant themes are not rigidly demarcated categories, but closely interrelated.”¹⁶⁶ The third contextual framework in which *dohās* are found is actually an extension of the first. Schomer states that “because of the appeal of the Sant religious message and the popularity of the *dohā* form, they have become an integral part of the proverbial lore and linguistic repertoire of the speech community, sayings that come up for use in the proper context just as the appropriate idiom or expression does.”¹⁶⁷

The *sākhī/dohā* could generally stand as an utterance by itself, but was also often connected to other verse forms to summarise, or to function as concluding, truthful, statements¹⁶⁸. The rhythm of its structure made it a vehicle of memorising. The rhythm also implies that it was intended to be sung as well as spoken. Within the *dohās* of the Sants there is a presence of emotional Bhakti. The history of the *dohā* previous to its use by the Sants had primarily been associated with heterodox religious traditions.

This chapter have described the northern Sant tradition, their most used poetic genre, and their attitudes towards the society and the dominance of elites and religious institutions. In the next chapter I will present Kabīr, the most famous and popular Sant poet, some of his poetry and generally the relationship of all this with the triangular approach I presented in the introduction.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 75.

Chapter five: Kabīr – An apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity?

The last chapter was a brief presentation of the northern Sants; their general attitudes, and most used themes and genres. Kabīr is reckoned to be one of the most famous poets of medieval Hindi poetry and is the best known of the Sants. This chapter will present him; his hagiography in short, some chosen *sākhīs* (couplets), and generally how he has been interpreted with regards to religion and Hindi poetry, and with regards to Hindu-Muslim reconciliation and composite culture in recent times. I will present him (both through some of his hagiography and his sayings) and point to how the separate traditions of Hindus and Muslims have claimed him as theirs, while at the same time the promoters of Hindu-Muslim composite culture as based on interreligious tolerance claim that Kabīr fore mostly preached Hindu-Muslim unity. I have used both some of my own and other's translations, mainly those of Charlotte Vaudeville and John Stratton Hawley. I will argue that Kabīr has been interpreted to represent different religious and sectarian traditions, but that there is little evidence in his sayings demonstrating his acceptance of any of them. He is a representative of the third angle at the lower right side in the triangular model I presented in the introduction, because of his rejection of established traditions. The tradition that evolved after Kabīr – which as we shall see later counts for the Gūgā cult as well, includes more than merely the lower right angle of the triangle which Kabīr may be said to represent. Rejection of all religious traditions, rather than the inclusive acceptance of all, I suggest can be seen as a catalyst for development of composite cultures. Within the composite cult of Kabīr, though, other angles of the triangle are also visible. If Kabīr is to be interpreted as tolerant, one has to keep in mind the difference of established traditions and the individuals that identify as belonging to them. The sayings of Kabīr seem to reveal a figure who criticized established Hindu and Islamic traditions, besides generally all movements based on dead ritualism, written words and social hierarchies, as we saw in the previous chapter. “Kabīr emerges as the most thorough and consistent critic of contemporary society and its values. While upholding the concept of unity of God-head, Kabīr not only denounces the differences among the followers of various creeds, especially between Islam and Hinduism, but takes a stand on the fundamental equality of the created beings who were produced from the same drop of semen, and are alike in their skin, bone, flesh and marrow.”¹⁶⁹ Kabīr does not seem to have tried to unite Hindu and Islamic

¹⁶⁹ Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, ix.

established traditions as such, but through his critique of them both his sayings have had a profound influence on the minds of his followers.

Who was Kabīr?

“If Hinduism has a prophet, an Amos or a Jeremiah, here he is – not in the sense that he forecast anything, but that he was ever at odds with the world around him, always ready to fling the dart of criticism in the direction of established religion”¹⁷⁰ These are the words used by John Stratton Hawley to introduce Kabīr. Charlotte Vaudeville describes Kabīr in Indian religious and social history accordingly;

“Kabīr is the first great Indian poet to appear in Northern India after two centuries of Hindu-Muslim symbiosis.”¹⁷¹ “In Indian religious history, Kabīr is unique: to the Hindus, he is a Vaiṣṇava *bhakta*, to the Muslims a *pīr*, to the Sikhs a *bhagat* to the sectarian Kabīr-panthīs an *avatār* of the supreme Being; to modern patriots, Kabīr is the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, to neo-vedantins a promoter of the Universal Religion or the Religion of Man, who steadfastly opposed the superstitious beliefs and empty ritualism or orthodox Hinduism as well as the dogmatic pride and bigotry of orthodox Islam. In modern, progressive circles today, Kabīr is held in high esteem as a social reformer, a bold enemy of Brahmanical pride and caste distinctions, a revolutionary whose scathing attacks on caste prejudices, the principle of untouchability, and all forms of social discrimination are for ever famous and comforting to the enlightened Indian mind, like a breeze of fresh air”¹⁷²

This statement illustrates his popularity in the overall Indian population, which again might be the main reason why he is promoted as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim composite culture. All of the above mentioned traditions interpret Kabīr differently. These interpretations are built on the hagiographies and the collected poetry of the separate sects, and as we will see they depict a Kabīr that in many ways is incoherent with the sayings attributed to him. Winand M. Callewaert states that “Kabīr very soon was ‘appropriated’ by interested parties (from the Gorakhnāthīs and the Rāmānandīs in the seventeenth century to Brahmins like Hazari Prasad Dvivedi in the twentieth century) for their own ideological purposes.”¹⁷³ The tradition of the sect of the Kabīr-*panthīs* has been described in the words of John Stratton Hawley accordingly; “A Kabīrian catholicity! How the man would have shuttered. But that would be nothing compared to the astonishment he might feel at seeing some of the ways in which his

¹⁷⁰ John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 2004, 35.

¹⁷¹ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 81.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷³ Winand M. Callewaert, “Kabīr’s *pads* in 1556”, in Monika Horstmann (ed.), *Images of Kabīr*, 45.

name lives on in modern-day Benares. [...] Here is the prophet of iconoclastic *nirguṇa* religion apparently enshrined in the enemy's sanctuary: to a certain degree he has become a figure in the pantheon of *sagūṇa* Hinduism."¹⁷⁴

"The life and work of Kabīr is generally assigned to the 15th century."¹⁷⁵ His dates are uncertain and have been the matter of many controversies. According to some Kabīr-*panthī* sources his life spans over three centuries, while according to other sources, both Kabīr-*panthī* and Hindu traditions in general, "the date of Kabīr's birth is given as 1318 and that of his death 1518."¹⁷⁶ These dates legitimize many episodes in the hagiography where Kabīr is said to have met and discussed issues with important people whose dates are known, and far apart. The period in which Kabīr supposedly lived was to a large extent tinted with political disintegration. After the fall of the Delhi Sultanate in 1398 India saw the rise of Muslim dynasties like the Sayyids and the Lodis in Delhi, but the disintegration of the Sultanate was also concomitant with the rise of independent Muslim kingdoms to the east of Delhi and partly in the Deccan. "The Eastern and Southern Muslim kingdoms of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries played a great part both in the diffusion of Islam and in the elaboration of a new Hindu-Muslim culture."¹⁷⁷ Kabīr lived and worked amidst such cultural currents and developments; surrounded by religious traditions and sects from mainstream brahmanical Hinduism on the one side, to orthodox Islam on the other, and a multiplicity of dissent movements, mystical sects of *Sufīs* and *bhaktas* and the yogic tradition of the Nāths in the middle. According to Savitri Chandra Sobha "The life and works of Kabīr and his social philosophy have to be seen against this background. Although Kabīr was not a systematic philosopher, he strongly upheld the concept of an attributeless monotheistic God, whom he variously called Rāma, Rahim, Hari, Govind, Sahib etc."¹⁷⁸ Sobha continues "Echoing Sankara's philosophy of *advaita* and his concept of *maya*, on the one hand, and the monistic philosophy of the great Arab philosopher, Ibnul Arabi, on the other Kabīr emphasized unity of God with the created world."¹⁷⁹

Bhakti tradition includes an emphasis on hagiography which is not seen in Vedic and *Shastrik* Hinduism.¹⁸⁰ The reason why this is absent from Vedic and *Shastrik* Hinduism

¹⁷⁴ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* 46-47.

¹⁷⁵ Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, 47.

¹⁷⁶ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 36.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷⁸ Savitri Chandra Sobha, *Social life and concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry* 48.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸⁰ David N. Lorenzen, "The lives of Nirguni Saints", in David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India*, 181.

Lorenzen argues can be due to “the rejection of historical precedent and individual illumination as sources of religious truth in schools of Vedic exegesis, especially Mimamsa.”¹⁸¹ Both in *saguna* and *nirguna* Bhakti there is great emphasis on historical precedent and religious authority of individuals. Kabīr belongs within the *nirguna* Bhakti fold. Central to this is the contestation of Brahmanical and Vedic Hindu traditions, rituals, social structure and *saguna* perceptions of god (idols, *avatārs* and anthropomorphic descriptions of the Ultimate Truth (god)). Lorenzen has compared the hagiographies of the *saguna* and *nirguna* Bhakti saints of the North, and states that “the main episodes in the life of each saint are pretty much the same, with only minor though interesting differences, whether that life is told by a *nirguni* or a *saguni* storyteller.”¹⁸² Lorenzen points to some patterns that reoccur in the legends of many north Indian *nirguna* saints. The major points, and those which occur in the legends of Kabīr being; an unusual birth story, religious vocation at an early age, encounter with a revered guru/divine revelation, marriage and children, and further encounters with Brahmans, Mullahs, kings, and experience of an unusual death.¹⁸³

The legends concerning the life of Kabīr are extensive. I mentioned above how different established religions and sects all have claimed that Kabīr belongs to them. There is little we know with certainty about the real life of Kabīr. Kabīr is a Muslim name which means ‘the great’ and is one of the many epithets of Allah. Throughout there have been many discussions as to whether Kabīr indeed was a Muslim, if we take his poetry into account there is little evidence that he was so in any usual sense of the word. He criticized Islam, rather than defending it, but then again this can be said about his relationship to every established religion that flourished in his environment. According to Stratton Hawley, Kabīr “seems more at home with Hindu ways.”¹⁸⁴ Kabīr probably belonged to a weaver caste in Benares. According to Charlotte Vaudeville “There are many castes of weavers in India; with some local variations, their social status is very low and they appear affiliated with definitely non-Aryan groups [...] The Indian word corresponding to the Persian *Julaha* is *Kori*, ‘a Hindu *Julaha*’ – but there does not seem to be a marked distinction between the two groups.”¹⁸⁵ Kabīr frequently calls himself a *kori*, particularly when referring to the weaving trade. The weavers of Benares were probably one of the large *śudra* castes that converted to Islam en masse during the medieval era, and there has been some speculations as to whether Kabīr might have belonged to one of

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 183.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 185-189.

¹⁸⁴ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 83.

these. During the conversions of Hindus to Islam many customs and traditions were transferred from the practitioners into the framework of a new religious tradition¹⁸⁶, which might explain how fluid and frustrating the religious circumstances might have been in the surroundings of Kabīr and many of his contemporaries, and also how distinct ethnic separateness (of Indian Hindu and Turk) faded over time.¹⁸⁷

The caste or social group to which Kabīr belonged had probably converted to Islam prior to Kabīr's birth.¹⁸⁸ According to Charlotte Vaudeville "Most modern accounts of Kabīr's life are based on two late Kabīr-*panthī* works, the *Kabīr-kasauti* and the *Kabīr-caritra*, which are full of wonders and miracles, and whose legendary character is evident."¹⁸⁹ There is however not lacking in references to Kabīr in earlier sources like the Sikh's *Ādi Granth* and Nābhājī's *Bhaktamālā* (garland of Saints).¹⁹⁰ "The first Muslim testimony of Kabīr is found in the 'Ain-i-Akbari, compiled by Abu'l-Fazl-i-Allami, the Emperor Akbar's friend and chronicler, in 1598."¹⁹¹ Already in this text the popularity of Kabīr amongst both Hindu and Muslim communities is mentioned. Vaudeville states that "at the end of the sixteenth century there were already conflicting opinions in Muslim circles about the substance of the doctrines taught by Kabīr: such doctrines may not have been completely acceptable to some staunch Muhammedans, and this is probably why Abu'l-Fazl does not clearly state that Kabīr was a *musalman*."¹⁹² Vaudeville continues "It is interesting to note that, whereas in the seventeenth century a Muslim author did not hesitate to call Kabīr a 'Vaishnava' and a 'Vairagi' (i.e. a Vaishnava ascetic), the late Persian work *Khazinat-ul-Asafiya* (c. 1868) is probably the first treatise composed by an Indian Muslim to mention Kabīr as a *Sūfī* and even as a disciple of a particular Shaykh Taqqi."¹⁹³ The legends and poetry of Kabīr included in the Sikh tradition mention the connections between Kabīr and Guru Nānak, while there is no reason to believe that Nānak ever met Kabīr.¹⁹⁴ Similarly the Kabīr-*panthī*'s version of Kabīr's life and legend connects him stronger to the Hindu tradition, and has incorporated in the legend of Kabīr's life a connection to the revered guru Rāmānand.

¹⁸⁶ Mohamed, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 260.

¹⁸⁷ Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the other, inscribing the self", Richard Eaton (ed.) *India's Islamic traditions, 711-1750*, 112n.

¹⁸⁸ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 4.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 27- 28.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

The birth of Kabīr is unusual. Lorenzen remarks that such unusual birth stories might be due to the actual low caste and status of the saint, and the need to elevate him by relating him somehow directly to god.¹⁹⁵ Kabīr is found by his foster parents floating on a lake,¹⁹⁶ but according to some traditions he was born by a Brahmin widow, who put him in a basket where he was later found by his foster parents of low caste. According to Vaudeville this is a “reminiscent of a Viśṇuite legend”.¹⁹⁷ Vaudeville continues; “from the seventeenth century onwards Vaiṣṇava hagiography takes on a strongly anti-Muslim flavor, which is usually explained by Aurangzeb’s fierce persecution of Hinduism.”¹⁹⁸ *Shudra* and untouchable saints often display their religious vocation, supernatural powers or divinity at a young age, while saints of higher castes adopt a religious vocation only after meeting their guru. Nabhajī, the author of the *Bhaktamala* does not say whether Kabīr was or was not a Muslim, he simply states that Kabīr had rejected the whole Brahmanical tradition, the caste-system, and that he criticized both traditions of Hinduism and Islam, with total impartiality.¹⁹⁹ A commentary to the *Bhaktamālā* composed by Priyadās in 1712 introduces the legendary biography of Kabīr, who even though being born a Muslim managed to become the disciple of Rāmānand. This he did by waiting on the steps of the *ghat* alongside the Ganges in Benares, where Rāmānand used to take his first bath of the day. As the saint Rāmānand stumbled over Kabīr he broke out ‘Rām Rām’, and according to legend Kabīr interpreted this as his sacred mantra given by the saint as a sign of him taking Kabīr as his disciple. Priyadas has narrated a lot of miraculous events concerning the life of Kabīr. These stories present a Kabīr who was born Muslim, but who converted to Vaishnava Bhakti through the influence of the Saint Rāmānand. The Rāmānandī Sampradaya has according to Lorenzen had a key role in the early development of hagiographical literature about both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* saints.²⁰⁰ According to John Stratton Hawley; “Rāmānand solves too many problems on too little evidence. He supplies the missing link that would relate Kabīr’s non-theist ‘eastern’ Banarasi side to the theist *Bhakti* personality so prevalent in manuscripts that show up father west. He locates Kabīr in a specific monastic lineage – the Rāmānandīs – while also providing the means for him to have

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 46f.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 30.

²⁰⁰ David N. Lorenzen, “The lives of Nirguni Saints, 181.

come from a Muslim family, as his name suggests, and then later be aligned by conversion with a kind of *Bhakti* that at least some Brahmins could call their own.”²⁰¹

“Kabīr-*panthī* sectarian literature, on which, as we have said, most modern popular biographies of Kabīr are based, presents Kabīr as an avatar of the Supreme Being.”²⁰² The Kabīr-*panthī* literature includes conversations in which Kabīr is made either to answer a trusted disciple’s question, or to argue with famous saints or yogis, which according to Vaudeville “is meant to establish the superiority of Sat-Kabīr over other religious teachers of great repute, chronologically impossibilities notwithstanding.”²⁰³ “The Hinduization of Kabīr’s legend and the tendency to make him conform to the ideal of Vaishnava sanctity as depicted in sectarian writings from the seventeenth century onwards probably account for a great deal of apparently interpolated material found in the present compilations of his verses.”²⁰⁴ The presentation of Kabīr and his biography or hagiography as done by Vaudeville reveals that the earliest sources to the poet’s life describe his unique attitude and harsh utterances towards all established traditions and ignorant individuals. Here he is a figure of dissent vis-à-vis the existing social and religious context in which he was living, whereas in later interpolated sections to the sectarian literature of both Hindu and Muslim background he appears to conform to their beliefs.²⁰⁵ This is an implication that the separate religious identities in South Asia have strengthened.

With regards to the death of Kabīr, his hagiography is “surprisingly economical”²⁰⁶ in fashion, at least when compared to the rest of his life story, and compared to the importance death seems to have had for Kabīr, taking into account the poetry.²⁰⁷ Priyadas says that Kabīr retired to Magahar near Benares where he spent his last days. When he felt that death was coming he asked for some flowers which he spread over his bed, and merged forever into the infinite love of God.²⁰⁸ Another more elaborate and not quite as peaceful version of the same legend describes the passing away of Kabīr as a happening where large crowds of Hindu and Muslim followers sat around his bed. When he passed away these two communities both tried to claim the body. After a long time of arguing the body of Kabīr was long gone, and instead a large pile of flowers were lying on the bed – or in another version; two piles of flowers. The

²⁰¹ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 272.

²⁰² Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 35.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰⁶ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the saints of India*, 39.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

former version narrates how the bodily remains of Kabīr were fought over by Hindus and Muslims, the former wanted to cremate him, and the latter to bury him. The remains then revealed themselves as a pile of flowers accessible to both. The latter version describes two piles of flowers and a voice from heaven that told the two disagreeing communities to deal with them according to their own customs. Thus the religious communities are in the second version acknowledged as separate traditions, though evenly trivialized; while in the former version the pile of flowers might symbolize that god is one. Two separate shrines have been erected at the supposed death place of Kabīr, one Hindu and one Muslim.²⁰⁹

The quarrel over the death of Kabīr has a surprising parallel to the death scene in the Gūgā epic, as we shall further explore in chapter six. Whereas the Muslim version of the legend describes a Gūgā that converted to Islam, the Hindu legends narrate how Gūgā was swallowed by earth in the same manner as Sīta in the Rāmāyaṇa. Both communities claim his death and post-mortals rites to have been in accordance with their own tradition, whereas some claim that his death and post-mortals rites was a compromise between the two communities. In Gūgā Medhi there is only one shrine for Gūgā, but still it is divided somehow between Hindus and Muslims, which we shall see in chapter seven.

The textual traditions of Kabīr’s work

Ink or paper, I never touched, nor did I take a pen in my hand,
The greatness of the four ages I have described by word of mouth...²¹⁰

The poetry and philosophy of Kabīr is difficult to estimate as he does not appear to have written down his ideas himself. He expressed contempt for the written word, sacred texts and the traditions built up around them. Kabīr advocated oral transmission and claimed to be illiterate. Still a number of sayings have been attributed to him and gathered in different textual traditions by his disciples and admirers after a period of oral circulation and performance. Callewaert states that “Interaction in the oral tradition and corruption in the scribal tradition act like fog and pollution, creating a nebulous environment in which it becomes very difficult to find the original versions of the songs of 15-17th century bhaktas.”²¹¹ Kabīr lived in a time of great religious change. The variation of ideas which flourished,

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 49.

²¹¹ Callewaert. *The millennium Kabīr Vāṇi - a collection of Pads*, 1.

whether it was Vaishnava Bhakti, *Haṭha* yoga of the Nāth yogis, or Sufism²¹², is evident in his poetry, which again is equally critical of all religious institutions. There are several textual traditions of Kabīr’s work, and they differ in content, and form, according to ideologies, region of origin, beliefs and agendas. He is equally popular among Indians belonging to all religious traditions, and is claimed by Hindus and Muslims both to have been one of them, as well as being included in the Sikhs’ Ādi Granth, as one of the predecessors of Guru Nanak. Much as a result of his sweeping criticism of all religious institutions, Kabīr can be regarded as one of the foremost representatives for the Hindu-Muslim composite culture of North-India. The way in which Kabīr and his contemporary Sant poets (and their predecessors the Nāths) opposed the existing social and religious realities I believe can have been a catalyst for development of composite traditions. Those who promote composite culture as a normative better for secular India, tend to depict Kabīr as a figure who intentionally and actively worked to unite Hindu and Muslim communities. Hedayetullah states that “Kabīr tried to combine Hindu monism with Islamic monotheism by discarding all the artificial barriers created by the two communities in the name of religion. Denouncing all religious formalisms, he preached a new religious universalism in an attempt to resolve the tensions that had prevailed between the two communities for so many centuries.”²¹³

“Three kinds of collections of Kabīr’s songs have been preserved in northern India: the ‘eastern’ or the Bijak tradition, the ‘western’ or Rajasthani tradition, and the Adi-granth or the Panjabi tradition.”²¹⁴ Linda Hess has done a comparison of these three traditions in the article “Three Kabīr Collections”, where she states that “The earliest, and the only one to which a definite date can be assigned, is the collection of Kabīr works found in the Adi Granth or Guru Granth Sahib (AG), sacred book of the Sikhs, put into its present form by Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh guru, in 1604.”²¹⁵ The two other collections come from Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar, namely the Pañcvānī (a collection of the sayings of five Sants) and the Bijak (the collection of the Kabīr-panth).²¹⁶ Hess further states that “all three collections show influence from the local language, from the sects that produced them, and from regional religious trends. All developed independently, but there are intricate interrelations among them.”²¹⁷ Hess has done comparison only on the lyrics structured as *pads*, which differ from

²¹² Ibid., 285.

²¹³ Hedayetullah, *Kabīr: An apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity*, xiv.

²¹⁴ Callewaert, *The Millennium Kabīr Vani*, 3.

²¹⁵ Linda Hess, “Three Kabīr Collections”, in Schomer & McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 111f.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 112-113.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

the *Sākhīs* in the way that they are more musical, the structures are looser and therefore, as she states, more amenable to alteration.²¹⁸ The collections of Kabīr's sayings or songs were not written down until a long time after his death. During centuries these songs have been performed all over north India and resulted in local variations. Callewaert calls this a "period of oral transmission". According to Zoller "when dealing with oral performances, one does not encounter books or manuscripts but a continuous tradition of text production and reproduction."²¹⁹ He further continues "the effect of this continuous recreation over some time is that there are serious problems for those who want to identify the authentic core within Kabīr's works."²²⁰

Kabīr's style and language

Reading books, the whole world died,
And no one became learned:
Read just one letter of the word 'love',
Then you'll be a pandit!²²¹

This poem is attributed to Kabīr, and does by all means fit in with the general idea of his resentment to the written word, the brahmanical traditions and the ignorance of those who based their knowledge on reading books. Many similar utterances and folk sayings have been attributed to Kabīr, but whether they were actually composed by him is hard to say, as similar sayings are connected to other traditions existing prior to Kabīr. Many themes found in the collections of Kabīr's sayings are in other words also found in his predecessors the Jains, the Nāths and the Buddhists²²², even though the latter were not anti-writing. The first couplet is assigned to Kabīr and has an equivalent in the Nāth-*panth*, as seen in the following utterance:

The Hindu died crying: 'Ram!'
The Mussulman crying: 'Khuda!'
Kabīr, that one will live,
Who keeps away from both!²²³

²¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

²¹⁹ Zoller, "Kabīr and ritualized language", 35.

²²⁰ Ibid. 2.

²²¹ Karine Schomer, "The Doha and Sant teachings", in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 67.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 263, (According to Vaudeville "He who will keep away from both terms is he who will not accept any distinction.")

Hindus say Rām, Muslims [say] Khudā

Yogis say the Invisible (Alakh), where there is neither Rām nor Khudā²²⁴

“Kabīr’s own social background as a low-caste weaver makes it likely that he was more or less illiterate, or at least that he had no formal teaching in reading and writing.”²²⁵ As much of his poetry reveals it is not likely that he would have written down his sayings, as he showed “contempt for the written word, for holy scriptures in general – be they Veda or Qur’an - and for those who read them”²²⁶ His language and use of symbols is in many ways influenced by the time in which he lived, and thereby also by the social and religious environment. He uses Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Nāth concepts, but criticises all traditions on the same level. However, it seems as though he is more familiar with Hindu, than Muslim concepts. His spoken language is another matter. Vaudeville points out, “Most scholars [...] have underlined the heterogeneous character of Kabīr’s language, which seems to borrow from a number of dialects.”²²⁷ It poses a great challenge to determine what language Kabīr used in performing his poetry, as there are a variety of textual traditions that have transmitted these, all connected to different locations in northern India. “Traditionally language has been considered a reliable clue for arriving at the authentic version of a text.”²²⁸ According to Callewaert rules which are used to conclude with an original language and core of a texts cannot be applied to the poetry assigned to Kabīr “first because the text definitely underwent linguistic changes in the hands of singers travelling from region to another. They adapted their repertoire linguistically to suit local audiences. Secondly, even within Kabīr’s oeuvre as we now have it, there is a great difference between the vocabulary used for these Sākhīs and the vocabulary used for the pads.”²²⁹ The poetry of Kabīr has been transmitted orally through regions, dialects, social classes and castes, which leaves us with many different collections of Kabīr’s sayings. Some of the sayings have also become integral parts of folk sayings, and some folk sayings have been attributed to Kabīr, even though they may have existed prior to the poet.

The tantric language, symbolism and style are vividly used in the poetry, in addition to a lot of comparisons often taken from the realities of everyday life. While the tantric yogis

²²⁴ Mariola Offredi, “Kabīr and the Nāthpanth”, in Horstmann (ed.), *Images of Kabīr*, 131.

²²⁵ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 49.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

²²⁸ Callewaert, *The Millennium Kabīr Vani*, 109.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

used their techniques as means to reach bodily salvation their technical terms were merely a conceptual device for the Sants.²³⁰ Kabīr’s main goal was salvation, which he conceived of as union with the ultimate Reality, which for him is Rām or the state of *sahaja*. The concept of *sahaja* is derived directly from the tantric practice and vocabulary of the Nāth yogis, and even though Kabīr freely uses their vocabulary he often ridicules their practices in the same manner as he does with other traditions. For attainment of the state or experience of *sahaja* the guidance of a guru is important, but not necessarily a human guru, but the *Satguru* or the absolute Reality. This state is only to be bought at the cost of one’s life, in the sense that he who wants to be one who has reached this state whilst alive, must be in a state of one who is dead whilst living.²³¹ In opposition to the Bhakti of the Vaiṣṇavites in general, this is nothing close to being an easy goal. Liberation is not reliant only on the mercy of god’s grace, but on one’s own efforts, which again rely on realizing the Truth as opposed to the ignorance bound up to ritualism and textual authority.

What is most striking in the language and tone of Kabīr is his directness. He confronts his audience bluntly, harshly, to open their eyes to the world as he sees it. “Kabīr is extremely pessimistic about human nature, if left to its own devices.”²³² Linda Hess states that “Although his [Kabīr’s] *nirguṇa* God or supreme truth seems impersonal when compared with the anthropomorphic Rām and Kṛṣṇa, Kabīr can be described as the most personal of all Bhakti poets: not because he dwells on his private experience, exposes his own quivering heart; but because he gets very personal with us, the audience.”²³³

Hey Qazi,
 What’s that book you’re preaching from?
 And reading, reading – how many days?
 Still you haven’t mastered one word.
 Drunk with power, you want to grab me;
 then comes the circumcision.
 Brother, what can I say? –
 If God had wanted to make me a Muslim,
 Why didn’t he make the incision?
 You cut away the foreskin, and then you have a Muslim;
 So what about your women?
 What are they?
 Women, so they say, are only half-formed men:
 I guess they must stay Hindus to the end.

²³⁰ Karine Schomer, “The doha and Sant teachings”, in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 68-69.

²³¹ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 146.

²³² Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 316.

²³³ Linda Hess, “Kabīr’s Rhetoric”, in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 147.

Hindus, Muslims – where did they come from?
 Who got them started down this road?
 Search inside, search your heart and look:
 Who made heaven come to be?
 Fool,
 Throw away that book, and sing of Rām.
 What you're doing has nothing to do with him.
 Kabīr has caught hold of Rām for his refrain,
 And the Qazi?
 He spends his life in vain.²³⁴

This is a *pad* found in the *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, and makes a good example of the way in which Kabīr addressed his audience; directly and insultingly. The poem is signed, which gives it the authority mentioned in the former chapter. Throughout this saying Kabīr confronts the Muslims, and the Rām he preaches of at the very end is not the anthropomorphic Rām of the *saguna* Bhakti tradition, but the god of Kabīr – the one god which is the same for all and independent of established traditions.

Topics in Kabīr's oeuvre

I mentioned in the previous chapter how the sayings of Kabīr and the Sants often are categorized according to topics, or *aṅgas*, in later collections. I have focused on the critique of Kabīr towards established traditions, which is based on his presentation of god/the ultimate truth as one and the same for all. There is only one god. Kabīr is a monist, and does by definition not see different aspects of God. Kabīr is a mystic and as such he searches for union with the ultimate truth, or Rām, which can be found in the state of *Sahaja*. To attain union with god, or the state of *Sahaja*, it is important to have a guru as guide. “The cult of the guru is ancient in India, where the spiritual guide who has shown the way to salvation is usually conceived as the very embodiment of perfect spiritual knowledge and God-imparted wisdom.”²³⁵ It seems as to Kabīr this is a state which is reliant on the efforts of the devotee; union with god is not something that relies merely on god's grace. There is much debate around the guru of Kabīr; there is a large amount of *sākhīs* concerning the guru, or the *satguru*, but this term is applied both to god and the human guru. “The *satguru*, or Perfect Guru, however, need not assume a human form: he can be interiorized.”²³⁶ Particularly in tantric schools it is normal that the guru gets divinized and held identical with god, but as

²³⁴ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, 52.

²³⁵ Vaudeville, “Sant Mat”, in Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, 33.

²³⁶ Ibid.

Vaudeville points out “to be without a visible guru (*nirguru*) is not respectable in the Hindu tradition as a whole since it is nearly universally admitted that a man cannot achieve salvation without a proper initiation imparted by a human guru.”²³⁷ This might be the reason why Kabīr is in some hagiographies depicted as a pupil of the guru Rāmananda. The Sants related to this relationship between a guru and a human pupil ambiguously. “Yet it is clear that, by and large, the Sants have been very reluctant to name their human guru – if they had one.”²³⁸ The position of the *Satguru* has the highest reverence amongst all the Sants, and the initiation or the revelation of the ultimate truth does not take the form of a sacred mantra whispered in the pupil’s ear, but is a matter of a sudden revelation referred to as the word, *śabda*, which is often compared to an arrow.²³⁹ This couplet is found both in the *Granthāvalī* and the *Samagra*, with only minor differences with regards to language. The former is found in the *Granthāvalī* and the latter from the *Samagra*:

Satgur laī kamān kari, bāhan lāgā tīr
Ek ja bahya prīti saūn, bhītari bhidā sarīr²⁴⁰

Satgur laī kamān kari, bāhan lāgā tīr
Ek jubāhya prīti hūn, bhītari rahyā sarīr²⁴¹

The Satguru took hold of the bow, and began to shoot the arrow,
Which with outer love, stayed within the body

The commentaries to this *sākhī* found in the *Kabīr Granthāvalī* explain the metaphor of the bow and arrow as an indication of the greatness of the guru’s speech or voice. The greatness of the guru is a central topic to Kabīr, as to the Sants in general. The *satguru* shoots the arrow, and hits Kabīr with knowledge, with the truth. This truth is something longed for, it is the union between an individual and god, and what Kabīr is witnessing. It is a central idea in Tantric traditions, that the entire universe is voice. The greatness of the word is a gift which nothing can measure up to, and therefore can the pupils hardly measure up to the greatness of the *Satguru* who reveals it.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 34.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Kabīr, *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, 24

²⁴¹ Kabīr, *Kabīr Samagra*, 205

Satgur ki mahimā ānant, ānant kiyā upagār
Locan anant ughāriyā, ānant dikhāvanahār²⁴²

The greatness of the satguru is endless, endless is his kindness
He uncovered endless vision/sight, and showed (me) the infinity

The word infinite or endless (*ānant*) is a word which might also refer to the supreme god. The sakhi describes the greatness of the *satguru*, who gave Kabīr, or the eyes of Kabīr the possibility to see the infinite.²⁴³

Longing for god or union with him is too a central theme; the theme of longing in separation (*viraha*). The feeling of separation is often described in the situation of a wedded wife, yearning to unite with her inaccessible, though ever present spouse. In this kind of poetry the poet speaks of himself as the longing wife, while the Ultimate Reality or god is represented by the long gone husband. For Kabīr only the human mind is to be blamed for the separation from god. The union is attainable within oneself, not by doing the rituals or pilgrimages of established traditions. This is a clear sign for the inwardness advocated by Kabīr, and so the critique of outward, written and ritualized tradition.

Birahin ūbhī panth siri, panthī būjhai ghāi
Ek sadab kahi pīv kā, kab re milihēge āi? ²⁴⁴

The longing woman stood at the edge of the road, asked the ones on the way,
Say one word of the beloved, when will he come and meet me?

Another metaphor used by Kabīr is the one of the bird in the night crying for its mate, as to describe the longing of man for his god.

Chakī bichurī rañni kī, āi milai parbhāti
Je nar bichure Rām sau, te din mile na rāti ²⁴⁵

The separated (alone) duck of the night, came and met (its mate) in the early morning,
Those who are apart from Rām will not meet him/find him by day or night.

²⁴² Kabīr, *Kabīr Samagra*, 204.

²⁴³ Vaudeville, *Kabīr*, 154.

²⁴⁴ Kabīr, *Kabīr Samagra*, 230.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

The state of separateness is a painful condition for man. Those who can see Rām will unite with him, like the duck in the morning, but those who cannot see Rām will not unite with him by day or night. The knowledge of god is not something found in external rituals, by withdrawing from society, or dressing and acting according to specific rules, but is something already existing within the human mind. Within man himself god exists, or the absolute Truth or Reality, and thereby through knowledge of this, and search within one’s self only, man can reach union with Rām. This critique of mankind’s ignorance and belief in external ritual is visible in a large part of the poetry of Kabīr. The following couplet criticizes man’s ignorance and paints a chilly and realistic picture of death as something which man cannot escape (unless he/she realizes the truth, reaches the state of *sahaja*, and are free from the merciless Kāl):

Jhūte sukh ko sukh kahaī, mānat hai man mod
 Khalak cabīna Kāl kā hai, kuch mukh maī kuch god²⁴⁶

(People) call false pleasure happiness, within themselves they accept
 The (material) world is roasted chickpeas for Kāl (death), some in his mouth (and) some (the rest) in his lap

Kabīr and composite culture

“Kabīr has recently been called the ‘apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity,’ but often scorned the outward signs and symbols of both Hinduism and Islam and clung to his own tough poetic vision of reality.”²⁴⁷ Throughout the legends and hagiography of Kabīr sectarian forces have tried to connect him to figures that are representative of certain stands, so as to define Kabīr to belong within the same tradition. John Stratton Hawley states that “As ‘the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity’ Kabīr became Exhibit A in the Indian government’s effort to encourage ‘national integration’ – while simultaneously a place was being made for him in the canon of Urdu literature that officially Islamic Pakistan wanted to claim him as its national heritage.”²⁴⁸ Malik Mohamed states that “Among the exponents of medieval Bhakti Movements, Dadu stands next to Kabīr, who actually thought of a religious syncretism. He was one of those who

²⁴⁶ Kabīr, *Kabīr Granthavali*, 27.

²⁴⁷ Eleanor Zelliot, “A Medieval Encounter Between Hindu and Muslim: Eknath’s Drama-poem *Hindu-Turk Samvad*”, in R. M. Eaton (ed.) *India’s Islamic traditions, 711-1750*, 65.

²⁴⁸ Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 275.

laid greatest emphasis on the unity of religion between the Hindus and the Muslims.”²⁴⁹ There has been a strong desire for many years to connect the authoritative voice and persona of Kabīr to the cause of Hindu-Muslim reconciliation, at the same time little attention is given on a national level to for example Gūgā (and other deities of folk traditions) with regards to him being a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity and tolerance, as he does not have relevance at a national or international level, but stays rather regional. We shall see later, though, that point one in the triangle was evident also within the cult of Gūgā.

We have seen so far that there is no indication in the poetry of Kabīr that confirms that he intentionally forwards his philosophies to be interpreted as a promotion for Hindu-Muslim tolerance and unity, still he is used by politicians and scholars that represent point one in the triangle as number one symbol and promoter of Hindu-Muslim tolerance and unity. The poetry of Kabīr reveals an equal criticism towards every religious tradition, at the same time as he is a product of his time and surroundings. He takes advantage of the vocabularies of all these traditions both to explain his own comprehension of the divine and liberation from this-worldly matters, as well as in his criticism of the dead ritualism of particularly the written established traditions.²⁵⁰ Kabīr is known for his critique towards written languages and traditions, the holy languages of the Brahmins and orthodox Muslims, the rigid ritualism of these and every other religious tradition, but as Claus Peter Zoller points out in an analysis of the language used by Kabīr and the Sants, there can be revealed a form of ritualism within this orally transmitted poetry as well. Zoller argues that the rituals Kabīr criticized were the dead rituals of that which was written down, not of the immediacy of revelation as described by Kabīr.²⁵¹ The sayings of Kabīr expose dissent not only towards the established religious traditions in his context, but towards the written word, written texts and those who read them; towards social inequality and the idea of one group as superior to another, either based on religion, caste, socio-economic status and so on. By and large the dissent in the sayings of Kabīr forwards the idea of equality of mankind. God is the same, he is one, and those who see him as another are to be interpreted as heretics rather than the mystics and saints that rejected the established traditions. Kabīr does not preach of Hindu-Muslim unity and togetherness, but his rejection of every established tradition might have worked as a catalyst for development of composite culture.

²⁴⁹ Mohamed, *The foundations of the Composite Culture in India*, 259.

²⁵⁰ Claus Peter Zoller, “The ritualized language of Kabīr”, 65.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

PART THREE: COMPOSITE PLACES OF THE PRESENT

Chapter six: Gūgā – An Epic Tradition

Who is Gūgā?

In order to elaborate in more detail on the lower left corner of the triangle we will now concentrate on composite culture as it is found in the folk religious cult of Gūgā Jī. There are many aspects to Gūgā and legends revolving around his life and afterlife. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has remarked that “there is no single ‘basic’ version of a Hindu myth; each is told and retold with a number of minor and major variations over years”.²⁵² This statement applies to oral epic traditions as well. Still there seem to be some basic patterns in the oral legends that cross geographical and cultural borders. This also applies to the Gūgā epic. There are only versions, not an original epic, as far as we know. This chapter will provide the reader with knowledge of the figure of Gūgā, central figures surrounding him, and the epic tradition evolving around him.

Apparently the Gūgā cult developed amongst Rajputs in Rajasthan, and extended to the foothills of the Himalayas around the 17th century.²⁵³ At this point it seems as though Gūgā was primarily connected to the Nāga cults (snake worship), and is reckoned to be the most prominent representative of this.²⁵⁴ Commonly Gūgā goes by the name Gūgā *Pīr* (Gūgā the saint) or Gūgā *Jaharpīr* (“the poison-hero”, the saint who possesses power to cure poison²⁵⁵), most likely due to Mohammedan influence.²⁵⁶ Other names are Gūgā *Bīr*, or Gūgā *Vīr*, which means Gūgā the hero, and refers to his heroic actions in war. A *bīr* is also a Hindu guardian deity or a minor deity. The two former names are in theory connected to the Muslims, while the two latter are connected to the Hindus, but it seems as though they are used interchangeably. Handa states that “above all these aspects of his [Gūgā’s] personality, his image as Jaharpīr commands the maximum cult following irrespective of any distinction of caste and creed.”²⁵⁷ The effect of Gūgā with regards to curing snake bites can be a reason for his popularity crossing religious communities, even though, as I have mentioned in chapter three and will return to below, this aspect seems to have faded over time. Gūgā is

²⁵² Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Hindu Myths; A sourcebook translated from Sanskrit*, 1975, 21.

²⁵³ O.C. Handa, *Naga Cults and traditions in the western Himalaya*, 319.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

believed by his devotees to have powers to intervene in other mundane matters as well, like health, economy and fortune of his devotees. Gūgā is believed to have belonged to the Chauhan clan or caste.²⁵⁸ This was a Rajput caste that originally was based mainly in what is now Rajasthan and Gujarat. During the medieval age some of the Chauhans, but also other castes following Gūgā, are believed to have converted to Islam, while continuing to venerate Gūgā, which might be another reason for the cult being shared by Hindu and Muslim communities today.²⁵⁹

Gūgā is always depicted sitting on his blue horse Nīla, or Līla. Nīla Ghoṛā was the horse Gūgā brought in battle, and which was later buried with him. “A recurrent feature in Hindu mythology is the association between a deity and his animal mount”.²⁶⁰ Horses are not mounts for gods and goddesses of the classical Hindu pantheon, with the exception of Kalki, the last incarnation of Viṣṇu, but are mounts for folk deities as Sontheimer has pointed out; “The omnipresent horse in the folk cults and rituals of the Deccan and western India is so pervasive and historically so old that I wonder whether we should not emphasize this phenomenon much more.”²⁶¹ “The tremendous importance of the horse in the cult of Khaṇḍobā and all the equivalent gods in the Deccan reflects the high esteem and reverence amongst the martial or potentially martial pastoral and tribal communities of the Deccan from prehistoric times. The high regard of the horse was certainly strengthened by the influence of Muslims and Rājputs.”²⁶² The horse of Khaṇḍobā is blue, as the horse of Gūgā.²⁶³ Another issue which distinguish Gūgā from other folk deities of North India, is that he is always depicted without his wife, whereas for example Maharashtrian folk deities, as Khaṇḍobā, are pictured with (one or) two (or five) wives; often one cultured and another wild.²⁶⁴ “Khaṇḍobā and his equivalents in the Deccan and South India always have a second wife from a community with a tribal background.”²⁶⁵

Whether Gūgā ever existed is impossible to say. Attempts have been made to place him in history and geography. “The attempt to find an historical Gogo Cauhāṇ (or Chauhāṇ) is even more fantastic than the search for the historical Pabujī. Maybe there was a historical Gogo Chauhāṇ, who does have a grave site (*samādhi-dargāh*) marking his swallowing by the

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Cānaṇamal Sharmā and Sāvatrī Sharmā, *Gorakhnāth evam Gogājī: śodhpūrṇ itihās*, 73-74.

²⁶⁰ Elwyn C. Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga: A North Indian Oral Tradition”, 303.

²⁶¹ Anne Feldhaus, Aditya Malik and Heidrun Brückner (eds.), *King of Hunters, Warriors, and Sheperds: Essays on Khaṇḍobā by Günther-Dietz Sontheimer*, 47.

²⁶² Ibid., 30.

²⁶³ Ibid., 39.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 25-26, 56.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 56.

earth”²⁶⁶ comments Hildebeitel. Still Gūgā is believed to have existed in a historical past, and some versions of his legend actually remain this-worldly, in the sense that the plots do not move between life and death, there is no deification of Gūgā and he does not possess super-natural powers. These versions though are very limited in popularity, and are important only for those who merely want to promote Gūgā as a warrior hero. Most legends of Gūgā describe a great hero and a saint, who not only has super-human powers, but who at the same time is a just king and tightly connected to his Guru Gorakhnāth. Gūgā is often depicted in the company of the Nine Nāths. According to Briggs the “Nāthas are religious leaders, or gurus, or guides, who derive their names from Ādinātha or Śiva. [...] While the word Nātha is a synonym for Hindu Yogī, and while it is a sect name of the Kānphatas, still, in this connection it refers to the nine great, or deified and immortal teachers of the sect of whom Gorakhnāth is sometimes called the chief.”²⁶⁷ Gorakhnāth is a part of the epic from the very beginning, but he only appears when he is needed by the main characters; mainly Gūgā, but also by his mother prior to Gūgā’s birth. The first time is when Bāchal, Gūgā’s mother, venerates him in order to conceive a child. Gorakhnāth provides help even when he is situated far away. Thereby he assists Gūgā in many situations, whether in war, in a game of dice,²⁶⁸ with regards to his marriage, even before his birth Gūgā calls upon his guru to make sure he is born in his paternal home, and as Briggs points out “Gūgā received his power over serpents, through discipleship, from Gorakhnāth, and he learned the art of charming snakes likewise from his great guru.”²⁶⁹

The epic of Gūgā

The epic of Gūgā is but one of the many oral epics of North India. The poem is in the vernacular called a *swāṅg*, or a metrical play, and is as such performed by the “natives”.²⁷⁰ “The cult of Gūgā qualifies as a regional tradition with many local expressions”²⁷¹ states Lapoint, whose agenda in the article “The Epic of Gūgā: A North Indian Oral Tradition”, is to explore “the question of how mythological materials may serve to reveal continuities of belief and thought between different segments of Indian society.” Lapoint also claims that “A number of themes present in the Gūgā mythology also find expression in the Sanskrit classics,

²⁶⁶ Hildebeitel, *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics*, 14.

²⁶⁷ G. W. Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphata Yogīs*, 136.

²⁶⁸ Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphati Yogīs*, 192.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁷⁰ C. R. Temple, *The Legends of the Panjab*, 121.

²⁷¹ Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga”, 283.

notably in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata.”²⁷² The relationship between oral and classical epics in India is complicated and an issue which for long has been object of research. I briefly explained this in chapter three on methodology and will return to the subject when relevant below.

The legends concerning Gūgā’s life and afterlife are many and vary according to location, community and religious affiliation of the devotees. His cult is widespread throughout the north-western part of India. According to Captain R. C. Temple “The whole story of Gugga is involved in the greatest obscurity. He is now-a-days one of the chief Muhammedan saints or objects of worship of the lower classes of all sorts. [...] In life he appears to have been a Hindu and a leader of the Chauhan Rajputs against Mahmud of Ghazni about A.D. 1000.”²⁷³ The story takes place in a kingdom called Bagar. According to Temple, “Bagar is usually placed in Bikaner. It was really however a tract, occupied by Chauhan Rajputs mostly, and situated in parts of what is now Gujarat and Mawla.”²⁷⁴ This chapter will be a brief rendering of the Gūgā epic as found in *The Legends of the Panjab* collected by Captain R. C. Temple, which I will compare to the findings of Lapoint. The versions I recorded at my own fieldwork differ to some extent from the tradition as recorded by both of these scholars. I will only briefly mention them in this chapter, as this is meant to acquaint the reader with our hero Gūgā and the Gūgā epic, whereas the versions collected by me form part of the analysis I will present in the next chapter. The reason for me to use the version documented by Temple is simply that it is the only one I have found as a written document with both transliterations and translations of an original oral text, and not just a summary of it. The epic opens with the following lines:

O mother Sarad, thou art great! Blessed by thy worship!
Grant me thy grace! Give me knowledge of poetry!
Give me knowledge of poetry, Mother mine, that I may
 obtain the desires of the heart.²⁷⁵
Thou, Mother art the giver of wisdom, I lay my head at
 thy feet.

Grant me the light of wisdom, that day and night I may
Come and worship thee!
Dwell in my heart and soul, that I may sing the legend
 Of Gūgā

²⁷² Ibid., 283.

²⁷³ Temple, *The legends of the Panjab*, 121.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 122.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

Ah, Mother Shakambhari!
Excellent is thy light!
Saith Bansi Lal, ‘come thou and help!’
Pleasant was the land of Bagar, Jewar was the Rajas
Name
He dwelt ever in the law and never at all committed sin.

And so starts the story of Gūgā, with a brief prayer and a short introduction to the leading man of the act, and the first man to speak his grieving words. There are many occurrences throughout the epic where links are made to mainstream Hindu beliefs, as is seen already in the first sentence where mother Sarad is called upon. She is also known as Saraswati, the goddess of speech and learning. Local traditions tend to link their mythology to pan-Indian traditions. It is a device in folk epic and in temple architecture to relate the regional story or regional deity to classical traditions, while at the same time maintaining their individuality and distinct character.²⁷⁶ Shulman has documented this from a Tamil folk tradition. He also states that “the folk mythology which still exists orally in the area, sometimes preserve ancient elements and motifs more faithfully than the more self-conscious Sanskrit renderings.”²⁷⁷ The different versions of the Gūgā epic make such links to a differing extent. I have not included the entire epic in its original language, but quote below only one verse so as to give the reader an impression of how the poetic language looks like, how it is structured, and which poetic devices are used. Here end rhyme has been used, but differently in the first four and last three lines. The first couplet ends with *-āve*, while the second ends with *-ārā*. The last three lines ends with *-ī*.

It is indeed a tragedy king Jewar and his queen Bāchal are experiencing in the land of Bagar;

King Jewar:

“He prabhūjī! Nā āge sautan: jatan kuchh ban nahīn āve.
Yeh karmoñ kī rekh likhī: ab kaun hatāve?
Nā āge koī putar rāj kā thāmanhārā.
Sochat hūñ din ren: kaun kīnī, Kartārā?
Prabhū, yeh kyā gat kīnī?
Hūā dukh mujh ko bhūrī:

²⁷⁶ See for instance the frontside of the temple of the regional deity Chalda Mahasu which depicts scenes from pan-Indian myths (O. C. Handa, *Art and Temple Architecture of Uttarankhand*, plate 46.

²⁷⁷ David Shulman, “The Murderous Bride: Tamil versions of the myth of Devi and the Buffalo demon”, 121.

Karm rekh balwān, nahīn ṭartī hai ṭārī.”²⁷⁸

”O Lord! I have no offspring to leave, nor have I any resource!
This is the decree of Fate: who shall know withstand it?
I have no son to leave as guardian of the kingdom.
I brood over it day and night, what hast thou done to me, O God?
Lord, what misery is this thou hast caused?
My grief is very great:
The decree of Fate is strong and waits not for postponing”

In a similar fashion, Bāchal, cries out her complaints, asking her husband who he is to blame for this sorrowful situation of theirs. And who is she to blame, she is also the victim of Fate.

Queen Bachhal:

“O lord! I gave no alms: I took not the name of Hari!
Thus I wasted my life: I praised thee not in my heart.
I committed the sins in my former lives: now have they ‘
Come up against me.”

Having poured out their hearts to each other, king Jewar concludes that God is gracious, and “when our fate is accomplished He will Himself call us to pleasure”²⁷⁹ Then, as if having heard their prayers a saint walks into the garden.

The gardener:

“A saint has come into the garden to-day.
He has come into the garden: your faith doth prosper.
Come with me, Raja; hearken to my words.
His beauty is glorious as the glories of the sun.
Visit him and thy sins will be forgiven and thy salvation
will be glorious”

It is no other than Gorakhnāth himself. The queen also hears that the saint has come, and she rushes to the garden to visit him, dressed in all her best. Queen Bāchal describes her pain and agony, that she has not given birth to a son. And Guru Gorakhnāth replies;

“In this illusory world grief is always present.’
My lady, I have nothing to do with this world.
I have nothing to do with this world: the invisible

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 125.

Being, the imperishable
Brahma is he, Bishn is he, Kailash is he of the thousand forms:
Take thou his name: salvation is written down for thee (by fate),
Thou art released from the eighty-four lives
Go to thy palace, lady, why art thou grieving here?”²⁸⁰

The queen goes home, and leaves Gorakhnāth concerned about her worries and despair. Her twin sister Queen Kāchal has by now also heard of the saint who has come to the garden, and how her sister has visited him and asked for a son. Kāchal has not conceived a son either and this is her greatest wish too. She goes to Gorakhnāth the next day, and asks for the same favor as her sister did (pretending to be her), and is sent home in the same manner. Then Bāchal returns again, and is sent away as she was before, but when Kāchal returns Gorakhnāth, who has not seen that these two sisters are not the same, promises Kāchal that she will conceive two sons. He further states that he cannot give sons to everyone who asks.

Here the scene changes again, and it is now Bāchal who is visiting Gorakhnāth giving him a glass of milk, and continuing to ask for the same favor. Gorakhnāth replies by scolding and asking her to leave; he already has given her what she asked for earlier. Bāchal tries to explain the misunderstanding; that some woman has deceived him. He believes her at last, and says;

“Weep not my Queen! Why art always sorrowful?
Go! Thy son will be the Prince Gūgā!
The Prince Gūgā will he be, beautiful, brave, miraculous.
From his very birth shall he work miracles that the
whole world may be his subjects
In every house shall be congratulations throughout the
City: the women shall sing songs of rejoicing.
The woman who deceived me, the deceitful sinner!
She shall die at their birth, very heavy sorrow shall fall
On her.
Twelve years shall their life last. Remember my words.”

The plot of the two sisters where one is deceived by the other is recurring in many oral and classical traditions in South Asia, as I explained and exemplified in chapter three. The queen leaves Gorakhnāth in a joyous state, only to be encountered by the judgments of her family in law. She has repeatedly visited Gorakhnāth, both by day and night, and he has never come inside the palace where others could have seen them. The honour of the Chauhan clan is

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 133.

lost, and nobody believes the innocence of the poor queen. The sister-in-law is the one who confronts her and gets her thrown out of the palace. King Jewar's first reaction is to kill his queen, but as he tries to lift the blade from the scabbard, it refuses through the power of Gorakhnāth. Bāchal is sent away with a bullock-cart to her father's house. On the way, while resting and giving water to the bulls, a snake sneaks up on the animals and bites them, and they die. In despair Bāchal cries till she falls into deep sleep. At this point Gūgā performs his first miracle. He talks to his mother whilst she is asleep, and tells her to break off a branch of a *neem* tree nearby and call for Gorakhnāth. Waking up, she recalls her dream, and does as the unborn Gūgā has told her. And after doing offerings and worshiping Gorakhnāth and the eight types of snakes, the bulls wake up as if nothing has happened.

Bāchal reaches her parents house, and cries out her despair. She explains what has happened. She has by now been pregnant for twelve months. Gūgā then speaks from the womb. He asks Gorakhnāth to take away the sorrow which Bāchal is bearing. He does not want to be born in the house of his maternal grandparents and asks Gorakhnāth to make king Jewar, Gūgā's father, realize the truth. In a dream the king gets the message from Gorakhnāth. After consulting with his minister, and praying to Ganpat (Ganesh), he travels to his in-laws in Ghazni, to get his queen back. A pandit tells him, after having seen some good omens that his son will be a miracle worker, and that he will be born on the eight of *bhadō*, the month of August-September. At the anniversary of his conception the people will sing songs, and use fans of flowers and set up blue standards.²⁸¹ From here on continue a few episodes from Gūgā's life and greatness.

The next great episode in the epic is the marriage of Gūgā and Siriyal. Siriyal is believed to have been the daughter of king Sanja of Kāmrūp in Assam. Siriyal might also be a name for the goddess Saraswati.²⁸² During the period of engagement, king Jewar dies. And Siriyal's father king Sanja concludes that there has only been misfortune in the home to which he is supposed to send his daughter. Therefore he sends a letter to Raja Gūgā, breaking the engagement. This leaves queen Bāchal with even more sorrow and despair. She has lost her husband, and evil rumors about their bad fortune have reached the house of her daughter-in-law-to-be. Gūgā then makes a flute and calls upon Gorakhnāth. While sitting in the forest playing the flute, Gūgā wakes up Bāsak Nāg and all the snakes in this transitory world. Bāsak Nāg is king of the snakes. He sends his servant snake Tatic Nāg to find out who the man with

²⁸¹ Such a blue standard is a tall pole covered with a blue and white striped cloth, and surmounted by peacock feathers. This is a peculiarity of Gūgā's festival, see picture 8-10.

²⁸² Temple, *The Legends of the Panjab*, 169.

the flute is. Receiving the news about Gūgā, and his relation to Gorakhnāth, the snake king decides to do whatever is in his power to help Gūgā in his grief, and he sends Tatic Nāg back to Gūgā to find out what can be done for him. Gūgā explains the situation and that he wants to marry Princess Siriyal from the village of Dhūp Nagar.

Tatic Nāg travels to Dhūp Nagar where he finds Siriyal in the garden with her seven maids. Dressed as an old Brahman priest the snake asks the princess for alms, and she offers him nothing but a dirty ring, which he will not accept. Then the princess starts to dance and sing, and Tatic Nāg sees the opportunity to make his move. He changes form back into a snake, and approaches her from a branch of a tree to bite her, but she escapes. Later on Siriyal and her maids go for a bath in a lake in the garden, and Tatic Nāg again sneaks up on her and bites her. Siriyal falls ill, and the entire kingdom is grieving. The king sends for all kinds of snake charmers, but none of them can help her. Tatic Nāg again takes the form of an old Brahman priest, and offers his help to the king. Before calling upon Gorakhnāth for help he obtains in writing a promise of betrothal and marriage to Gūgā. The marriage shall happen in seven days, which is a very short time for Gūgā to get there. With the help from the snake, however, he is there in a twinkling of an eye together with a procession of Gurus, elephants and carriages so large that king Sanja and the entire kingdom are overwhelmed. In the epic as documented by Lapoint King Sanja demands to possess the greatest gods, if Gūgā is to marry his daughter. And so Gūgā, with help from Gorakhnāth, summons all the greatest deities of the Hindu pantheon; Viśnu, Indra, Ganeśa and so on. This is again an example of how the oral tradition creates links to pan-Indian or classical traditions. The marriage takes place and Gūgā brings his bride back to Dadreva village in Bagar.

The scene changes completely here, and the story continues with Gūgā and his two cousins, the sons bestowed upon queen Kāchal by Gorakhnāth; Surjan and Urjan. Surjan is repeatedly asking both Gūgā and queen Bāchal for half of the kingdom to share between himself and his brother, and Gūgā continues to refuse. Then one day Surjan invites Gūgā to go along with him for hunting in the forest, as this is “natural” for them as Rajput warriors. Gūgā comes along, but only to be ambushed by the two brothers. They draw their swords at him, but Fate saves Raja Gūgā. Gūgā strikes back and beheads Urjan and Surjan. He returns to the village with the heads, and shows them to his mother describing what has happened and the great sin he has committed. She immediately refuses to ever see Gūgā again after this terrible action of his.

Gūgā:

“Bhagwan is my witness that I will never see thee again,
May I live seven lives in Hell if I disobey the command
Of my father and mother!
With joint hands I pray thee, O Mother Earth!
Take me into thyself, or else I will kill myself now!
Or else I will take my own life now. I have no
Friend in the world!
I beseech thee, for death hath encompassed me.
Delay not, but take me today.
I have trice vowed that I shall see my mother (no more).
If thou wilt take the curse (on thee) I will go whither
Thou sends me.
Tell it to me and I will fetch and bring it thee.”

Mother Earth:

“Ah my son, I tell thee, how is it that thou dost not know?
Musalmans are buried below, Hindus go to the pyre.
Hindus go to the pyre, my son, I tell thee.
Go to the Rattan Haji and learn the Musulmans Creed.
When thou hast done this I will take thee to myself.
Siriyaal, Raja Sanja’s child, will curse me.”

The Rattan Haji might be the Sufi saint Khwaja Mu’ainy’ddin Chishti of Ajmer, who flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries. Mother Earth sends Gūgā to Ajmer to worship saint and learn the Muslim Creed. He tells the whole story to the saints in Ajmer, and they teach him the creed. He returns to his home and repeats the creed to Mother Earth who takes him to herself at once.

Sarad, I adore thee; Ganpat, I worship thee.
I have finished the whole legend of Gūgā; be ye my salvation.
Be thou my salvation, Mother (sarad). I have fulfilled
My desire.
From the day I worshipped thee, thou hast shown me
The forgotten verses
In the seven climes and the nine quarters thou art not
Fathomed
Saith Bansi Lal, Mother, I have finished the Gūgā’s legend.
Mother, be my help.
That art sung in the four Vedas,
To him who worships thee
Grant eternal knowledge, Great Mother!

Comparing the Gūgā legends

And so ends this version of the Gūgā legend. There are, however many local variations as to how this legend goes, and how to interpret the various incidents. “Thematic continuities may be identified between cultural performances representative of different communities, different regions, and different levels of traditions. These continuities provide crucial evidence of an ongoing process of cultural communication.”²⁸³ “Cultural patterns vary in geographical scope”²⁸⁴ argues Elwyn C. Lapoint in an article on the epic tradition of Gūgā. The point is that the cultural traditions of India vary in the extent to which they are geographically spread. Some are confined to a local community; others are multi-local, regional or even of national importance. Lapoint has documented the Gūgā tradition from a village in UP where it seems to be popular mainly amongst a Hindu community. In this version of the Gūgā legend many of the deities of mainstream Hindu pantheon are included, as we shall see below.

The epic as described by Lapoint includes some variants to the one introduced above. Lapoint claims that over time “differences have arisen between various local traditions concerning his [Gūgā’s] career”. The version which is referred to throughout this article reveals mostly the Hindu aspect of Gūgā; many figures that also are part of the Sanskrit epics occur. Such cross references includes the scene where Gūgā is sent into exile by his mother after killing his two cousins. Siriyal does not want Gūgā to go by himself and refers to the Rāmāyaṇa where Sita accompanies her husband Rām in exile. Gūgā still leaves her behind with her in-laws. Another link with pan-Indian traditions is found when Gūgā travels to fetch his bride, but has to bring the entire Hindu pantheon to persuade King Sanja to give his daughter away.

The Gūgā epic has four main segments; pre-birth and birth, marriage, the battle with the cousins, and exile and *samādhi*. In most cases local traditions seem to vary, but not so much in connection with the pre-birth and birth scenes. In this first part the variants are mainly based on how elaborate they are, on the locations of the meetings of Gorakhnāth and Queen Bāchal, on the travel from Bagar to the village of Bāchal’s father’s house, and so on. In all versions I have encountered, Gorakhnāth plays a significant role, queen Bāchal is deceived by her sister Kāchal (a motif which I explained in chapter three), she is sent away from the kingdom due to her meetings with Gorakhnāth, and she is brought back home prior to giving birth after an unnaturally long pregnancy. I will especially emphasize the last part of

²⁸³ Elwyn C. Lapoint, “The epic of Guga”, 282.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 283.

the epic concerning Gūgā's death, as this is the scene which is most relevant for understanding the Hindu-Muslim compositeness of Gūgā.

As we saw in the episode as found in the *Legends of the Panjab*, Gūgā had to say out the Muslim creed if he wanted Mother Earth to open up for him. According to the legends as recorded by Lapoint, Gūgā was sent into exile by his mother after he had decapitated his cousins' heads. This is a theme which is found also in the classical Sanskrit epic Rāmāyaṇa. Gūgā's wife told him that she would either accompany him or die. Here Sirial recites the Rāmāyaṇa passage where Sita accompanies Rām into exile. But Gūgā leaves without her, and he also wants to leave behind his blue, flying horse, but the horse complains, and in the end Gūgā decides that the wife has to stay back, but the horse he will need. In this version Gūgā dwells with Gorakhnāth in Kajali Forest. After twelve years, he still has not returned and Sirial therefore decides to commit suicide. Gorakhnāth realizes this through meditation and informs Gūgā who immediately returns to his wife, another incident where Gorakhnāth comes to our hero's rescue. Gūgā begins to visit Sirial by night, without his mother knowing this. This goes on for twelve more years before Queen Bāchal gets suspicious. She asks her daughter in law, who earlier had promised Gūgā not to tell anything, but Sirial cannot keep the secret for long. One night Bāchal sneaks up on Gūgā as he is to depart from the castle, he sees her and tries to escape, but she runs after him and grips the horse's tail. Gūgā covers his face with a cloth and continues to ride away, as his mother still holds on to the tail. She begs him to return home, but he replies that he will not return as she sent him into exile all those years back. Bāchal loses her grip on the horse, and Gūgā invokes Gorakhnāth who again appears when needed. Gūgā requests that the earth opens before him so that he might perform *samādhi* (voluntary live burial). And on the back of his blue horse Nila, Gūgā rides through the night and the earth opens up before him, and buries him alive. Rumors of the great event spread as fire in dry grass, and suddenly it is known also by the king of Delhi, who earlier in this version of the epic has seen the greatness of Gūgā and promised him to construct a memorial at the site of *Samadhi* which is believed by my informants to be situated in the temple of Gūgā in Gūgā Medhi, Hanumangarh district. After his death Gūgā continues to perform miraculous acts in favor of those who venerate him.

During my fieldwork I met some people who presented to me another, more mundane version of the death of Gūgā, which in short terms goes like this; Gūgā was a great warrior hero at the time when Mahmud of Ghazni was raiding North India. Gūgā was a Hindu of the Kshatriya caste, and he was known for his great skills in battle. After having defeated

Mahmud of Ghazni, this Muslim warrior returned next year, and Gūgā was decapitated on the battlefield while sitting on the back of his blue horse. After his death he became known for his great warrior skills, and a memorial site was built in his honor. During fieldwork in Gūgā Medhi in Rajasthan August 2009, I encountered many variations as to how this legend ended and I will return to them in the next chapter.

Gūgā epic in context of folk and classical traditions

According to Claus Peter Zoller it is important “for an appropriate evaluation of oral folk traditions to see them in the context of other South Asian folk traditions.”²⁸⁵ Further he emphasises that one ought not to exaggerate the relationship with classical traditions, but balance what he refers to as the ‘vertical’ and the ‘horizontal’ dimensions of these relationships. Vertical dimensions are found when folk epics and classical epics are compared with each other. Even though the epic of Gūgā contains many episodes and themes that have parallels with the classical epics of Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, one also needs to focus on the similarities with other folk traditions, which is the horizontal dimension. There are however a variety of local folk versions of the classical epics. The epic of Gūgā is not a version of one of the classical epics, but still there are many themes and plots that reoccur in the epic of Gūgā which are also found in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa of classical Sanskrit epic traditions. Lapoint connects in this context the themes within the Gūgā mythology with the mythology found in Sanskrit classics like the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata.²⁸⁶ He is not the only one to have traced the connections of local and oral epic traditions with the traditions of a pan-Indian Sanskritic character, as I also pointed out in chapter three. Kathryn Hansen states that “A recent collection of essays on Indian folklore examines the connections between the categories of “folk” and “classical”, noting overlapping themes, rhetorical strategies, and psychological dynamics.”²⁸⁷ And in his work *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics* Alf Hiltebeitel claims that “each of these oral epics “rethinks” one of the classical epics”.²⁸⁸ The aim of Elwyn C. Lapoint is “to demonstrate that the general thematic correspondences exist between Sanskrit mythology and non-Sanskrit mythology of the Hindu villager”, by examining the oral epic tradition of Gūgā in North-western India. I will only briefly point to

²⁸⁵ Claus Peter Zoller, “On the Relationship between Folk and Classical Traditions in South Asia”, 83.

²⁸⁶ Elwyn C. Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga”, in Sylvia Vatuk (ed.) *American Studies in the Anthropology of India*, 1978, 283.

²⁸⁷ Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for play*, 1991, 43.

²⁸⁸ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics*, 7.

some of these connections to give a better foundation to the figure of Gūgā in the North Indian epic context.

“The symbiotic bond between ruler and priest (or sage) is dramatized in the classical literature and sanctioned in traditional law.”²⁸⁹ In addition, this part of the myth where the marriage of Gūgā and Siriyal takes place explores the family roles and kinship ties. The relationship between Gūgā and his mother is one filled with tension. This is a relationship which is often idealized in other legends and myths. According to Lapoint the Gūgā epic therefore represents a more realistic picture of family life in South Asia.²⁹⁰ “Despite the closeness and tenderness of the typical mother-son bond, and despite its importance in Indian social organization, the potential for friction between the two clearly exists.”²⁹¹ The marriage between Gūgā and Sirial can compromise the relationship between Gūgā and Bāchal, and she is not willing to accept the marriage before it is actually done. According to Lapoint, the Gūgā epic is very popular amongst Hindu women because of its realistic presentation of the mother-daughter in-law relationship of Bāchal and Sirial.²⁹² With regards to the relationship between Gūgā and his father in law, king Sanja/Sindhya there are also issues. The father of Siriyal is concerned with family status, and is not willing to give his daughter’s hand to someone as little impressive as Gūgā. Only when Gūgā is accompanied by Gorakhnāth who has used his powers to summon all the great deities of Hindu tradition; Indra, Viśnu, Śiva, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and so on, he agrees to the marriage. The version as documented by Lapoint is a rather Hinduized version of the Gūgā epic, in contrast to the epic as recorded by Temple. The prestige of the family is important in the everyday life of the audience as well, and the epic reflects this.

Themes and motifs in the epic of Gūgā that correspond to the classical epics are according to Lapoint; “exile, reincarnation, filial loyalty, family conflict, the martial ideal, and the dialectic of sacred and secular power.”²⁹³ Other correspondences are the twin sister story, the quarrel between Gūgā and his two cousins about the kingdom, which is found also in the Mahābhārata between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The death of Gūgā resembles the death of Sita (being swallowed by Mother Earth), and Gorakhnāth’s repeated interventions are also found in the Mahābhārata where Vyas time and again intervenes in the ongoing plots. In the versions as recorded by me many of the just-mentioned links to mainstream Hinduism are not

²⁸⁹ Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga”, 295.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 296.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga”, 297.

²⁹³ Ibid., 305.

found. They do for instance not show any connections with the deities of mainstream Hinduism. Neither goes Gūgā into exile. Still the family conflicts are a prominent theme here as well. Lapoint claims that the reason for the strong appeal of the Gūgā epic is its quality to present characters and roles that the audience can identify with. This may very well be, simultaneously, as we shall see in the next chapter the super-human powers of Gūgā have come to include a lot more than the curing of snake bites.

There are many ways in which to classify oral epics; either with regard to conflict: martial, sacrificial and romantic oral epics; or with regard to structure: single story and multiple story epic traditions. Some are called historical oral epics, which according to Hildebeitel is unsatisfactory as it “begs the question of history”. I do unfortunately not have the experience with oral epics as to discuss these categories to any significant extent here, and will therefore only refer to the epic of Gūgā as a regional martial oral epic. It is a heroic epic telling the story of the warrior-hero Gūgā, at the same time Gūgā has from the very beginning, prior to his birth, super-human and divine powers and a particularly strong bond to the yogi Gorakhnāth. I see very little resemblance between the epic of Gūgā and the folk romances of India, like for instance Padmāvat. Even though the epic includes a large section describing the marriage to Sirial, and describing how Gūgā is in despair when this betrothal is broken off, the legend never describes any longing or great love from Gūgā’s side towards his wife. Gūgā wants this marriage to happen, but more so because it has been revealed to him in a dream. The epic seems to be more concerned with honour and pride, with the greatness of the hero and his relationship to sacred power. Gūgā gets his bride, but he pursues other interests than to sit around entertaining his wife, and when the day comes when he is sent into exile, he does not want the company of Sirial, and moreover forgets to return when the time of exile has passed.

In the epic as recorded by Lapoint the Muslim version is mentioned with regards to how the epic tradition has changed according to local traditions; “some villagers maintain that Gūgā converted to Islam before his death”²⁹⁴. As seen in the version from Punjab, he was given the choice by Mother Earth to say the Muslim creed, which he did. Whereas Briggs points out that there is “A bit of record [that] strangely states that he [Gorakhnāth] was the foster father and the teacher of Muhammad; and another fragment reports him as having taught Gūgā the Muslim creed.”²⁹⁵ At the festival in Gūgā Medhi Mela I did not come across

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 284.

²⁹⁵ Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphata Yogīs*, 181.

these versions as mentioned by Briggs, but I encountered different versions of Gūgā's death, and they were interpreted by the devotees in differing manners as we shall see in the following chapter. We have seen so far that the Gūgā Epic does not narrate a story of a man that worked intentionally for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation, still as we shall see in the next chapter he is by representatives of point one in the triangle interpreted a symbol and a promoter of Hindu-Muslim unity. At the festival in Northern Rajasthan it was not only the Muslim devotees that claimed Gūgā to have cried out the Muslim creed to escape his mother, but also some of the Hindus. It seemed as though the religious identities here were not that sharp, and that it did not always matter whether Gūgā was a Hindu or Muslim when he passed away, but rather that he possessed the powers to assist them in times of need.

Chapter seven: Gūgā Medhi Melā – composite culture in practice

Every fall in the end of the monsoon there takes place both small and large festivals in veneration of the deity, saint and hero Gūgā scattered over north and north western India. People do pilgrimage from their home villages and towns to participate in the celebrations. To visit a major Gūgā temple, most preferably in Rajasthan is regarded the most auspicious way to venerate Gūgā. The festival in Gūgā Medhi in Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan, visited by me, was perhaps one of the largest of this kind, at least according to those who arranged it. It lasts for a month every fall, and includes a celebration of the birthday of Gūgā: Gūgā *Navamī* which comes the day after *Kṛṣṇa Aṣṭamī*, the birthday of Kṛṣṇa, which also is celebrated during the festival. These two days are the most auspicious days to visit the temples of Gūgā and Gorakhnāth. It is impossible to estimate any exact number of visitors that came here in 2009 during the one-month long celebration of Gūgā's life, death, and birthday. I tried to ask several of my informants how many visitors had come here during this month, and I always got answers like this one from the government official at duty;

Narayan Singh: “Actually, millions of people are coming here, that's why this melā is called a ‘lākhī’ melā, lākhī means lākh, and you know lākh?” (One lākh is 100 000)

My informants varied as to how many devotees showed up, but according to them there were numbers between 1 and 5 lākh people who entered the main shrine each day. Another estimate was 20 lākh during the entire month. It is hard to relate to these numbers as the arrangers seemed to be concerned with giving me an impression of the festival as the largest one of its kind. They also stressed the great work they did with the arrangements, how everything was free of cost for the devotees. Time and again they emphasised the measures they had taken to make people be as comfortable as possible, but simultaneously in a very apparent manner they mocked and discriminated the devotees who mostly came from a low-caste background, as I mentioned in chapter three. People mostly came from Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat, and Delhi, but also from states further away like Maharashtra and Bihar.

The festival took place in the area of a small village Gūgā Medhi in Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan. The village had normally approximately a population of 3000 inhabitants, but exploded during the weeks prior to, under and after the festival. The cult of

Gūgā (Gugga, Goga, or Gogo) has a long tradition throughout North and North-Western India. According to Elwyn C. Lapoint “Locally, the cult of Gūgā is presided over by a small coterie of devotees or bhagats. These *bhagats* encourage the popular worship of Gūgā in their respective villages, receive alms on his behalf, conduct related rituals, and play a leading role in disseminating the myths associated with Gūgā’s career.”²⁹⁶ Lapoint continues, “It is not uncommon to find members of the yogi caste serving in this capacity. Their claim to a special aptitude for the office rests on a mythical association between Gūgā and a particular school of yogis (or jogis) led by Guru Gorakhnāth.”²⁹⁷ In Gūgā Medhi there were two separate temples, one for Gūgā another for Gorakhnāth, or for the Nine Nāths. It is not unusual to find Nāth temples in near proximity to those of Gūgā. These two temples were at the same time independent of and connected to each other. Gorakhnāth is according to myth regarded as Gūgā’s guru. The relationship between these two is also one between a king and a sage. They are in a reciprocal relationship to each other; Gorakhnāth acts as the spiritual adviser of Gūgā, while Gūgā offers his mentor royal patronage, a relationship that seemed to be somehow transferred to the relationship between these two temples in Gūgā Medhi.

“A devotee’s vocation is validated through pilgrimage to a major Gūgā shrine, particularly one in Gūgā’s home territory in Rajasthan.”²⁹⁸ There seems though to exist disagreement where Gūgā actually came from, and which shrine is the real *samādhi*. My informants were convinced that the shrine at Gūgā Medhi in Rajasthan was where Gūgā was buried, either as an act of *samādhi* (live burial, swallowing by earth) or by reciting the Muslim creed. According to my informants the village Gūgā came from, Dadreva, was situated about 60 kilometres away. The ritual paraphernalia of the Gūgā worship further include use of a *cabuk*; an iron whip which the devotees use to confer the blessings of Gūgā on themselves. According to Lapoint this whip is used symbolically,²⁹⁹ if by that he means that the worshipers do not actually hit themselves with it, I must disagree because of my own experiences in Gūgā Medhi. Here yogis approached the priest and bent down before his feet and tossed this heavy instrument over their backs, and waited for the priest’s blessings. According to G. W. Briggs “Gūgā’s whip is prominent. This consists of a ring, from which

²⁹⁶ Lapoint, “The Epic of Guga”, 284f.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 285.

hang five iron-chain lashes to which are attached iron discs at intervals. Under special circumstances a bhagat lashes himself with two or these whips, one in each hand.”³⁰⁰

Another symbol that appears in Gūgā ritualism is the *charī, niśan* (staff, standard), which is a long bamboo pole, covered with cloth in bright colours or blue and white stripes, and the top is covered with peacock feathers.³⁰¹ This pole is carried from the point of departure of the pilgrim/devotee and right up to the entrance to the *samādhi*, where it is made to touch the outer walls of the shrine, before it is handed over to an employee of the temple who takes it out of the temple. According to some of my informants these poles are plucked to pieces that are sold separately after a month. Briggs states that “Among the things necessary for the worship of Gūgā is the ‘flag,’ which consists of a bamboo twenty or thirty feet in length, surmounted by a circle of peacock feathers, and decorated with fans and flags and cocoanuts, done up in cloth. At the fairs men who are called ‘Zahra Pir’s horses’ carry these ‘flags.’ The poles are also kept at home by some persons and are used in special sacrifices. They are sometimes carried from house to house in August and then the owners receive alms.”³⁰² It is rather likely that the poles in Gūgā Medhi were brought back home by the devotees, after being charged with blessings of Gūgā at the temple. In the entire month of *Bhādō* (August/September) Gūgā is venerated, but particularly his birthday seems to be the auspicious time to visit his shrines.

The legend of Gūgā’s death is quite central to the whole idea of his joint Hindu-Muslim nature, and also to his either Hindu or Muslim nature. According to Briggs “The saint Gūgā Pir, or Zahra Pir, was born a Hindu; but he afterwards turned Mussulman, in order that he might enter the interior of the earth and bring the snake kingdom under his control. [...] He is worshipped to prevent snake bite and cases where persons have been bitten by poisonous snakes or by scorpions.”³⁰³ As I emphasized in the last chapter on the legends of Gūgā, there are many versions coming from different localities, religious or caste backgrounds, which emphasize different aspects of the saint. Let us recall the final hour of our hero’s life (in most of the epic variants); Gūgā cries out to Mother Earth for her to swallow him. According to *The legends of the Panjab* she refuses at first, claiming that Muslims are buried, while Hindus go to the pyre. Then she sends Gūgā to Ajmer to learn the Muslim creed, and only then can she do as he wishes. According to my fieldwork notes there are four versions of this story;

³⁰⁰ George W. Briggs, *The Chamars*, 1920, 152.

³⁰¹ See Appendix for photos number 8-10.

³⁰² Briggs, *The Chamars*, 151-152.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 151.

Version One; Gūgā wanted to go inside the Earth, but the Earth denied. Then, as a miracle Gūgā knew the Muslim creed, which he spoke, and the Earth opened up to him, and swallowed him while he was sitting on his blue horse.

Version Two; Gūgā wanted to go inside Earth, and he did, riding on his blue horse into the earth as it opened up to him.

Version Three; Gūgā wanted to go inside Earth, and was told by the Earth to say the Muslim creed. He attempted at this, but he was only able to pronounce half of the creed, and the Earth still swallowed him, while he was sitting on his blue horse. Or she swallowed half of him and his horse, leaving his body from the waist and up above earth.

Version Four; Gūgā was a warrior hero before anything else. The temple here is his grave, where he was buried after he was killed in a battle, in which he was decapitated.

Those who believe him to be a Hindu retell his legends with versions that underline his Hindu affiliation; he never converted to Islam, he never called out the creed, not even parts of it. Their legends contain more references to classical Indian epics in form of the pan-Indian gods which are interpolated. The roles of the figures are in accordance with patterns of Hindu ideals. Those who believe him to be a Muslim ask how would he otherwise have been buried, or why would mother earth have opened up to him; here the figures of the classical Hindu epics are not central; and anyhow they have a proof in form of a family lineage which has been continued until today³⁰⁴. There are though disagreement upon whether he converted or if the family converted some generations after his death. Finally there is the understanding of the larger part of those involved with Gūgā; the common devotees. I got a strong impression that they do not exclude each other as Hindu or Muslim, or each other's versions of Gūgā's history.

All of these approaches and attitudes are present at Gūgā Medhi Melā. Here I will go deeper into the actions, the utterances and experiences that met me at the fieldwork in August 2009. I will again remind the reader of the triangular approach to composite culture I suggested in the introduction, and emphasis that none of the three elements stands on their own with regards to a comprehensive understanding of composite culture. What can be said immediately is that Gūgā is in many ways not one figure; he is many. To those who forward composite culture as a normative tolerant better, he is a symbol or apostle of Hindu-Muslim

³⁰⁴ See Appendix for photo number 12.

unity and harmony. To those who do not appreciate this former approach he is entirely Hindu or Muslim, and to the common devotees, whether Hindu or Muslim, he is a saint that provides assistance in times when needed regardless of religious affiliation, and to them the normative approach as seen in point one is close to irrelevant as they don't need to be told to respect each other; it is just how it is.

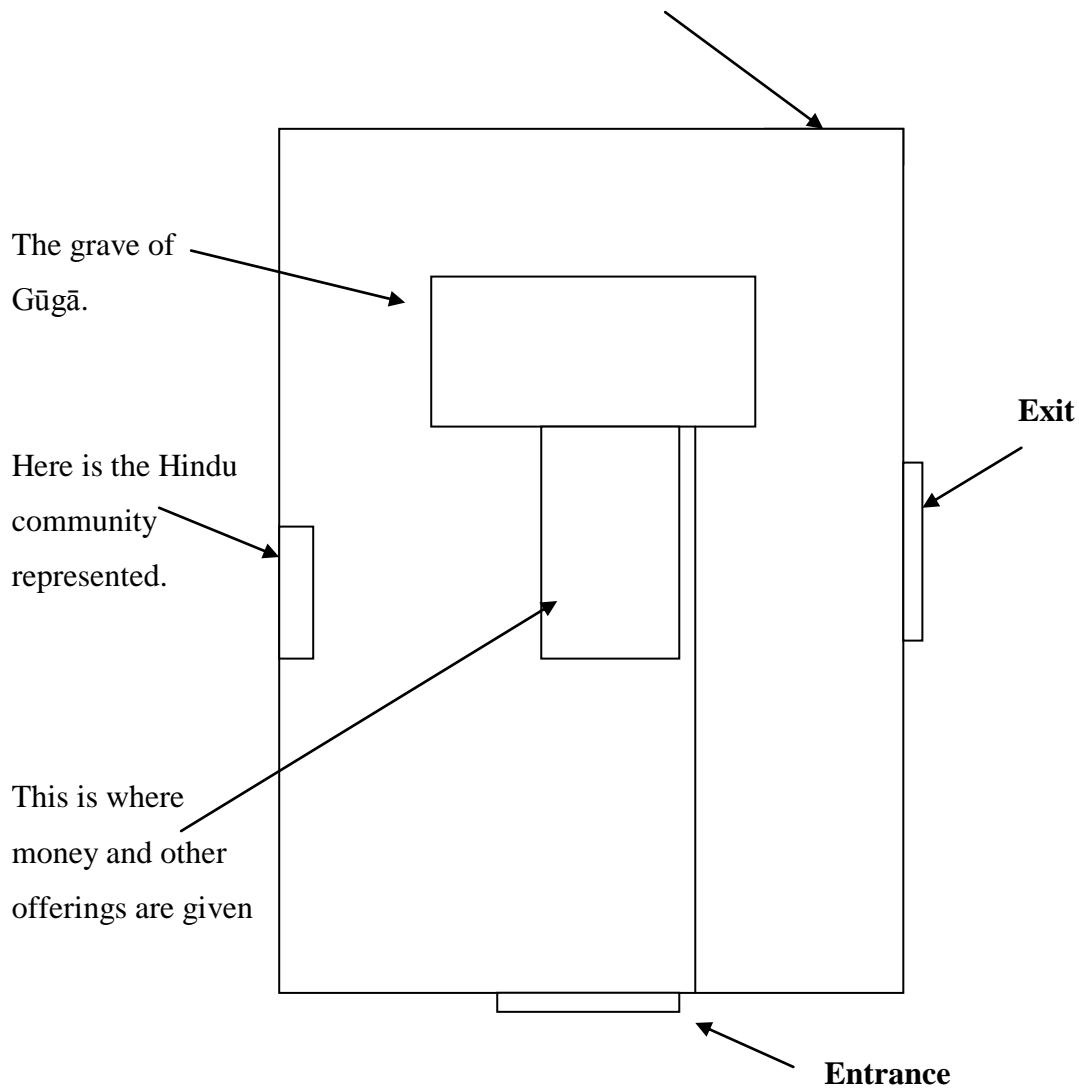
The Gūgā Temple

What was remarkable at the Gūgā temple was the way it actually was interpreted by Hindus and Muslims. But Gūgā as a hero of a popular culture can at the same time be seen to stand independent of these two traditions. Most of the devotees identified themselves as either Hindu or Muslim, and they told separate versions of the legend of Gūgā where the final scene, his death, either expresses his Hindu or Muslim identity. Others, however, told a legend in which Gūgā tried to pronounce the Muslim creed, but stopped half-way. Therefore he is by them understood to be both a Hindu and a Muslim, or that he rejected both Hindu and Islamic traditions. These informants did not claim Gūgā to belong to only one of these established traditions, but to be a saint independent of them. For some of them he was actually a symbol of togetherness, and a saint who provided help to everyone regardless of religious affiliation. They found his temple to be extraordinary, since Gūgā had both a Hindu and a Muslim Pūjārī (priest) to serve him in the temple. The Pūjārī functions as “priest” who has responsibility for the rituals and the devotees in the temple. There is no corresponding word in Islam, and therefore the Muslim priest was called by his sub-caste name Chāyal and the title Pūjārī.

Within the temple, there are throughout the year one Hindu Brahman Pūjārī and a Muslim Chāyal Pūjārī. In the outer room surrounding the grave each one has an “office”, and they both have seats within the grave chamber, and each tradition is represented by a candlelight, in case the priests are not present - the lights, though, burn anyhow. Once inside the temple the devotees first come directly into the room with the marble casket, and walk in a clockwise direction around it, while they offer different objects. The following illustration is of the room of Gūgā's grave³⁰⁵:

³⁰⁵ See photo 3-7 in the Appendix.

Here is the Muslim community represented.



Mostly different sized rupee notes are thrown in front of the casket, but rice and sweets are also offered. On the right wall the candle representing the Hindu community is placed, while the light representing the Muslims is placed on the backside in the corner. The devotees show their respect towards these lights, or the priests if they are there, before they circled the grave. While circling they touch the grave with their hands, and smeared some cloth, saris or handkerchiefs, towards the marble top which is covered with a dusty layer of burnt down incense. Approaching the shrine some of the devotees bends down and touches the ground or steps with their hands and foreheads for each step they walk. The room of the shrine has two doors; one entrance and one exit, which lead out to the outer temple where photos and illustrations of Gūgā and his horse are placed.

Gūgā Jī – a symbol of Hindu - Muslim harmony

As I have pointed out above the topic of Hindu-Muslim composite culture has become an important discourse in literature and politics of South Asia, as represented in point one of the triangle. Through its emphasis on tolerance, Hindu-Muslim unity, togetherness and interest shown in each other's cultures from the time of Muslim advent in India, it works as a counterargument against the communal tension and religious nationalism that has overshadowed South Asian politics in modern times. However bright and positive this glorification of Hindu-Muslim togetherness might be, it tends to rewrite history to benefit its own purposes, as many other ideologies do. In discourse on composite emphasis is laid on the peaceful periods of Hindu-Muslim history prior to British Colonial power. This has been discussed in the literature, and my intension is now to show that this approach to composite culture was very much evident at the festival in Gūgā Medhi, even though Gūgā does not have any relevance on a national level in this regard, as opposed to Kabīr. And even though there are little evidence found in the oral epic tradition to support that Gūgā ever promoted or worked for the cause of Hindu-Muslim reconciliation. It was particularly amongst the group of informants that I have labelled the arrangers; people who were clearly familiar with the concept of composite culture, that this understanding was eminent.

This aspect or approach became visible in the impact it had had on my informants, who were familiar the notion of Hindu-Muslim tolerance from Indian politics and scholarship. And even though Gūgā has not got nearly the significance within this approach as Kabīr does, being just a regional folk hero/saint, the arrangers recognized this aspect within this cult, and claimed Gūgā to be a national symbol of unity and togetherness. It really seemed as though the discourse on composite culture had reached its goals to have an impact on the population, and thereby challenge the discourse of religious nationalist movements and parties. I spent two days with the government official Narayan Singh and the chief of police at Gūgā Medhi Melā Ismail Khan. We discussed the situation of communalism and composite culture:

Katarina: “What is the situation of communalism and communal harmony in contemporary India?”

Narayan Singh: “This time communal harmony is totally established in India. Common people are not thinking about the communalism. People have no tension about the communalism. Some bad elements or bad leaders are thinking about

communalism, and acting for their personal interest. They are using the people in the name of community. They want to fulfill their own interests, only.”

We discussed this theme in relation to the festival and the figure of Gūgā. When I asked Mr. Singh what he thought about Gūgā, he simply said this:

Narayan Singh: “Actually my knowledge regarding Gūgā Jī is not too much. Actually I am a government official here, posted at Bolari in Hanumangarh district. Nor is my headquarter here. At Gūgā Medhi I am doing a magister duty. A magister duty for loyal order purpose and all the arrangement for government side for the people who are coming here. Like drinking water facility, medical facility, or other things”

Narayan Singh was positioned at Gūgā Medhi Festival, and as such he had responsibility for the practical arrangements at the festival. Still he had some reflections over the figure of Gūgā, and similar figures representative for composite culture, and it became clear that when he said he did not know about Gūgā, he simply meant that he was not a devotee himself.

Narayan Singh: “Gūgā Pīr, or Gūgā Jī, and many other people or saints in India, like Rāmdev, Babu Jī, Golu Babu Jī, Jambo Jī, worked for communal harmony in India in the 11th or 12th century. Then Muslim population had already settled in India this time. And from 11th-17th century Muslims were rulers. They ruled India. Then the British came to India, and they ruled here. The communalism did not exist between Hindus and Muslims prior to this. Communalism was introduced to India in 1857, when India fought their first war for independence. Before that Muslims and Hindus, the mass of India, were living together in India very peacefully. Gūgā Jī is a symbol of communal harmony in India.”

From this statement it is clear how history prior to British influence is idealised as one where Hindu and Muslim communities lived in perfect harmony, and where there were no arguments of conflicts between them; typical characteristic of point one in the triangle. During the conversation we continued to talk about the temple with regards to the Hindu-Muslim composite culture. There were many men inside the office, and I never got to learn all

of their occupations or names. Dr. Suthar, the journalist employed at the Gorakhnāth temple, had joined us, and listened to the monologue of the government official regarding the composite nature of Gūgā Jī, looking at us with scepticism; suddenly he shot in a comment;

Dr. Suthar: “The temple is Hindu!”

Office clerk: “The Muhammedan *Chāyal* priest is sitting at the bed corner³⁰⁶ of Gūgā Jī, to the right. The Hindu Brahman priest is sitting by the *dīpak* (candle light) to the left. Two different religions, two different priests in one temple, Gūgā Jī is a god belonging to all religions and castes. I mean mostly related to the Muhammedans, while temple is mostly related to the Hindus, but Gūgā Jī is for all. The candles are blowing all year continuously. It is the only temple in India, perhaps on an international level as well, where there are both Hindu and Muslim priest at the same time“.

The reply came from a young man from the village Gūgā Medhi, who had a close relationship to the temple all year around. He knew the people employed at the Gūgā temple, and seemed to participate in ceremonies and discussions there. There was always present both a Hindu and a Muslim priest there. The two priests were good friends, and had regular discussions over the background of Gūgā and his composite nature, at the same time as both of them claimed him to belong to their own religious traditions.

Gūgā Vīr – Hinduizing a popular tradition

Throughout its history composite culture has met forces that opposed it; a strong representative for this is religious nationalism, or religious revivalist movements that evolved during the 1800s.³⁰⁷ This opposition to composite culture was evident also at the festival in Gūgā Medhi. Its strongest representative seemed to be the journalist Dr. Suthar, who I presented in the chapter on methodology. Still the picture is not that black and white. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Suthar a few months after the festival, when I came back to Gūgā Medhi to see the temple in a calmer situation. At this point he revealed a much more moderate attitude towards composite culture than what he showed during the festival. Anyway, as he

³⁰⁶ I do not know why he used the term bed-corner for the corner of the grave of Gūgā, I have not come across similar utterances, and it might be a matter of language confusion.

³⁰⁷ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 2003.

was an important contact and informant during the festival, and gave his opinions on Gūgā, I feel the necessity to include his reflections here.

Dr. Suthar was employed at the Gorakhnāth temple, situated opposite of the Gūgā temple in Gūgā Medhi. He was a journalist at the local newspaper, and had a doctor degree in yoga. Dr. Suthar was not of the opinion that Gūgā was a saint, but entirely a warrior hero who had fought Mahmud of Ghazni. His death was by no means mystical or super-human, but merely Gūgā fell in battle, he was decapitated and buried in a marble casket in the temple which was built to venerate his great powers in war right after his death. In other words it was nothing superhuman or godly about him.

In cooperation with the Nāths of the Gorakhnāth temple and others working at different temples throughout Rajasthan and Gujarat, Dr. Suthar was involved in a project that wanted to discover the true history and Hindu philosophy of Gūgā Vīr. According to Dr. Suthar Gūgā never converted to Islam; this he considered to be rubbish, rumours, a Muslim version of the legend that had confused a large part of the population, and resulted in the name of Gūgā Vīr to become Gūgā Pīr over time. Extensive research was being done on his part to discover and spread the true story and message of Gūgā. During a conversation he stated the following

Dr. Suthar: “We are doing research, for the sake of all the arriving devotees. It is for them we do research on Gūgā Jī. Who was the actual Gūgā Jī? And his actual history, what was that? History was converted. (history convert kar diyā gayā) Next year is our book published, with the actual history and philosophy of Gūgā Jī. (agle sāl hamārā issue āegā, ismē Gūgā Jī ke actual history aur philosophy haī). India does not know the actual history of Gūgā Jī. The people *here* do not understand it. In the Indian political conditions the Gūgā Jī history converted. It is like that. We do not want any PHD on Gūgā Jī. It is our work, for the knowledge of the entire country, for the devotees of Gūgā. Those who are his devotees do not know the real him. We want them to know the real history, that’s why we are working. I used to be a teacher in the Government of Rajasthan, but I resigned, joined journalism, and Gūgā Jī attracts me, as he does you (Gūgā Jī ne mujhe ākarṣit diyā, jaise āpko), and I am sacrificing my life for the real knowledge of him.”

We were sitting in the office of Dr Suthar during this conversation. The room was about 15 square meters, and people and left with errands. It did not seem as if they all agreed to the speech of the journalist. On the walls he had two very distinct motifs. On the one side there was a large poster of Gūgā and the Nine Nāths, while on the wall behind his desk there was almost something like a small shrine where Gūgā and Golvalkar and Hegdevar (the founders of RSS) were depicted on two separate photos right next to each other. According to Dr. Suthar Gūgā had preached a fourfold Hindu philosophy:

- 1) Unity of nation
- 2) Providing the Hindu *darshan* to the world
- 3) Social reform
- 4) Cow movement

It was this Gūgā Dr. Suthar and his colleagues wanted the world to know. Dr. Suthar could not see that this theory could pose historical challenges. Throughout the fieldwork, whenever I was accompanied by Dr. Suthar he strived at leading me away from anything that did not confirm his vision. Passing the stands selling pamphlets and items he guided me away, claiming “this is not scientific, this is not the real history of Gūgā Vīr”. I explained to him that the pamphlets and the “common people”, as he called them, too were important to my research which was more concerned with the cult of the devotees present. Still, he emphasized the importance of learning the history correctly, as I would do if I only listened to him. My intension was to interview as diverse people as possible and I made that clear to Dr. Suthar. His intension, though, seemed to be to only point out parts of the festival that verified his own views and visions, which was the Hinduness of Gūgā Jī. For one day I was his guest, and I accepted his tour guide around the area, even though it meant that I was not introduced to any Muslim devotees, rather guided away from them. I tried to ask initially, as I knew this to be a festival where Hindus and Muslims should be present, and he replied “yes, there are some Muslims here, but not so many, most of those who are here come here to sell things like bangles”. During the day with Dr. Suthar I was shown around the Gūgā temple, introduced to the Hindu Pūjārī, and to some Hindu devotees. Thereafter I was taken to a cow hospital or home, which was started only recently by the Gorakhnāth and Gūgā temples.

Gūgā Jī – an effective god

As I mentioned in chapter three I came to Gūgā Medhi Melā with a presupposition that there would somehow be a form of composite culture based on tolerance and unity. My assumptions were based on a variety of literature on the subject; works directly concerned with the composite culture and works on figures like Kabīr and Bulleh Shah, the Panjabi Sūfī poet. I had actually found very little literature on Gūgā, and knew only some general facts of his legend, of his connections to snake worship, and his popularity amongst Hindu and Muslim communities alike. I was rather astounded when I realised that the snake aspect of this figure seemed to have the least relevance for the devotees who were devotees at the Gūgā Medhi Melā.

It was during the second day at the festival that I for the first time had the chance to communicate with the devotees of Gūgā. Everywhere people were on the move. They were dressed in yellow clothes, and moved between the temples and the small shops selling Gūgā effects. I did not know how to reach them. The weather was sunny, hot, and occasionally a breeze ran through the sandy knolls making the skin burn even more. Here and there small spots of shadow occurred; in the shades of concrete walls, underneath a dried out tree, or inside a local *dhābā* or *lassī* shop; and it was here I had the chance to get to know the devotees who became my informants. At a concrete platform underneath a tree a crowd had gathered. One of the families sitting there had come from Haryana, but some of them lived in Gurgaon. They had arrived early in the morning and were going to stay at the Melā for two more days. Four generations of the family gathered here every year, even though the last generation consisted of a new born child. They were Hindus, and they used the name Gūgā Pīr. I had been corrected by Dr. Suthar several times before regarding this epithet Pīr, and therefore asked them if they had any opinion on his name; whether *Vīr* or *Pīr* was the correct use. It did not matter much, was their reply, some say *Vīr* others *Pīr*, and some say both. It was the 15th year they attended the festival. I asked them to tell me about Gūgā Jī, and they explained to me that Gūgā was a great saint. And they told his legend; That Bāchal and Kāchal were two sisters who were not able to conceive children, how Kāchal had deceived Bāchal, and how Gorakhnāth had bestowed upon Bāchal Prince Gūgā. Further they explained how Gūgā already prior to his birth had been in possession of super-human powers, how he through the help of Gorakhnāth had married queen Sirial. I asked them about the powers of Gūgā, about his ability to charm snakes and cure snake bites, and they replied that he absolutely could, but he was much more efficient than only in this regard. The grandfather of

the house came forward and drew up his sleeve and showed me his arm. From birth his hand had been handicapped. It looked almost like a foot, with four toes and a heel. Fifteen years ago his family had started to come to Gūgā Medhi Melā. He called for his son and grandson who also drew up their sleeves. The son who was approximately twenty-five years old had the same hand as his father, while the grandson was entirely healthy. This was the effect of Gūgā, and as he had helped them when they venerated him they would always continue to come to the Melā.

The people gathered around me and participated in the chattering. Most of the interviews with the devotees took this form, as people stayed together as families or friends, and as they were curious and flattered by my interest in them and what they had to say. Thereby I got many aspects on Gūgā Jī and reasons for my informants to venerate him and participate in the festival. A lady who was with the same company had earlier been seriously ill, this was a few years back. And then she had joined the community from her village that used to come to Gūgā Medhi every year, and she had prayed to Gūgā Jī, and asked for his help. Not long time after this she was much better, and as it is required for a devotee whose wish comes true, she had returned a second time, and continued to return those years she had the opportunity. Besides the effect this community believed Gūgā to have had on their health and mundane problems, we also discussed the presence of different religious communities at the festival who venerated Gūgā Jī. This community was Hindu, and they believed Gūgā to have been so as well. When they told the legend of Gūgā and the way he died, it did not include any Muslim creed, he simply was swallowed by Mother Earth. Still, Gūgā did not discriminate on the grounds of religion, according to them. As long as people venerated him with pure intentions he helped them.

Later the same day I spoke with a *saḍhu* in one of the *ḍhābās*. He was a regular at the festival, and also a Hindu. He had dreads in his hair and was wearing a *dhōṭī* and a green cloth around his neck. After finishing his meal he was willing to talk to us about his relationship to Gūgā. He was not married, he said. He came from Haryana and had come to the festival the day before. This was the twentieth year he had returned. He told me the same legend as I had heard underneath the tree, apart from the end. According to him Gūgā had attempted to cry out the Muslim creed for Mother Earth to swallow him as he escaped his mother. He had not been able to say it fully, but stopped half-way. Therefore Mother Earth had only buried him and his horse from the waist on downwards. Ergo he belonged as much to the Muslims as to the Hindu populations. He was independent of both. I asked him the

reason for his return every year, if Gūgā had some effect on his life, and he lifted his *dhotī* up to the knees and showed me his skin. He had some kind of disease; all over his leg white spots were visible, at some places his normally brown skin had gone entirely white. When he first started to visit Gūgā Medhi Melā both of his legs had been almost completely white from this disease, but gradually it had almost vanished. This was all due to the effectiveness of Gūgā.

Time and again I tried to bring to the surface the relationship between Gūgā and snakes in dialogues and interviews, but most people just nodded their heads from side to side, saying “yes, yes, he was a snake charmer”, and then turned the conversation on to other issues. I actually did not meet one person who found this snake aspect relevant in any other manner than that it is a part of his legends. I did though observe a couple of people who sat outside of Jaharvīr Gūgā Mandir with snakes in bast-baskets, but unfortunately I never got the chance to talk to them. This was mainly due to the crowds that pushed their way up the stairs and into the *samādhi* of Gūgā in trance; some were screaming, some crying, others were dancing and laughing. It was very emotional, and I did not want to disturb. At the same time I was accompanied by the government official or the journalist, and as they hurried forward to enter the shrine I had to follow.

Some concluding remarks

A festival like this showed to reveal many aspects concerning composite culture. I was to a greater extent prepared to find a Hindu-Muslim tolerance and togetherness, as this is a central theme in much literature on the subject, but amongst the regular devotees of Hindu and Muslim communities this tolerance was of a pre-reflective kind. They were by all means tolerant towards each other, but this was not their reason for attending such a festival. Most of them came for the benefits that came from venerating Gūgā.

Recalling the triangle I proposed in the introduction I stated that not only one of the points within it is present at a folk cult like this, or in the tradition evolving around Kabīr for that matter. At the festival in Rajasthan there was a presence of and a play between point one and two. The normative aspect (point one) was mostly seen amongst the arrangers, whereas point two came to the surface while talking to the devotees. At the same time it did not seem as if the boundaries between the two religious communities were very sharp, at least not to all. The version of the legend where Gūgā pronounces only half the Muslim creed and therefore is interpreted to be either half Hindu and half Muslim, or neither of them, reveals that the religious identity of the object of worship, and the devotees, is not very central to all. With

regards to Dr. Suthar the matter was another. To me he represented another point which is not included within the triangle, but stands on the outside, and intrudes, namely the movements that oppose composite developments and try to claim the tradition to be Hindu. He did not appreciate the tolerant aspect of the cult, nor did he care for the popular versions of the Gūgā legends. He wanted to forward Gūgā to the world as a pure Hindu hero, who fought the Muslim conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni, and as such was he a warrior hero who defended India against foreign intrusion.

There are as we have seen many aspects to composite culture. A festival like this is in many ways a microcosm of the cult in its entirety as it is host to many different people with different aspects and agendas. One can in other words not label composite culture merely through the tolerance and togetherness, as is seen in scholarship on the subject, as there is so many other aspects and factor that play a part in the development and continuance of such traditions, and because this normative tolerance is far from the practice and motifs of the 'real' devotees, but rather the incentive of politicians and scholars that want to counter-argue communal tension in South Asia.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In the encounter between Hindu and Muslim communities from the advent of Islam on the subcontinent there gradually developed common Hindu-Muslim religious and cultural practices and beliefs. Hindu-Muslim composite culture is found in the field of religion, literature, art and architecture, but also in everyday life circumstances; such as dress codes and food habits. There is in other words a multiplicity of occurrences of composite culture, and it is seen in many levels of South Asian culture. There can be many reasons for such developments, but to a great extent the practices of the mystical traditions Bhakti and Sufism are given a lot of credit in this regard, besides developments in the folk traditions that are shared by Hindu and Muslim communities; both are cultural spheres where sharp religious identities have been less relevant than at the core of mainstream and orthodoxy of the established traditions (but not with regards to every mystical sects or schools, there were those that stayed in tune with the orthodoxy or mainstream traditions).

Composite culture has been a counter-argument to existing religious nationalism and communal tension in South Asia that tends to strengthen the divides between Hindu and Muslim identities and communities. At the core of Indian politics and scholarship that are representative of point one in the triangle Hindu-Muslim composite culture and its development is interpreted as something which developed mainly out of the tolerant atmosphere between religious communities of medieval India. This approach to composite culture emphasises periods in history when the relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities has been peaceful, and tolerance becomes the main characteristic and reason for the existence of composite traditions. In such an interpretation history seems to be written to serve the agenda of these politicians' and scholars' point of view, and regrettably other factors that have been, if not more than, then at least equally important as tolerance for the unfolding of composite practices are not cared for, such as efficacy of deities/saints (as seen in the folk culture of Gūgā), and total rejection of established traditions (as seen in the poetry of the Sants and Kabīr). One can say that point one of the triangle stands on the outside of the actual cults or traditions, and preaches of a normative inter-religiousness, that for the common practitioners and devotees is of a pre-reflective kind. In this manner the behaviour of point one is rather similar to another, yet very different, approach, namely the approach of those movements that oppose composite developments. Concerning composite culture there is somehow a polarized relationship between point one in the triangle and movements that

oppose composite practices. Whereas point one over-emphasises tolerance and togetherness, the movements that oppose such traditions over-emphasises the clear religious boundaries, denies that there are religious practices and beliefs that cross the boundaries of established traditions, or they stamp those who practices composite culture as heretics, and try to hijack the traditions to be entirely Hindu or Muslim. Both these strands act with a political agenda, and interfere to different extents in the composite traditions as they actually are acted out by the real practitioners and devotees.

In the introduction to this thesis I suggested a triangular approach to composite culture because I believe that there are other factors than tolerance and harmony between Hindu and Muslim communities that are the reasons for composite developments. This does not mean that tolerance is not present within such traditions, but that in order to get a more nuanced understanding of composite culture one has to pay attention to the actual practitioners and their actions and attitudes. We have seen that point one in the triangle is present with regards to both the traditions evolving around Kabīr and Gūgā, but that tolerance was not the driving force of any of these figures. (I have also mentioned that the movements that oppose composite culture also act out a role with regards to both of these traditions). Kabīr has been described as the apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity, though he never intentionally forwarded such an agenda. The case is similar regarding Gūgā; he is believed to have worked for Hindu-Muslim harmony, but nothing we have seen in the legends evolving around him implies that he ever preached such an agenda, or acted to reconcile religious communities. The reason for his crying out the Muslim creed, or for entering the earth through Samādhi, was the effect he wanted; to be hidden from his mother by the earth swallowing him. These two figures stand at the core of two composite traditions in North India. What they share with regards to some of the hagiography is that their deaths and post-mortal rites is something believed to have been fought over by Hindu and Muslim communities, as they both want to claim the figures to belong within their own religious tradition. There are also interpretations of the death scenes of these figures that explicitly claim both figures to have been available to both Hindu and Muslim communities, or that they rejected both the established traditions, and therefore have been independent of them.

We have throughout this thesis looked into the oral traditions evolving around the two figures of Kabīr and Gūgā, as well as how the cult of Gūgā works in practice at a common Hindu-Muslim festival. As we have seen so far the oral texts connected to these figures and traditions are quite different from each other. The triangle has been useful with regards to

comparing these traditions, putting them into a wider context, and it has been useful by the way that it reveals that composite culture is a manifold phenomenon that goes beyond the simplifying focus on religious tolerance and mutual respect between Hindu and Muslim communities, but that they seem to include a variety of approaches parallel to the variety of devotees and participants present. It suggests that there is more to composite culture than merely interreligious tolerance. As composite culture is a phenomenon with a lot of different occurrences, the triangle might be limited in the form which it has now, as my focus has been restricted to Sant Kabīr and Gūgā the Snake god. The triangle might therefore have the potential for expansion or transference to other forms of composite culture, which also might reveal that there may be other significant reasons and surroundings that have worked as catalysts or reasons for composite developments.

The points in the triangle are in other words not exclusively present within composite traditions. At least two, but also perhaps all the points, can be found to some extent within composite cultures, at least those I have presented in this thesis. In part two of this thesis I have highlighted that point one and three is present, whereas in part three point one and two is present, though there might have been presence of point three also within the tradition surrounding Gūgā, as seen in those versions of the legends that claim him to have rejected the established traditions of both Hinduism and Islam. This aspect might be connected to the Nāth tradition which has influenced Kabīr and the Sants, but which also is very tightly connected to the cult of Gūgā. Unfortunately this thesis has been limited with regards to both time and space. There are some issues that should have been looked into in addition to what this thesis has done so far. Still, the line has to be drawn somewhere, even though there are issues that ought to be looked into.

First of all I have had the opportunity to examine the oral traditions evolving around both figures, but I have only taken a closer look at the practical aspect of the figure of Gūgā. It would have been fruitful to explore the attitudes and practices of the cult surrounding Kabīr to see how composite culture works in practice at this level in South Asian culture as well. It is hard to say whether point two in the triangle possibly could be present within this tradition, but perhaps other aspects would have been revealed. Still, as my aim has been to forward this triangle, and to show that there is more to composite culture than the mere tolerance preached by representatives of point one, the poetry has been sufficient to make clear that it does not seem to have been the agenda of Kabīr to preach of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Secondly, I would have liked to have the time to explore the situation of the Nāth tradition that in many regards is involved with both Kabīr and Gūgā. This has also been a matter of time and space, as there are limits to the scope of this thesis. More knowledge of the relationship between the Nāths and the cult of Gūgā might have revealed that point three in the triangle is evident also within the Gūgā cult, but that is impossible to speculate over. I never got the opportunity to examine the relationship between the Gūgā and Gorakhnāth temples more thoroughly while I conducted my fieldwork. The only aspect I got in this regard was connected to the thoughts of Dr. Suthar, who clearly revealed an agenda of revealing the Hindu nature of Gūgā to the public, and to the world. This is something to continue with on a later occasion, if the opportunity bids.

Thirdly I wanted to explore additional composite practices, so as to see whether this triangle is applicable with regards to different outcomes of composite culture, but this has not been possible. I wanted to include the tradition evolving around the Panjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah, who is also known for his tolerance towards the established traditions of Hinduism and Islam. His poetry reveals to a greater extent the tolerance aspect, than that of Kabīr, and so it would have been interesting to compare the two. I also wanted to look into the tradition evolving around Rāmdev, another symbol of Hindu-Muslim harmony in Rajasthan, but firstly, the annual festival for Ramdev in Pokaran was held at the same time as the Gūgā festival, and I had therefore not the opportunity to be present there as well. Secondly, I figured that for now it is more useful to limit my field of research to the figures of Gūgā and Kabīr, so as to not exceed my own capacity, and the capacity of this thesis. There are in other words a few points to explore further, and I hope to do this in the near future.

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Appendix

1)



Gūgā Ji on his blue horse; here on a poster inside the temple premises.

2)



A statue of Gūgā and his stallion at the memorial site outside of the temple complex.

3)



The grave of Gūgā, a marble casket with an image of Gūgā on his stallion.

4)



The entrance to the shrine of Gūgā.

5)



The line of people entering the shrine

6)



Inside the shrine of Gūgā.

7)



Inside the shrine of Gūgā, people touching the grave with their hands and clothes to charge it with divine power

8)



The standards were brought by the devotees from their villages to the Gūgā temple. They were decorated with colorful cloth, and at the top with peacock feathers.



9) This is one example of the standard: here it touches the wall of the shrine of Gūgā, so as to be charged with the blessings and energy of the deity,



10) A long procession of people carrying the standard towards the temple entrance.

11) One of the Sand-stone pillars erected outside the memorial site to Gūgā and Gorakhnāth. The history of Gūgā's birth is written on this particular one.

