This paper poses a theoretical question: how, if at all, can ‘critical medical anthropology’ and ‘performance theory’ be combined? More specifically, the author discusses the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, with respect to a healing cult in the Central Himalayas of North India. The paper has four parts: first, an ethnographic description of the cult itself; second, a brief introduction to critical medical anthropology; third, a short discussion of the performative approach to healing rituals; and finally, an attempt to combine the two approaches. The author concludes that the two approaches can indeed combined, so long as one recognizes (1) that caste and gender are also appropriate objects for critical medical anthropology; and (2) that aesthetics is always already political.

A healing cult in the Central Himalayas

The healing cult discussed in this paper is found in India’s newest state, Uttarakhand, which came into being on 9 November 2000. Uttarakhand was created out of 11 Himalayan districts of the former Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, to which two additional districts were added. The state roughly corresponds to the two former Hindu kingdoms of Garhwal and Kumaon, and is bordered to the southeast by Nepal, to the northwest by Tibet, and to the northeast by the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The vast majority of the population is Hindu, and various local dialects of Hindi are spoken there. Uttarakhand is perhaps most famous for its many high-altitude pilgrimage places, which are visited every year by hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims from throughout India and, indeed, the world.

The healing cult is centred in the Alakananda Basin (the Alakananda River is one of the chief sources of the Ganges), in Chamoli district. Throughout this region, afflicted persons often seek relief from minor local gods and goddesses. Typical afflictions include fever, stomach ache, lack of energy, sleeplessness, sexual problems, and ‘psychological disturbances’ such as involuntary possession, bouts of fear and panic, and depression. However, afflictions are not limited to medical and psychological problems. People also turn to local gods and their oracles for information about...
runaway children or stolen property, for relief from problems connected with livestock (cows that do not give milk, barren sheep or goats, etc.), from economic difficulties, or simply from a persistent run of bad luck.

When a person’s physical problems are not amenable to medical diagnosis, or when they strongly suspect supernatural causation, they often visit a local oracle, who becomes possessed by a god or goddess, and answers questions while in trance. The term for oracle, pûch, is related to the Hindi verb pûchnā, ‘to ask’: the pûch is an oracle whom one consults about one’s afflictions. These oracles come from all castes and classes, but low-caste persons and females are disproportionately highly represented. Such oracles are in principle available at all times, but they are especially busy on Tuesdays and Fridays, days that are regarded as particularly suitable for such activities. An oracle’s reputation rises and falls: sometimes she experiences brief periods of fame, when she receives many visitors and earns a fair amount of money. But reputations decline, too, and almost inevitably, there comes a Tuesday or a Saturday when a previously-famous oracle receives no clients at all.

Oracular séances (or, as I would prefer to call them, ‘consultations’) have a more-or-less standard form: the client takes a handful of rice from his or her own house, circles it over the heads of family members and/or livestock, and puts it in a bag or ties it in a handkerchief, along with Rs. 1.25. Once the client reaches the oracle’s shrine, he removes his shoes, enters the consultation-room of the oracle, and waits. When his turn comes, he empties the rice and the Rs. 1.25 into a thālī or metal platter. Sometimes the oracle then performs a short pūjā or ritual, worshipping the deity by whom s/he is possessed with incense and mantras, but normally this has already been done, before the very first session of the day.

The oracle now begins to ‘play the rice’ (motī khilānā). This is often done by picking up handfuls of rice and flinging them on to the platter in rapid succession, although there are other methods too. The rapid, rhythmic movement helps the oracle to fall into trance, which is indicated by changes in voice, posture, and so forth. Now the actual consultation between client and deity begins. The author has seen perhaps a hundred such consultations, and in nearly every case, they begin with an exchange in which the deity insists that the client must have faith (vīśvās) in the oracle’s ability to declare the truth, and the client replies that s/he does indeed have such faith.

The oracle proceeds to question the client about his or her problems. These questions are rather formulaic, requiring simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, as in the following example, where ‘O’ stands for ‘oracle’ (in this case an elderly woman of low caste, already in trance) and ‘C’ stands for ‘client’ (a middle-aged man of the high-ranking Kshatriya, or warrior, caste):

O: Two legs or four legs? I stop nothing; I hide nothing. I see that it is the path of a person; a woman.

C: Yes.

O: You’re not asking about another woman, but about your own. It’s for your own woman: place your hand on the rice! I see it’s not a male problem. You’ve asked other oracles?
C: Yes
O: You’ve ‘played’ the rice, but had no result (gun). I’ll use these rice grains to
tell you a successful path: I won’t let her lose.

[The oracle whistles, and tosses the rice grains into the air]

O: Look, have you worshiped the chal
   (‘crafty demon’) or not?
C: No.
O: I see that you haven’t worshiped any chal
   You haven’t worshiped anywhere else. Do you understand?
C: Yes.
O: I see the one who suffers time and again. She suffers, doesn’t she?
C: Yes.
O: You’ve had no result from your previous inquiries?
C: No.
O: I see that this is a chal from her natal home. Look, is it in the east or not?
C: She has three natal homes: what can I say?

It is obvious even from this brief excerpt that the oracular consultation is a
performance. In the first place, it requires an audience – a client – in order to take
place at all. The encounter is, or should be, a conversation between deity and client,
which is why the author prefers to call it a ‘consultation’ rather than a ‘séance’. In
order to be effective, an oracle must be able to divine the client’s particular
problems, as well as to suggest a plausible cause, and a solution. Therefore, a
consultation is ‘performative’ in the further sense that the oracle is assuming
responsibility for a display of communicative competence (Bauman 1977; Bauman &
Sherzer 1974). No doubt there are formal and quasi-formal protocols for such
 consultations; nevertheless, this formal structure is only the background to a practice
that is fundamentally context-specific. There is also a third sense in which oracular
consultations are performative: in order for them to be effective, the client must be
convinced of the authenticity of the oracle’s trance, and this partly accomplished
through dramatic means: changes in voice and posture, rolling of the eyes, loud and
rapid speech, shaking, whistling, grinding of the teeth, etc.

One of the most common diagnoses to emerge from such a consultation is that
the client is being afflicted by the deity Bhairav, a local form of a pan-Indian deity
who has strong associations with punishment and revenge. His cult is widespread in
India, where he often appears as a village deity (Gold 1994). In both Hindu and
Buddhist pantheons he is a fierce deity associated with the great God Shiva (von
Stietencron 1969; White forthcoming). He bears affinities with the god Virabhadra,
who led Shiva’s followers when they took violent revenge on Prajapati, the father of
Shiva’s wife, Sati, after she had burned herself to death in her father’s sacrificial fire
(Dimmitt & van Buiten 1978). He is well known in the Sanskrit literature for
having released Shiva from the sin of Brahminicide after Shiva met him in the city of Kashi, where he is popularly regarded as the kotwał, or ‘police chief’. Because of his numerous associations with blood and violence, he is an important deity for practitioners of tantric Hinduism of the so-called ‘left-hand’ variety, with its practices involving menstrual blood, animal sacrifice, death-focused meditative practices in burning grounds, ritual sex, and the like. In the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, he becomes the ‘Remover of the Obstacle of Death’ and a Protector of the Buddhist dharma.

In Garhwal, when someone feels that they have been treated unfairly, they may choose to go to one of Bhairav’s shrines and call upon him to provide justice. In the paradigmatic form of this curse, the victim of injustice goes to one of Bhairav’s shrines, opens the sacrificial pit (a site of concentrated violence), and says ‘Oh God, if I am the guilty one, then strike me dead! But if so-and-so is the unjust one, then bring him into my shelter!’ (i.e. afflict him so that he comes to me and asks for forgiveness). The enemy is then afflicted, and must worship Bhairav in order to remove his or her suffering. The ritual might last up to three or five nights, and often involves establishing a shrine to Bhairav. Conversely, if the curse is perceived to be successful, then the person who uttered it in the first place is obligated to worship Bhairav, and if they fail to do so, they will be afflicted as a result. Thus the cult of the deity spreads, in an ever-widening circle of affliction and revenge.

To worship Bhairav, one must summon a priest or guru who is capable of performing this work. In this context, guru does not mean ‘spiritual master’, but rather a ‘master of the spirits’; someone who is capable of commanding Bhairav, along with the numerous other deities and spirits responsible for spiritual affliction. This guru is always male, and normally (though not exclusively) from a low caste. Gurus use mantras, or magical spells, to summon and control the deities, along with aesthetic means such as song, drumming, and dance. Performances typically begin after dark, when the guru takes his seat, and tightens and tunes his hudakī, a small hourglass-shaped drum with two goatskin heads, the tightening straps of which are attached to a harness which the guru wears around his back, so that when he plays the drum he can, by pulling on the straps, cause it to make an unusual sound, which is especially effective in invoking the spirits. The guru is normally accompanied by the thakalyor, who plays an inverted metal platter with two wooden drumsticks, and by the bhamvar who echoes the final lines of each verse of his song. During much of his fieldwork, the author performed this third role.

Much of the guru’s performative art involves recognizing various deities as soon as they possess their human mediums, and singing their corresponding songs. The relationship between guru and deity can be agonistic, as, for example, when a guru uses particularly powerful techniques to persuade a recalcitrant deity to manifest himself or herself, or to leave the séance. Performances involve a range of musical styles, as for example when a ghost interrupts the ritual, at which point the guru puts down his hudakī and begins playing the metal thālī by himself, while singing a distinctive exorcism song.

These rituals normally take place over a sequence of nights, and are sometimes quite spectacular, involving up to a hundred or more spectators. They are regarded as successful only when a large number of spectators is possessed by deities and other supernatural beings. The overall effect can be very powerful, with the guru singing
and drumming loudly while many people dance before him in a state of trance, often with painful and contorted gestures. This very powerful collective energy, what Durkheim would call ‘effervescence’, is recognized and named by participants in the cult, who call it siddhi, the ‘power’ or ‘energy’ of a public, ritual performance.

It is important to note that Bhairav and his healing cult are strongly associated with the lowest castes of the area. These castes are often referred to as ‘untouchables’, although as Charsley (1996) has shown, the category ‘untouchable’ is a colonial construction. Mahatma Gandhi attempted to re-designate India’s lowest castes ‘Harijans’, literally ‘the people (jana) of God (hari)’, and this is the by far the most common term used in Uttarakhand, by people of all castes. Amongst contemporary Indian intellectuals and activists however, the politically correct term is ‘Dalit’, literally ‘the oppressed’. The author was once told by an activist that a Dalit is like a blade of grass: he may bend when trod upon by the powerful, but he is resilient, and always springs back up.

This paper will not describe the suffering of the lowest castes in India, except to confirm that in many areas, it is truly horrific. India’s newspapers carry regular accounts of atrocities of various kinds: villages burned down because low-caste persons dared to use the wells of higher castes, inter-caste lovers captured and executed by village councils, or even by their own parents, the sexual exploitation of Dalit women. India’s Dalits suffer at many levels: economic, physical, political, sexual, and spiritual. If ever there was a ‘community of suffering’, this is it, and that is why many groups and individuals have sought to abolish untouchability in India. Indeed, caste discrimination was made illegal in post-independence India – in part because Ambedkar, the chief author of the constitution, was himself a Dalit – but these laws have nevertheless failed to eradicate caste, which remains deeply rooted in Hinduism.

In much of India, the lowest castes are also landless, and their suffering is correspondingly greater. In Uttarakhand however, nearly all Dalits have at least a small piece of land, and there are few if any reports of caste atrocities in the region. Nevertheless, the suffering of the Dalits in the area is very real, as is their greater poverty relative to the high castes. When Dalits are abused or exploited, or when they are the victims of injustice, there is one person in particular to whom they turn for justice: the god Bhairav.

Bhairav’s association with local Dalits is evident first of all in his iconography. In Chamoli district, the most dangerous form of Bhairav is Kacciya, whose association with pollution, filth, and inauspiciousness mirrors the general cultural stereotype of the Dalit. Here is the author’s translation of one of the songs that the guru sings in order to summon Kacciya to a ritual performed in his honour:

Awaken, father Kacciya, in your leather blanket in your house of filth on the burning ground with your demoness lovers, in the warm springtime where skeletons dance, on death’s burning ground where the red-hot skillets dance ever around in your leather blanket, in your house of filth ghosts wail in pain, but you hear sweet music you spend half the night here, and half the night there
the light of the funeral pyre is your candle
you chop the dead bones with the blunt edge of your axe
your fire altar is a burning corpse
and you drink blood from the veins of the dead.

you seize their shrouds and bind them on your head
and you twirl the corpses by their feet
you fry the flesh of the dead and then eat it
you cook your rice pudding in the skulls of the dead
and make lentil stew from their funeral biers.

Here we find an iconic reversal of the normative values of Hinduism; filth instead of purity, polluting cow leather instead cloth, erotic relationships with demons instead of humans. The god’s very consciousness seems to be reversed: he hears painful wailing as sweet music, he eats human flesh rather than food. He can’t even use his axe correctly, and instead of chopping up corpses with the sharp edge of his axe, he uses the blunt one! This inverted iconography parallels and reflects the social position and experience of the Dalits. Like Dalits elsewhere in India, they are closely associated with low and impure activities such as disposing of the carcasses of dead livestock, assisting at the polluting event of childbirth, and the like. In some sense, then, Kacciya Bhairav corresponds to the social image of the Dalits. Does the ‘inverted’ iconography of this song, sung by the Dalits themselves, also correspond to their self-image?

Bhairav is clearly associated with local Dalits through his mythology, as is illustrated in the following account of Kacciya’s origin:

Once upon a time, the high-caste Myurs of Panthi Bagwan were building a temple. Big rocks had to be cut for this temple, and the Myurs said to the low-caste Coppersmiths, ‘Fetch the rocks, you bastards!’ So the Coppersmiths lifted the lighter rocks and brought them, but they left the large rocks behind – they weren’t able to lift them. And so the Myurs seized them and beat them. And they kidnapped their beautiful daughters Umeda and Sumeda, and sold them into slavery.

So the girls’ father Udotu and his brother Sudotu went to Tibet to visit their spiritual teacher, a Tibetan lama. They said to him, ‘Hey Mother’s Brother, the Myurs have done us a great injustice; they have sold our daughters into slavery, and they have flayed the skin from our backs! We have no one’.

So the Tibetan Lama made a red pot, a round red pot. And he filled its belly with forty-two heroes, fifty-two demons, eighty-eight fierce goddesses, sixty-four female yogis, and ninety man-lions. He put all of them in the pot’s belly, and told them to ‘play their game’. Then he covered the pot and closed its mouth by tying it with a cloth.

And then he said, ‘Lift it, sister’s son – lift this pot’. The coppersmith tried to lift it but it was very heavy. The spirits began murmuring in the belly of the pot, but he couldn’t understand anything. He couldn’t lift it, and he said, ‘Guru, I won’t be able to place this pot on my head’. So the guru himself lifted it and put it on the Coppersmith’s head. And he said ‘Go, sister’s son, and take this
red pot to the land of Uttaranchal. Take it, and open it at the place where you find a high mountain, a high pass'.

So the coppersmiths went to Tilkhani Bar. When they lay down to sleep, they heard a buzzing sound within the pot. So Udotu opened the cover just a little bit, and immediately Bhairav slipped out! Now at that time they were doing the dance of the Pandavas nearby in Dobari Village, and Bhairav took the form of a yogi and reached the village where they were dancing. He said to the villagers, ‘Give me some lovely spot that I can call my own’. They said, ‘Where have you come from, you lazy son of a bitch?’ and they beat him and drove him away. He joined his hands in supplication and said, ‘Give me a beautiful place where I can raise buffaloes, goats, cows and oxen’. They said, ‘Go! Get out! Where the hell have you come from?’ So Bhairav took the form of a leopard, and he ate all of their livestock: all of their cows, buffaloes, sheep and goats. And since that day, the Pandavas have never danced in Dobari. They were cursed by Bhairav.

From there, Bhairav went to Kob Bar where the Myurs lived. And he exterminated them: he took the form of cholera and killed them all. Two corpses were carried to the cremation ground every day, until the Myurs were totally destroyed.

Here the author has reproduced this story as a narrative, but it is normally performed as a song. Indeed, the singing of this song is one of the most powerful techniques for summoning the god, and to a large extent, its power is generated by the performance itself. Many people, friends and relatives, gather at night, expecting to be visited by fierce and unpredictable deities. There is an atmosphere of excitement, a crush of warm bodies packed tightly together on the earthen floor. The music is strange and exciting: the high-pitched clanging of an inverted metal platter rapidly beaten with two wooden sticks, the voice of the guru reaching out above the weird sounds of his two-headed huḍakī drum with its unmistakable ‘vhoo-vhoo!’ sound, the hypnotic echo of a third musician, a singer who joins the guru in singing the final words of every line. This is the siddhi of which is written above, and it has a powerful impact.

The crucial line is ‘I have no one’. When this is sung, it is a cue for possession to occur. Many listeners fall into trance; women loosen their hair so that it hangs loosely, then whip it back and forth in the air as they ‘dance’ wildly, on their knees, to the beat of the drum; people roll about on the floor, grimacing and writhing in pain, their hands painfully bent into the shape of a bird-like claw, the characteristic sign of possession by Kacciya.

In addition to this song, there are also other well-known stories and songs that describe how Kacciya, or one of the other forms of Bhairav, came to the aid of a Dalit person who was exploited or threatened by someone from a higher caste. It is the author’s impression that many of the problems that low-caste persons bring to oracles and gurus have to do with caste-based oppression, and this hunch is supported by the songs and prayers associated with Bhairav, which consistently refer to him as the protector of the poor and the weak. For example, one ritual observed had to be stopped when a ghost suddenly appeared. Bhairav was called upon to help drive away the ghost, with the following words:
Oh God, you are the support of the poor,  
the support of the poor.  
You are the mother and father of the orphans,  
the support of the orphans  
Awaken, O Kacciya! and dwell in this shrine!

If Bhairav is associated with the weak and the powerless, then it should come as no surprise that his strongest relationship is with the weakest and most powerless persons in the society – Dalit women, who are oppressed by both caste and patriarchy. In Garhwal, high-caste women are expected to abandon their natal deities when they are married, and begin to worship the gods of their husband’s family and village (Sax 1991), but low-caste women by contrast often take their family gods with them when they move to their husband’s home after marriage. Indeed, this practice is often cited as one of the main reasons why the Dalit castes have such a low status. It is said that Bhairav accompanies these women when they move from their natal home to their marital home – in a basket, or an article of clothing, or a piece of jewellery, or his favourite place, a woman’s ponytail, at the point where she knots her hair. Bhairav protects the new bride from high-caste people, from cruel mothers-in-law, and from threatening men in her new place of residence. Indeed, the author has been warned by high-caste men that he should ‘not even look sideways’ at a Dalit woman, because she might send Bhairav to afflict him. High-caste people are truly frightened by low-caste women’s close association with Kacciya Bhairav, and it seems likely that to some degree, the cult ameliorates these women’s suffering.

In sum, this healing cult seems to draw much of its power from performance, and so is clearly an appropriate object for the ‘performative approach to ritual’ (Sax 2002; Schieffelin 1985, 1988; Tambiah 1979). But at the same time, it is clearly focused on poor and oppressed persons, and in this sense it cries out for a critical perspective, one that connects health and illness to relations of power. Such perspectives are exemplified by Comaroff (1985), Taussig (1987), and Foucault (1973) amongst others. Another approach is ‘critical medical anthropology’ (hereafter CMA), which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as one of the major theoretical perspectives in the field.

Critical medical anthropologists focus on social relations of domination and subordination, on the social production of disease rather than the cultural construction of illness. They seek to link the macro-level of the capitalist world with the micro-level of the patient’s beliefs about and experiences with disease (Baer & Singer 1995). Noteworthy examples of CMA have concentrated on the relationship between multinational pharmaceutical companies and the public health of poor countries (Ong 1987, 1988), and on the relationship between poverty and tuberculosis (Farmer 1997). Originally, critical medical anthropologists like Adams, Baer, Farmer and Singer were strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School and by Wallerstein’s ‘World-Systems’ Theory, and had a strongly materialist orientation. More recently, however, it has been recognized that purely political-economic analyses are inadequate even to describe, much less analyse, the human experience of health and sickness, and that they must be supplemented by the tools of cultural and symbolic analysis. Thus, critical medical anthropology has become ‘critical-interpretive medical
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anthropology’, exemplified by the work of Comaroff (1985), Lock (1990), Lock and Scheppe-Hughes (1990), Martin (1987), Ong (1987, 1988), and Taussig (1987). In this way, CMA has been deepened by incorporating an interpretive perspective. However, CMA was – and still is – primarily a critique of capitalism, and of biomedicine as a (sometimes unwitting) agent of neo-imperialism. How might such a critical approach be applied to this healing cult in the Himalayas?

Although some ‘critical-interpretive’ medical anthropological studies have concerned themselves with ritual, or have focused on ritual healing, none has taken advantage of ‘performance theory’. Conversely, those who have used performance theory to analyse healing have failed to incorporate the insights of critical medical anthropology. This is confirmed by Csordas, who defines four approaches to the topic of performance and healing: the ‘cultural-performance approach of interpretive Anthropology … the performance-centered approach from sociolinguistics … the performance-utterance approach which spans both of the former … and the rhetorical-persuasive approach developed in the study of therapeutic process’ (1996, p. 91). Interestingly, none of the 39 publications he lists in support of this division could be described as ‘critical’ or ‘critical-interpretive’. Why has no one combined the performative approach to healing rituals with CMA? Why is it that even thinking about doing so seems vaguely counter-intuitive? A brief answer is that many critical medical anthropologists think that rituals are merely ‘expressive’ and not instrumental; that they are epiphenomena that are to be explained as the effects of more basic causal forces. One could put this in Marxian terms, by saying that such rituals belong to the superstructure and not to the base.

One of the most eloquent exponents of this line is Paul Farmer, who criticizes anthropologists for giving too much weight to culture and ideology in the explanation and analysis of health and disease. According to Farmer, it is more often a combination of external agents like viruses, poverty and exploitation, rather than food categories or witchcraft beliefs, that are responsible for health problems. In short, Farmer suspects that anthropologists’ tendency to explain health and illness – along with everything else – in ideological or cultural terms neglects some of the most powerful causes of health and illness, causes that lie in structures of power and exploitation.

Farmer is motivated by a passionate desire to fight against such oppressive structures, and this is what gives his polemics their rhetorical power. But one can share his progressive political agenda without necessarily agreeing that cultural and ideological explanations must take second place to material and political ones. To ignore the performative and ritual dimensions of illness and healing is to ignore the human interaction that structures them, as well as the power of such interaction to cause ill health, and to cure disease.

In another context, Bourdieu has observed that ‘economism is ethnocentrism’, by which he means that when we analyse the exchange systems of other cultures in terms of a purely economistic calculus, we only reproduce the logic of our own capitalist system, and fail to appreciate the possibility of an alternative. Likewise, when we take a purely biomedical approach to health and illness – and Farmer’s paradigm is nothing less than that: a biomedical paradigm linked to a radical critique of the world system – then we cannot even begin to understand the rituals which are
a part of every system of healing that has ever existed, from the shamans of Garhwal to the dentists of Berlin.

The solution is to recognize that social power is constituted not only by relations of material production, but also by relations of ritual production. In other publications (e.g. Sax 2002), the author has argued that the power of public rituals lies in the fact that they are the chief site where both collective and individual identities are created, reiterated, and transformed. One is more or less obliged to participate in the rituals of a particular group (family, village, business firm) at the risk of ostracism, and through one’s participation, one confirms the model of society that is being presented. In short, the efficacy of rituals lies in their power to define social actors and their relations to each other. The power to define is the greatest power of all; ultimately the power of the Malaysian factory as well as that of a multinational pharmaceutical company is built up out of thousands of such acts of definition, acts that often take a ritual form.

In the author’s view, it is possible and desirable to link a critical medical anthropology with the performative approach to ritual, but only if two important facts are recognized. First of all, it must be understood that capitalism and neo-imperialism are not the only systems of exploitation in the world. In the South Asian context, for example, the system of castes is also a deeply exploitative, and deeply embedded, system of power relations, one that clearly influences the healing cult of Bhairav. Secondly, it must be realized that the performance of ritual reflects and, even more importantly, often reproduces unequal relations of power. Therefore, a ‘critical’ perspective must be applied to the ritual performance itself.

What does it mean to say that a ritual reproduces unequal relations of power? How might one apply performance theory to analyse this? In effect, both these questions link aesthetics with politics. To understand this link, we can begin with Bourdieu who, following Panofsky, points out that aesthetic judgements must be learned; they are neither spontaneous nor natural. The act of aesthetic empathy presupposes an act of cognition, which in turn implies a cultural code. As Bourdieu puts it, ‘Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (1984, p. 6). In other words, the ‘aesthetics’ of various classes – in our case, the aesthetics of the various castes – are not aesthetically determined, but rather sociologically determined. In the present case study, the aesthetics of ritual performance both reflects and reproduces the social distribution of power within the order of castes.

This is shown by the aesthetics of voice amongst the oracles of the healing cult. Most of these oracles are from the lower castes, a fact which itself requires explanation. But there are high-caste oracles too, and the author has recorded and translated lengthy excerpts from their oracular consultations as well as those of low-caste oracles. One of the patterns that clearly emerges from these transcripts is that the lower the caste, the more extreme are the linguistic and paralinguistic variations in oracular speech. Lower-caste oracles whistle and grind their teeth; they speak in archaic dialect; their trances are more sudden and violent; their very bodies are sometimes the battleground for different spirits who seek to control them. Meanwhile, oracles from the highest castes tend to be calmer and more self-controlled. They speak in standard Hindi, they do not whistle and shout, and sometimes they are not even possessed.
A second example of how bodily control is directly related to relations of power is the aesthetics of possession. While lower-caste oracles are frequently and violently possessed by all kinds of spirits and demons, the trances of upper-caste oracles are more subtle. Some of them are not possessed at all: they are literally more 'self-possessed' than their lower-caste colleagues. The body aesthetics of lower-caste persons tend to be more violent and painful than that of their upper-caste fellows. One of the most dramatic examples of this is the pose taken by those who are possessed by the 'god of filth', Kacciya. Their arms and especially their hands are grotesquely and painfully contorted, a practice that is explained by a myth in which the god Shiva, displeased by Kacciya's laziness, ordered him to 'eat his own flesh', which he does to the present day.

In short, social status is directly related to bodily control: high-status persons are associated with bodily control, low-status persons with its lack. This pattern is to be found in a very wide variety of cultures, and seems to be well-nigh universal (Elias 1978; Foucault 1986; Osella & Osella 1999). It is important to remember, however, that this relationship is self-constituting and self-reproducing. It is not simply the case that certain persons deliberately seek to enhance their social status by demonstrating greater control over their bodies, as a purely instrumentalist theory might have it; nor is it true that persons’ bodily movements are determined once and for all by their social position. Rather, the socialization and the disciplining of the mind–body within a particular caste or class produces a set of dispositions (Bourdieu’s *habitus*) which are, so to speak, the starting-point for further action. But these dispositions may, by dint of hard work, be transformed or overcome. For example, one high-caste male oracle told me that formerly, he was regularly possessed, but now, he only caused others to be possessed—a clear indication of his enhanced social and spiritual power. The thoroughly-discussed phenomenon of 'Sanskritization' in South Asia, where a caste attempts to raise its status by emulating the practices of higher castes (Cohn 1955; Srinivas 1969, Staal 1963), provides an example of the way in which the *habitus* of a group can be transformed and overcome. The point is that, although the *habitus* can sometimes be successfully transformed by an act of will (Lynch 1969), it then tends to reproduce itself in this transformed state: the dialectic of agency and determinate-ness cannot be overcome.

A third example of the way in which the performative aesthetics of gurus reproduce relations of power and domination has to do with the musical aspect of Bhairav’s rituals. As noted earlier, all gurus are male, and most of them are from the Dalit castes. However, there are a few upper-caste gurus as well, and there is a
great difference between the aesthetics of the two types. The most obvious difference is the fact that high-caste gurus do not use the *hudakī* drum, while low-caste gurus do. The usual explanation for this is that the heads of the drum are made from goatskin, and are therefore polluting, so that high-caste gurus do not use them. No doubt this is true, but the author believes that the refusal of high-caste gurus to use the drum also has to do with aesthetics. Drumming induces trance of the more uncontrolled sort, associated with a lack of bodily control, and this is generally unacceptable to the highest castes. For them, the aesthetics of the body is one of greater control, reflecting the social power that they are accustomed to exercise. For the lower castes by contrast, the aesthetics of possession is one of wild abandon, in which they exercise the freedom that they are normally denied (see Freeman 1999). This freedom is induced by the guru, who himself remains self-possessed, in charge of the ritual, and in control of the spirits, thereby ensuring his own high status within the context of the ritual.

In short, by combining a critical with a performative approach to ritual, we can analyse and understand how the healing rituals of the Bhairav cult both reflect and reproduce relations of power. These relations are reproduced through the aesthetic *habitus* and inscribed on the body, and have specific implications for states of health and illness. Both critical medical anthropology (in the widest sense) and the performative approach to ritual can be deepened and expanded by understanding the ways in which relations of domination and subordination are reproduced by the aesthetics of ritual performance.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper appeared in 2002 in German, in *Paragrana*, vol. 12, nos 1–2, pp. 385–404, under the title ‘Heilungsrituale: Ein kritischer performativer Ansatz’.
2 The districts of Almora, Bageshwar, Chamoli, Champawat, Dehradun, Nainital, Pauri Garhwal, Pithoragarh, Rudra Prayag, Tehri Garhwal, and Uttarkashi.
3 The districts of Hardwar and Udham Singh Nagar.
4 For further ethnographic studies of the region, see Berreman (1972), Saklani (1987), Sax (1991, 2002), Joshi et al. (1990–2000), and Sanwal (1976).
5 bhagawān tu rai gařiboṃ kī ādhārī,
   bhagawān tu rai gařiboṃ kī ādhārī, 
   choḍoṃ ko mā-bāp, choḍoṃ kī ādhārī,
   jagarant hvai jā kaccyā sāmī,
   thān māṃ ho jāe bās

References


Osella, C. & Osella, F. (1999) ‘Seepage of divinised power through social, spiritual and bodily boundaries: some aspects of possession in Kerala’ in Possession in South Asia:


